FOUR PRINCIPLES OF SOMATICS

By Stuart Moody

> *We are all somas – conscious, self-sensing, self-regulating bodies, whose purpose is to experience, to understand, and to be fully alive.*

Whenever we talk about decreasing stress, increasing energy, and improving health, we are really talking about somatics. The term *somatic* was adopted by Thomas Hanna, Ph.D. (1988) to refer to the body as it is experienced from within. (*Soma* is the ancient Greek word for the living body.)

In studying the effects of stress on posture, flexibility, and overall well-being, Hanna noted that awareness of the body is intimately related to the functioning of the mind. Working with Moshe Feldenkrais, he discovered that conscious movement could awaken inner intelligence not only for learning more effective movement patterns but also for improved thinking. Greater awareness in the body could lead to greater awareness throughout one's being.

In Hanna's view, somatic awareness means being tuned to inner states even while engaged in goal-directed activity. This awareness allows us to organize and adapt our behavior fluidly in the moment. *Somatics* was his name for developing mind-body coordination through conscious movement and relaxation. While he systematized his approach, developing a set of *Somatic Exercises,* he understood that other forms of movement and therapy function as somatic arts, too. These include:

- Martial arts, such as Aikido and Tai Chi, whose aim is to control one's responses to stress
- Massage and related therapies such as Trager Work
- Movement-oriented bodywork such as the Alexander technique, Feldenkrais, and Jean Couch's Balance technique
- Yoga

Somatic arts are those which enliven the mind-body connection, creating more awareness and increasing the flow of energy. Are all forms of yoga and all martial arts necessarily somatic? Only to the degree that they enliven the mind-body connection and nourish the living body in its wholeness. To the degree that they create dis-connection – through stress, strain, or otherwise treating the body as an object rather than as a living being – they cannot be called somatic.

Doing a Tai Chi routine smoothly and comfortably is clearly somatic. So, too, is a calm, deep breath at your door in the morning, or a meditative walk in the woods, or a gentle rub on your neck and shoulders.

This article includes a sampling of exercises which you can use for recharging during the day. Equally important, you may use them as part of your regular practice every morning or early evening to restore balance and a sense of well-being that radiates to others as friendliness and good will. You can make an art of your day by regularly replenishing the flow of energy and awareness through somatic movement and relaxation.

To begin, let's look at four principles of somatics: *energy*, *movement*, *relaxation*, and *awareness*.

Principle 1: Energy

From the perspective of somatics, we can look at the day as a series of experiences of energy transformation. For energy is the currency of every living body. As Walter Bortz, M.D. puts it, "Life is the bundling and ordering of energy" (1986, p. 322). Organization of energy is fundamental to successful living. Loss of the ability to organize and use energy characterizes the gradual decline in function that we call "aging" but which may be more properly termed "frailty" (Bortz, 2002). Somatic management means managing the experiences and the activities of the day in ways that increase the soma's effectiveness in capturing, storing, and utilizing energy.

Organized energy, then, is a key to success in living. This is not as abstract as it sounds. Consider a middle school classroom, or a downtown office. The degree of chaos or order in the space determines whether the members of the working community will reach the end of the day feeling frazzled and frustrated or happy and satisfied. At the end of a somatically-managed day, you should feel more energized, more awake, more "organized" than when you began. This applies equally whether you are in meetings all day, on the golf course, or running errands.

> Somatic principle #1: *Everything in life depends on energy. An active, healthy lifestyle depends on keeping your energy flowing throughout the day.*

Principle 2: Movement

The work of life – capture, storage, and utilization of energy – is a highly active process. This simple principle has profound implications for your daily life. "Whatever life may be in the abstraction," says Hanna (1993), "the way life manifests itself in living bodies is through autonomous *movement*. The living body is a moving body – indeed, it is a constantly moving body" (p. viii).

This movement comes from the brain. As Baggaley (2001) says, "The brain and body are constantly alive with billions of electrical and chemical signals," an unending stream of activity emanating from our nerve cells (p. 97). While we tend to think of the brain's functioning in terms of its ability to compute, to decipher symbols, to compose sentences, and to construct logical models of the world, the brain has equally far-reaching tasks in the governing of movement, from cell to tissue to bone.

The central role of movement extends across the entire lifespan, starting from infancy. "At the sensorimotor level," Piaget points out, "the few-months-old baby first discovers causal connections solely through his own physical actions" (1976, p. vi). The multitude of discoveries made through sensory-motor interaction with the world not only builds a treasure trove of information about physical properties of the universe, it also develops basic concepts and cognitive structures. Kermoian & Campos (1988), for example, describe how locomotor experiences have a strong facilitative effect on the development of spatial intelligence. Their study of infants at 8-1/2 months found that children with extensive locomotor experience had more advanced concepts of object permanence than did non-locomoting infants.

Optimal physical development depends upon movement, too. The body's need for physical exercise is so great that it is been called a cosmic imperative. "Stagnation, lethargy, and apathy," remarks Bortz (1986), "breed molecular, cellular tissue, organismic, societal decay" (p. 326).

Somatic principle #2: *The nature of life is to move. A healthy lifestyle will allow you time and space to exercise this biological imperative in many and varied ways.*

Principle 3: Relaxation

Prolonged stress impairs performance. Acute incidents of stress do sharpen cognition and promote quick, adaptive response. For example, if you enter a crosswalk and suddenly notice an oncoming car, you instantly assess the situation, mobilize your energy, and step back onto the curb. Long-term, chronic stressful experiences, however, especially ones which do not allow for adaptive response, lead not to sharpening of cognition but rather to atrophy of neuronal processes (Sapolsky, 1995).

According to Hanna (1988), the accumulation of stress in the body leads to "sensory-motor amnesia," the loss of conscious control of over-stressed muscles. This loss of sensory-motor memory leads to problems in posture, breathing, gait, and the overall sense of well-being. Hanna's Somatic Exercises, like routines from other somatic arts, aim to release tension and restore relaxed functioning in the central nervous system. Relaxation improves physical parameters such as circulation, respiration, and movement efficiency. It also liberates vast resources of the brain for thinking.

Somatic principle #3: *Stress impedes learning and the flow of life. By creating a relaxed atmosphere at home and at work, you can help your family members and co-workers throw themselves heart and soul into the tasks at hand.*

Principle 4: Awareness

Movement, energy, and relaxation, then, are fundamental factors in the life of the soma. But none of these things would have any meaning without consciousness. "For truly," says an ancient text, "without consciousness the eyes would not reveal any form at all . . . without consciousness the body would not reveal any pleasure or pain . . . without consciousness the mind would not reveal any thought at all" (Shearer & Russell, 1978, p. 83).

What, then, is consciousness? Consciousness, or awareness, can be defined as a "feedback loop" of the living organism. It is the ability of the soma to perceive, reflect upon, and respond to internal and external stimuli. Receiving and processing these signals allows the organism to change its behavior in response to this feedback and with reference to its own internal goals.

Adaptation of behavior comes from awareness, and from adaptation comes growth and development. Growth and development, of course, are the aims of all forms of education. Therefore, the progress of education, whether environmental, physical, or artistic, depends on awareness.

Without awareness, we could not experience anything nor could we do anything. And awareness is adjustable. Have you noticed how you can go through the day with more or less awareness, depending on how well you have slept, how hungry you are, how interested you are in a topic, or how well you believe you can tackle a project? (This happens to our students, too!)

The development of awareness is the central task of maturation. Whatever hampers awareness postpones progress, and whatever enhances awareness draws us closer to fulfilling our goals.

> Somatic principle #4: *Awareness is at the heart of learning and human development. Awareness can be used to restore sensory and movement possibilities; and sensory-motor experiences can increase the level of awareness.*

Neural timing – a special aspect of awareness

Reflecting on the different aspects of somatic awareness, Hanna (1993) points out a feature that he calls neural timing – the elegant and sequential coordination of intricate patterns of movement throughout the body. Calling it "the fourth dimension of our living being," he says that this neural function embraces all three dimensions of our spatial being (p. 121). While our cognitive awareness can turn in only one direction at a time, the neural function of timing simultaneously coordinates every movement of the body, from the intake of oxygen to the opening of a book. It is this central cohesiveness at the heart of somatic functioning that allows our surface consciousness to attend to one thing at a time.

The unidirectional nature of surface awareness seems limited, indeed, compared to the pervasive function of timing, which coordinates actions as complex as holding a large bag of groceries while reaching into a pocket for car keys, or writing notes while listening to a speaker, all the time maintaining our balance and upright position. Yet the "single channel" of conscious attention can be tremendously powerful, even in serving the soma whose holistic functions are subtle and often beyond conscious reckoning.

Consider how you can relax your muscles after sitting an hour in a less-than-optimal position. Perhaps, during a long spell of reading, you have let your shoulders slump forward, your low back to curve unnaturally far backward, and your head to protrude in front of your shoulders. (Due to stress, habit, or fatigue, we do sometimes adopt such uncomfortable postures!) But at some point your inner sensing tells you that tension has accumulated in the body. To relieve this tension, you might sit up straight, breathe deeply, and feel the back of the spine lengthen from tail bone to skull. Exhaling, you can relax the spine, sinking a little lower to the ground. Closing your eyes to attend more fully to the experience, you can inhale again, lengthening the spine, growing a little taller. Exhaling, again you settle downward a little bit. After a few repetitions, you can just pause and feel the effects of what you have done.

This kind of tension release is at the heart of Hanna's *Somatic Education* – movements done slowly, smoothly, with complete relaxation at the end. Moving this way requires a high degree of "unilateral consciousness," and helps to restore the subconscious functions of spatiality and timing which keep our bodies balanced and energetic. This is the somatic use of awareness, and can be applied throughout the day whenever tensions begin to accumulate. The exercise below works on this principle, allowing you to let go of tension and restore flexibility without forceful stretching. This is just one example of ways that you can move every day to release stress, recharge your mind and body, and develop inner and outer awareness – a key goal of contemplative pedagogy.

Adapted from "Moving into Stillness: Somatic Meditation" (Moody, 2011)

Let's say that you are feeling tension in your upper shoulders. You can release that tension by consciously and gently contracting the muscles further and then letting go of the contraction: inhaling, you lift the shoulders slowly up toward your ears; exhaling, you slowly let the shoulder blades slide back down. Then, try engaging your neck muscles, one shoulder at a time: inhaling, lift the right shoulder while tilting the head gently to the right. Exhaling, return the head to center and relax the shoulder down completely. After a few repetitions, do the same on the left side. Pausing afterward, see whether the tension is much less, if not gone entirely.

Stuart Moody
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