



**VIDYA
METHOD**
Meditation & Movement

Somatic Restructuring
An Introduction to the Method
&
The Inner Principals

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July 2023

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Somatic Restructuring

An Introduction to the Method

“In Japan Buddhist practice is usually called “shugyo” (personal cultivation). Eastern thought traditionally tends to emphasize the inseparability of mind and body. Therefore, personal cultivation in the East takes on the meaning of a practical project aiming at the enhancement of the personality and the training of the spirit by means of the body.” - Yuasa Yasuo, The Body

Somatic Restructuring is the study of the mind-body relationship, how they interrelate and influence one another. It's a method for self-cultivation along the embodied developmental process. Somatic Restructuring teaches one how to resolve compensatory patterns through embodied self-awareness. Once the habit patterns have been freed, one can begin to explore the body as a fully connected vibrant system. In this way Somatic Restructuring is a dynamic method that develops the elastic, myofascial capacities of the body. As more skill is developed one will continue to strengthen one's body consciously to ever more subtle levels. Due to the nature of the method the practice of Somatic Restructuring also develops inner qualities such as patience, curiosity, gratitude, and mindful determination. These are not secondary to the method but central. Without them the embodied state cannot be maintained.

Somatic Restructuring is not a set of techniques, but an educational method that helps redefine the mind-body relationship. There are internal principles that must be learned, applied, and refined over time. As patience grows, the ability to disconnect from distractions or excessive thoughts creates the necessary space needed to remain embodied. Learning and developing these internal principles creates a base from which to practice the more advanced physical movements.

The physical methods are based on natural movements the body is already using such as contracting and expanding. The body is essentially a skeletal system that is pushing outwards and a myofascial system that is pulling inwards and these opposing forces create dynamic tensions that make up the body's structure. If we want to develop strength through freedom of movement then we must understand how the body is designed, both intellectually and somatically.

In the embodied state the mind is working directly within the body to adjust the tension elements. Patience and concentration are needed to develop the capacity to calm the mind and have a direct awareness of internal bodily sensations. If one is agitated, distracted, or forcing the practice then one will not be able to enter the embodied state and therefore will begin imposing on the body and this is not the method. Due to the complex nature of the method a calm focused mind is essential.

The body has the capacity to restructure itself which is a key component of the work. If we are to understand habits and how to gain freedom from them then we must understand how the body deals with forces. We gain freedom from habits by knowing and working with the internal tensions of the body and learning about how the body is structured to handle internal and

external forces. Once we are familiar with the body's structure then we can consciously guide movement so the body can begin to restructure itself in response to new movement demands. Knowing this, we begin the somatic journey with patience, slowly remodeling and reorganizing through our own conscious driven efforts.

Ways of Attending

What we attend to shapes us

To develop the embodied state, we must understand the mind as well as the body. It's the mind that is the cause for being embodied or disembodied. Disembodiment refers to when our awareness is focused on thoughts and not the field of sensory experience. Embodiment refers to the mind that is aware of the body's felt sense of experience.

*"The Buddhist definition of mind is "that which is clear and knowing." It is not something physical; it does not have mass, shape, or color, yet states of mind are closely correlated with brain activity. The two features—luminosity, or clarity, and cognizance, or knowing—have come to characterize "the mental" in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist thought. Here, clarity refers to the ability of mental states to reveal or reflect, while in contrast knowing refers to mental states' faculty to perceive or apprehend what appears. Clear expresses the essential nature of consciousness and knowing expresses its function. Consciousness and mind are synonymous and can be divided into five sense perceptions, which apprehend shapes and colors, sounds, odors, tastes, and tangible objects, as well as a sixth category of mental consciousness." - Geshe Tenzin Namdak; *Freedom Through Correct Knowing**

When the eye sees an object, it does so without embellishment. The direct sense perceivers engage and perceive raw sensory data. A direct sense perception is caused, "by the object" prior to any conceptual distortion. The five senses directly perceive objects by way of their physical apparatus without thoughts. It's only the sixth mental consciousness that cognizes or thinks. Cognition is used to interpret the direct experience. When one sees a tree, the eyes only perceive shape and color but it's the sixth mental consciousness that interprets it as a "tree." The sixth consciousness can also make distinctions and preferences about the object, none of which the other five sense consciousnesses do.

When we reflect upon the mind-body relationship in ordinary experience it's the conceptual mind that typically dominates our experience. The conceptual mind breaks things into parts, captures moments in time, categorizes, and compares to make "sense" of things. The conceptual mind is a virtual reality that is only capable of interpreting phenomena through a filter, never directly. If one relies on this mind to understand the body, then all one is capable of is indirect knowledge, and not a direct experience. Our mental consciousness is a very limited consciousness where the body is not primary.

A direct perception is a clear appearance without the interference of a mental image. For example, when one grabs a tennis ball, the body senses the shape, the felt sensation of the material, and the weight of the object. This is the embodied experience or a direct experience.

Then following the direct embodied experience with the object, the mental consciousness interprets it and labels it as a tennis ball. The mental consciousness can also make distinctions and preferences about the object, none of which the five-sense consciousnesses do.

Phenomena are changing continually thus their reality is one of change, or process, and this is exactly what the conceptual mind is unable to capture. Phenomena don't exist in isolation and do not have the solid boundaries thoughts would lead one to believe. A simple reflection of our body reveals that there actually is no "body," instead it's many interconnected systems without any actual boundary within its environment. If we were to remove our body from all environmental factors (which is not possible) the body, simply cannot exist. The body is made up of much more than what we can see or touch. Sunlight, nutrients, oxygen, gravity, etc., all are parts of the body not just the gross physical parts we call "body." All objects exist in this way, and one must keep this in mind when working with the body. When we talk about the body we are talking about a verb, a dynamic process. Through this realization one discovers that the body cannot be grasped conceptually, but only experienced directly.

The Body as Process

"In motion the whole body should be light and agile, with all parts of the body linked as if threaded together." - Chang San-feng

To be alive means to be in motion. When we approach embodiment we must ask, what are we embodying? The skeleton, the tissue, the cardiovascular system, the nervous system, the cellular matrix, internal pressures, or the external environmental forces? All these aspects make up the body and we must try to embody them all, all at once.

The lens through which one perceives the body impacts movement. People construct mostly unconsciously, a mental image of their body and how one moves is in large part a direct result of those conceptual models. *Those models are the blueprints for our habits.* It's important that we are aware of our conceptualizations because it's these concepts that drive our behavior and conceal other realities.

To be in motion suggests instability, and this can be uncomfortable if our internal map is a static structure. Most of our habit patterns are due to a misunderstanding this basic fact. As a result, many negative emotions like fear and anxiety build up around movement. For example, the fear of falling is a rigid attempt to stay upright at all costs.

The body is in a continuous push and pull which creates elastic spring like forces in relationship to gravity. The compression-resistant bones of our skeleton are smaller elements of a larger supporting framework, the musculoskeletal system. Essentially the body is a skeleton that is pushing out and the myofascial system is pulling inwards resulting in a continual tension system continually expanding and condensing. The body is a physically integrated framework that can rapidly adjust to external forces and permits us to move freely in our environment. Without the

aid of surrounding tension-generating muscles and tension-resisting tendons, the ligaments, fascia, bones, and cartilage would do little to support us or handle external forces.

Posture is nothing more than a particular moment in time. Posture lacks mobility and only gives the illusion of stability. Often habits are an unconscious attempt to maintain stability. This is particularly problematic because the human body's great strength resides in its instability. Bodies are unique in that they are stabilized by continuous tension elements with discontinuous compression elements or floating compression which means the body is a continually moving structure. It's only unstable if our understanding of stability is "stuck" or "fixed" like a building or pillar. Our bodies stabilize joints through internal tensions which create bounce and buoyancy. The body doesn't rely on fixed muscle tensions to keep us upright. Fixed muscular tension makes the body unstable and works directly against its inherent strength, continual movement.

Balance is not a stagnant event but a continually changing process. Due to the lack of understanding or investigation of the body's relationship with gravity, unconscious habits arise as one braces against gravity. Over time, issues of chronic misalignment set in as the body resists gravity and other external forces. Chronic misalignments can present as a "gripping" or chronic muscular contractions that attempt to resist the force of gravity. This is not the fault of the body but of the mind imposing on the body because of one's inability to recognize these forces. It's inefficient to rely on excessive muscular tension thus, habitual compensatory patterns are wasted energy, because one is not using the natural design of the body.

Embodiment attends to all "things" that make up the body, even if the "thing" does not present "thingness" (in other words, not a "material" entity). Gravity is as much a part of the body as any physical part is. We cannot separate the body from gravity and other unseen forces. The ability to generate power is directly related to the surfaces we interact with and our interaction with gravity determines our strength. All objects are interconnected with gravity. Gravity is the most dominant force on Earth, the strongest mechanical force among all the forces of nature and therefore we cannot separate movement from it. Without gravity, there is no body, and there is no movement. Our bodies are interdependent with gravity. Therefore, all movement is gravity dependent. To stand up, our body interacts with the gravitational force. This is why we can say our body is like a tensegrity in that it maintains its shape effortlessly, reliant upon the gravitational field. Any model of the body that does not consider the gravitational field is woefully incomplete.

Embodiment is not primarily comprehended in a cognitive fashion but felt and experienced. In the embodied state, it becomes possible to sense the "materiality" of environmental forces. For instance, forces cannot be conceptualized but only experienced; thus, deeper levels of embodiment are required to directly perceive them. Neither sensation nor gravity can be seen, however, both are tangible determiners of movement. The learning process involves the learner's active engagement in the embodied state and negotiation of the resistances of their surroundings.

While body techniques are often discussed detached from their environment, the somatic practitioner is always in relationship with it. The practitioner interacts creatively with the physicality of the environment. Somatic practitioners experience the structure of the coarse body, but in addition are simultaneously aware of the subtle aspects of the body and the environment. This process involves both the shaping of the body and the transformation of the environment such that one begins to experience the emergence of a common medium that pervades the two. The body and environmental forces are fundamental aspects of the person. Therefore, practices are performed within a “body ecological” framework.

The Inner Principals of Somatic Restructuring

Stages of Somatic Awareness

There is a general process of embodiment I call the stages of somatic awareness. These are not fixed linear stages. The understanding embodiment as a process that is developed over time and in stages. This is a useful map until one is more familiar with the process. There is both a passive and active stage of embodiment. Passive embodiment is directly sensing the body without moving. Active embodiment is movement within the embodied state. The key point is to learn to recognize when you are either focused on a concept (disembodied) or are directly perceiving a bodily sensation (embodied). Learning to distinguish these states is the crucial first step.

Stages of Somatic Awareness:

1. Cognitive
2. Cognition mixes with sensation
3. Sensing
4. Sensing and directing

1. Cognitive, Coarse Mind (disembodied)

Conceptual mind dictates to and directs the body. This is not what is meant by embodiment. This is using the conceptual mind to direct the body.

2. Cognitive, Conceptual Mind mixes with Sensation (both disembodied & embodied)

Embodiment is a continual process of sensing and directing internal movements. This directing is a shared event between the conceptual and the directly perceiving mind.

3. Direct Perception and Sensing Sensation (embodied)

The subtle mind mixes with sensations in the body and movement is derived from those sensations. The directly perceiving mind acts like a conductor, in that it's part of the process but not the driving force of the movement. At this level there is a great deal of listening and cooperation involved. This is a sophisticated level of mind-body interaction that is a learned skill cultivated over time.

4. Sensing and Directing

This is a very subtle stage of embodiment. While one's mind is consciously directly perceiving in the embodied state, one can begin to intend movement from here. The meaning of intention is important. Here, intention is not a concept but a subtle mind that is able to direct awareness and movement without conceptualizing.

Somatic Restructuring Methods

All the methods used in Somatic Restructuring are based on what the body already does naturally. We come to that understanding through listening during the embodied state and then we remodel based on the new knowledge discovered during that process.

To restructure the body is a multistep process that in many cases requires releasing muscular tension, changing patterns of movement, and continuing this process over a long period of time until the body has remodeled. Patience, concentration, and determination are essential.

1. Passive Embodiment

The foundation of practice resides in stillness within the embodied state or passive embodiment. By developing the capacity to listen, one will establish a solid base upon which to work. This is a self-assessment tool that can be used to chart the way forward. It's not wise to begin to change things before you have properly diagnosed them. Stillness practice is used not just in the beginning but for the rest of one's life. F.M. Alexander's technique as well as Tai Chi and so many others are based upon this idea, to listen before moving. If this skill is not developed, then one will simply put new habits on top of old ones.

To build this base, it's useful to develop practices that don't require movement. Stillness practice allows us to discover what parts of our body we are not consciously using, are compromised, or are not familiar with. Using less effort, we can sense more.

Changing movement patterns is a long-term process. Remodeling takes time; therefore, it is absolutely necessary to cultivate patience in order to do this work. Patience is cultivated during stillness practice. Simply having the resolve to remain in a still state for a predetermined amount of time will go a long way toward developing the patience needed for deeper levels of practice.

2. Active Embodiment

To restructure the body, we need to understand tone. Healthy tone is characterized by adaptable tensions inside the body and facilitates a response to stimulation. There is no right or wrong amount of tension there is only what is needed at a particular time. Tension should be approached as a spectrum that needs to be explored and developed. High tension creates stiffness and low tension creates laxity. Knowing this, the practitioner should develop familiarity with the full spectrum and use of their body's tensile capacities. Learning how to use tension is in large part how one becomes a better mover and resolves chronic pains. Continuous full-bodied tension is what gives one their intrinsic strength and support. Without tension there is no structure in the body.

Having achieved the embodied state, one will begin to move guided by the tensile sensations. Movement should be relaxed while maintaining a continuous full-bodied dynamic tension. Through continued practice this will become self-evident. One should be able to determine the difference between different types of tensions. Chronic or habitual muscle tensions that impose

on and hinder movement as distinguished from the internal dynamic full-bodied tensions that support the body in movement. A full body balanced tension is adaptable, strong, responsive, and capable of complex agile movement.

If one directs one's mind towards the core of the body, the deep front line, the axial muscles (muscles of the trunk and head), or the skeleton, the tensions will become easier to work with. With an increased use of the deep postural muscles and the superficial muscles will be able to relax, and the body will develop more tone. Using the superficial muscles to support the body or as the primary movers creates weakness due to unbalanced tension and a loss of tonus as those axial muscles become weaker. Moving from the center of the body unites the body and increases strength and coordination. Load creates demand, therefore the more one can move from the axial line the body will gain strength and coordination along the axial line and develop more tone as a result.

Reorienting one's conscious relationship to the body and its environment will change how one perceives and relates to the body. By consciously placing one's attention on the body's relationship with gravity the body will reorient itself to the new perspective. Through this shift of perspective, new use and new sensations will arise as new movements begin to form, and undiscovered lines of tension in the body will reveal themselves as the body begins to adopt new behaviors.

When we place the body in new environments or increase the loads and demands, the mind and body will adapt. Sometimes those are new environments and sometimes it's simply rethinking and reorienting to a familiar one. Again, an understanding of what is happening is crucial so one does not overreact or misunderstand what the body is going through as adaptations begin to occur. One needs patience, for time is needed to adapt both mentally and physically to any new skill. Habits are the obstacles to freedom. If one desires freedom, then begin by recognizing the habits and then seek to transcend them.

3. Pulsing

Pulsing is used to restructure the body. Pulsing is what the body does naturally, all the time. All the body's systems are continually pulsing or contracting and expanding. When one brings a conscious effort to pulsing one can generate a great deal of internal sensation. Consciously pulsing develops one's haptic ability which then allows one to directly work with the sensations through internal squeezing and releasing. Pulsing can be applied to any part of the body depending upon one's skill level.

There are two aspects to the "pulse": the concentric and eccentric phase. The body is always pushing (eccentric) or pulling (contracting). To somatically sense the natural pulses of the body is the first step. Once one senses the pulsing of the body then one can begin to consciously enhance the concentric and eccentric phases to develop strength, elasticity, and redistribute tone. Once the ability to actively pulse the body has been achieved one can consciously pulse and the somatic practice will come to life.

To pulse the body, one will make a mental connection with a particular muscle group, fascia line, or any targeted area. Next begin to contract and release that area. Initially, you can use the conceptual mind to locate the area you want to work with and then drop into a direct sensing consciousness as your skill level increases. Once you have identified an area of interest, you can gradually build up tension and use more force and change speeds. Once the body can accommodate more tension, you gradually build up the effort, increasing its capacity to handle and direct greater forces.

One can isolate parts of the body or engage the whole body through the simple method of pulsing. Pulsing can be applied in both static and dynamic movements. Pulsing is effective in finding and working with areas of the body that are chronically tense or chronically lax. Tissues in the body that are inflamed especially due to chronic tension can be released through the pulsing method. Pulsing is also excellent for working with the elastic properties of fascia, especially deep within the torso to activate the axial lines. Pulsing is an excellent way to hydrate and free up problematic areas in the fascial body.

4. Graded Extension (push)

A graded push is a conscious extension of the body away from the center line of the body. One can also think that two bones are separating at the joint. This method can be applied to any part of the body or the entire body at once using muscular tension, fascial tension, or both. Extensions are particularly good when targeting the deep axial muscles along the center of the body. We can also think of it as a self-traction method, that is the body creates space by expanding and the joint is pulled open compared to a contraction or pull that brings the joint closer together. The active and near-maximal extended tightening of muscles around the joints in question requires nerve impulses to travel to and from the sensory and motor cortex in the brain. Thus, one is also targeting the growth of new neurons.

Begin by tensioning the body through extension and slowly build up the effort in stages, or a graded effort. Imagine you are slowly turning a dial up from 1-10, hence graded. You will want to consciously control each level of force you're applying and only put as much tension in the system that the body can handle. Having achieved the maximum level of effort then you can hold for 6-10 seconds and then slowly eccentrically release this position, which will recalibrate the neural muscular connection.

5. Graded Contractions (pull)

A graded pull is a contraction towards center line of the body, closing joints by contracting muscle and fascia. Graded contractions strengthen the body and create new neural connections.

The myofascial web is always pulling inwards or creating an internal tension which opposes the skeletal system. The combination of the skeletal system and the myofascial system creates opposing tension and compression elements that stabilizes its shape. In other words, the body stabilizes through an internal tension that reduces laxity in the body. This ensures immediate whole-body responsiveness. Opposing muscles and bones establish a dynamic force that

balances and places our entire musculoskeletal system in a state of isometric tension. Graded pulls are a consciously driven isometric that consciously use this principal.

The practice of pulling inwards and condensing the joints strengthens and nourishes the body. It's graded in that we approach slowly and build our effort to allow all the body's systems to reconfigure to accomplish the task. Begin the contraction slowly and deliberately. If one contracts too quickly, the body will respond with tensional habit patterns. Due to fascia's viscosity, it will resist if we use the wrong kind of strength to initiate movement.

6. Dynamic Tensioning

The goal of dynamic tensioning is to maintain a degree of conscious tension throughout the entire body while moving through various ranges. One can increase or decrease levels of tonus in the body thus consciously regulating those levels required for movement. Dynamic tensioning allows one to move with minimal muscle contractions and maximal full-bodied strength. Through this practice you will get a deeper sense of the tensile properties that make up the body. You will begin to get a sense of whole-body connectivity. Dynamic tensioning more than any other practice will bring into focus the body's tensegrity structure. Try keeping all the joints open and moving as a whole unit without losing the whole-body tension. Then try keeping all the joints closed and moving as a whole unit.

Dynamic tension allows the practitioner to examine their misalignments, both conceptually and directly. It allows one to discover the body's natural alignments. It's helpful to think of how the tension element of a tensegrity structure works before you practice. There is a balanced tension throughout the entire tensegrity structure and these tension lines give the structure its integrity. This is also observable in the mast of a sail. The sail stays up in relationship to its tension lines. Those lines must always keep their tension, or the mast will fall. When a strong wind comes the tension distributes accordingly to maintain a dynamic tension that can handle movement. Tension is always adjusting but there is never slack, hence a dynamic ever-changing tension in response to external forces.

Living the Embodied Life

"Movement should be rooted in the feet, released through the legs, controlled by the waist, and manifested through the fingers. Everything acts simultaneously. If one part doesn't follow, the whole body is disordered." - The T'ai Chi Ch'uan Classics

When we are disconnected from our body, we are disconnected from the world. The body does not exist apart from its environment. When we discover our interconnected relationship, we become more attentive to our surroundings, less self-centered, and a natural care for the world begins to emerge. When we care for our environment, we care for ourselves and developing this perspective requires one to practice mindfulness. When Thich Nhat Hanh was asked what he learned his first year living at the monastery he replied, "how to open doors quietly." This is the perfect example of how through mindfulness one becomes more caring of self and other, or how to live somatically within one's environment. Learning to live mindfully creates inner peace,

meaning one is somatically aware more of the time and lost in the conceptual mind less. From this type of personal cultivation, a profound understanding and compassion are born, and this is the greatest benefit of Somatic Restructuring.

Most of our time is spent engaged in “mundane” activities or things that must get done day in and day out. Activities like cooking, cleaning, brushing one’s teeth, opening doors, etc. These daily activities take up most of one’s time and therefore it’s these seemingly unimportant moments that are in some ways the most important part of Somatic Restructuring. It’s during these activities that most people are not paying attention and that is the very time when habits are formed and reinforced. If we want to change then we must turn the mundane into the supramundane, meaning we must try to be conscious and embodied during these times. If one can do this, then change will happen quickly. If, on the other hand, one only practices embodiment during a few practice sessions per week, progress will be slow. True progress is determined by how conscious we are during our normal day. From time to time, stop what you are doing and notice where your mind is. If you find yourself lost in thoughts, check to see if you are in a compensatory pattern. Typically, when one is lost in the conceptual thoughts the body will automatically rest in a habitual pattern. Knowing this, make an effort to be mindful and diligent throughout the day.

When we live disembodied, we lose our felt experience, the reality of our interconnectedness and interdependence. Remodeling and changing movement patterns is a long-term process that requires patience and humility. Often, the results of one’s practice are small, but they will accumulate over time if one is persistent. As you learn to listen to your body, you will align with the natural processes both internally and externally. In this way, Somatics is teaching us a great deal that is not always obvious, opening our awareness to the subtle aspects of life. The reality is we are interconnected beings. Our body is not a “thing” separate from our mind but is a continual process of many interconnected fluid systems working interdependently with the mind and our environment. Somatic embodiment opens the door to new movements and frees us from habitual, limiting patterns. To cultivate the embodied state completely reorients the individual to the body not as a fixed thing but as a process. The lines between the mind, body, and the environment blend as we move more freely into the process.

