

Somatics and Yoga

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Yoga Journal: What is Somatics and how can this special work be useful to an asana practice on any level?

Somatics is a body of work that gives us tools to know ourselves from the inside out. Any practice where we seek to foster internal awareness including mapping, tracking, registering, sensing and feeling ourselves is by definition a somatic practice. This includes Yoga, Tai Chi, Qigong, Body-Mind Centering®, Somatic Experiencing, Continuum, and many other traditions.

I think of a soma as an aware, awake, alive, breathing, moving, thinking, conscious body. As I started to weave yoga and somatics together, I thought 'wouldn't it be wonderful to experience my yoga body in a more somatic way?' I recruited my students in an experiment. Together we explored how they moved, felt and aligned themselves when I posed new somatic questions to old yoga problems. I continue this living laboratory, tapping into our embodied and intuitive wisdom every time I teach. It is both humbling and inspiring.

Somatics helps yoga practitioners to sense and feel ourselves more clearly. Yoga is masterful at developing proprioception (the ability to know where we are in space). What somatic practices offer is a window to interoception (our awareness of subtle, body-based feelings or the 'bodyfulness' of our experience). If I can learn to truly meet myself in a moment to moment, breath by breath way, I can use that feedback to become more intelligent in my body, and more skilled in my movement choices including asana and vinyasa. Interoception is directly correlated with self-care, so the practice directly impacts our mental and emotional wellbeing and shapes how we take our yoga off the mat and into the world.

Somatics cultivates patience, curiosity, trust, ease and connection. It is interested in wholeness and relationship rather than individual parts. This is how your brain conceives of your body. It does not think 'I need a strong transversus abdominus and long hamstrings'. The maps we have of ourselves are far more intricate and dynamic than that.

One of the questions somatics asks which I think is particularly pertinent to yogis is 'how can I stay at ease in the effort?' This does not mean that we don't apply



right effort when we practice, but that there is a quality of palpable ease to moving and breathing. This apparent effortlessness lends a fluid, graceful, poised quality to movement, which is something we often see in long-term yoga practitioners. It takes education, time, patience, curiosity, desire and usually getting out of our own way.

Somatics helps the body-mind feel safe and secure, and this is our brain's number one priority. For this reason, it is invaluable in repatterning deeply ingrained habits, relieving pain and decreasing body tension. This may result in beautiful posture, dramatically increased flexibility, co-ordination, balance, dexterity and strength, but it is not the goal. I call this way of learning 'going in through the back door'. Think 'less is more' and you're on the right track.

I am a movement omnivore. I wear several official hats when it comes to marrying somatics and yoga. As a somatic movement educator in the Hanna Somatic tradition, the work specifically involves posture, functional movement patterns, neuromuscular repatterning and sensory motor training. With my Body-Mind Centering® hat on, the core of my work is on developmental movement patterns (the blueprints for all movement including asana and vinyasa), and embodied anatomy which allows us experience our unique anatomy in a direct, intimate way. All these practices pave the way for a more democratic use of the body that goes far beyond muscles and bones. They also give us unshakable *sthira*.

Yoga Journal: Where does this work come from? Is it a one source work or there is many mixed on it? Tell us a little bit about the origins of it

The word 'somatics' was coined by movement educator and philosopher Dr. **Thomas Hanna** in 1976. Dr. Hanna went on to found Hanna Somatic Education. The term 'somatics' was adopted by both emerging and traditional modalities that focused on understanding the integration of the body and the mind rather the separation. Many of the early pioneers were scientists or medically trained therapists including **Ida Rolf**, **Bonnie Cohen**, **Moshe Feldenkrais**, and **Irmgaard Bartenieff**. Contemporary practitioners like myself owe a huge debt of gratitude to their legacy.

One of my favourite related words is 'somanaut', which anatomist and ethicist **Gil Hedley** first invented to describe **Emile Conrad**, the founder of Continuum. A somanaut is anyone who explores and navigates the inner space of the human form.

Yoga Journal: The latest studies in injuries give us frightening numbers among the community of yoga practitioners, why do you think this is happening so much nowadays and how can we make our yoga asana practice safer?

I have a huge amount of empathy for both teachers and students who have suffered injuries. Learning about our inner landscape and mindscape is a multi-faceted process. First, we have to refine our sensory antennae and ability to interocept. Then we have to learn to trust what we are hearing. Only then, can we can act on the information and make more skilful movement choices. My teacher trainees report that the hardest part of that equation is self -trust. It is often easier, and in many ways simple, to be told what to do rather than think and feel for ourselves but it can come at a cost.

I think the schism between inside authority (me) and outside authority (the teacher, method or lineage) is part of what creates injury. This battle can be emotional and mental more than physical. I firmly believe that it is invaluable to have a guide/teacher on the yoga path who has experienced the roadblocks and pitfalls and can offer suggestions, advice, enquiry and knowledge. It is also important to seek specialist advice when dealing with injury or illness. However, if as a student I continually look for the answers outside of myself or blindly follow a set of 'one size fits all' instructions, I risk devaluing my inner voice and kinaesthetic IQ. Learning and teaching this way is a relatively new pedagogic model in the classical yoga world but it is growing.

In tandem with this, I think is it our responsibility as teachers to question what we have been taught. This includes some outmoded instructions, including the things that get repeated and never questioned because



they are part of tradition. For example, there is no scientific research that supports the fact that passive stretching makes your hamstrings longer. In fact, the research suggests that long holds potentially damage muscles. Yet many practices continue to perpetuate the myths that can lead to injury. This is a question of continuing education and yoga as a life-long path of growth and discovery.

The advent of Instagram and other visual-based social media has a pervasive and insidious influence on what we think yoga should look like. Every movement practitioner I know, myself included, has tried to copy a picture from a book or a photo. Experimenting this way is usually not an issue in the short term and is often part of how we learn especially if we don't have a teacher. However, if what is being modelled is impossibly beautiful people doing virtuosic asana in incredible locations, what kind of message are we sending out into the world? How does a beginner ever find the courage to get on the mat? How does a seasoned practitioner learn to adapt the practice to the seasons of their life?

There are two other practical aspects that I believe would reduce injury. One is smaller classes and more individualised instruction. The other is a more rigorous framework around which students attend what class. I was at a Saturday morning class in London last year where there were 80 people in the room with one teacher. With all due respect, no instructor, no matter how experienced, can know the movement history of that many students or be able to meet their individual needs. The teacher cannot truly do their job, which is to serve the students, and the students cannot truly benefit from the teacher's experience. It's a lose-lose situation.

In the same class, there were beginners and experienced practitioners both attempting handstands. My partner, who has been involved in martial arts all his life, was aghast when I told him that yoga students decide for themselves what level they are and what class they attend. In the martial arts tradition, all students must master a set of prerequisite skills before they move to the next level. A series of belts operates, and a practical assessment decides if the student

progresses. I wonder how the yoga injury rate would be affected if we were more discerning about who, what and where? This would involve teachers knowing and tracking their students process and

progress. I have been in many classes where the teacher does not even know the students' names. I find it sad.

Yoga Journal: From your perspective, how important it is to have a self-practice and why?

I heard **Judith Lasater** say once that you will always be a beginner until you self-practice. It really stuck with me. Imagine you want to learn to play the guitar. Once a week, you go to your music teacher and they show you some new chords and teach you technique. After each lesson, you sit diligently at home strumming away and practicing what you learned at the class. 99% of your guitar learning happens on your own at home. Why would yoga be any different? Self-practice helps us 'own' and mature our practice and is key to all of the somatic processes I described earlier.

Yoga Journal: Tell us about the pedagogic model you commit yourself with, what are the fundamentals of giving more time to explore and less instructions for a student, why it's so important?

I count myself very lucky that **Donna Farhi** taught me her pedagogic model early in my career. In her teacher trainings, she asks 'how can teachers create a context for students to enter into a process of deep and concentrated investigation and discovery?' It is a model where the teacher is there to serve the student, not the other way around. The most important aspect of a class is whether the student walked away having learnt something new about themselves, not whether they mastered a pose. The teacher should be an authority and know their material without being authoritarian and instructions are often posed as invitations to explore.

One of the basic tenants is creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. We offer explicit and genuine permission for students to practice self-care and ask them if they wish to be touched, modified, or used in a demonstration. Baked into the model is the idea that when we engage with our students we are engaging with the whole person: someone who has hopes, dreams, aspirations, challenges, habits and patterns. We are never just simply doing *ustrasana*, and posture is the result of the person's whole life history. Farhi's model is also firmly anchored in many somatic practices of self-enquiry that are threaded through guided movement exploration, asana, vinyasa and Yoga Nidra.



When I teach, I think of creating a feedback loop with my students. I consciously tune into what is actually happening in the room and use that to inform my pacing, layering, instructing and inviting. I will often leave more time and space around an enquiry or instruction if I feel the students are still engaged in answering a question for themselves. My goal is to move them from dependence to independence and facilitate them having new experiences in their bodies, not to overload them with instruction. This helps them stay in the parasympathetic part of their nervous systems and makes learning relaxed, pleasurable and fun.

A soma is by its nature self-monitoring, self-organising, self-sensing, self-correcting, self-healing and self-renewing. Moving to this way of thinking can be a shift for some students, but ultimately, they report that working this way is incredibly empowering and affirming.

Yoga Journal: At the workshop you mention about the new studies on flexibility and the work of Jules Mitchell, this is a conversation about flexibility is really new for the Spanish community and i would like to ask you the question, from your experience and research on the matter, what makes us flexible?

Words carry a huge amount of meaning. I set myself a challenge three years ago, which was to delete the word 'stretch' or 'stretching' from my teaching and practice vocabulary. It was quite a feat! What do you say if you can't say stretch and what student understands the rather clunky alternatives like 'tensile load'? Your body tissues glide and slide, are more or less hydrated, and more or less mobile, but as the clinical anatomist and dissection specialist **John Sharkey** says, there is no part of your body that actually stretches.



The fact is that no-one cares about stretching and flexibility the way the yoga community does (except maybe gymnasts). We have come to worship at the foot of a god that is injurious.

A full discussion of the science is beyond this article, but basically your brain determines how flexible you are. It is an issue of tolerance and safety. If your brain does not feel you will be safe and injury free at a particular range of motion, it puts the brakes on. This can be because the movement is not in our repertoire (the use-it-or-lose-it principle), or that we are simply not strong enough in that place. If you were under a general anaesthetic your flexibility would dramatically increase. Why? Your nervous system is not monitoring and tracking your movement to keep you safe, so the brakes don't get pressed. The issue is not in the tissues. It's in the brain.

It will take time for this information to filter into the yoga community and for us to adjust our mindset and practices, but I am confident that there enough lot smart somatic people researching and writing and updating current practices to make a cultural change in the long term. Yoga is simply not Sanskrit for flexibility.

Yoga Journal: Many people think that to practice asana you need to be flexible, and if you are flexible you are good on asana, but the reality is that more flexibility is a quality that can make our bodies more vulnerable to injuries. How is the proper way for a teacher to work with very flexible students? What the flexible practitioner should be aware also to have a safe practice?

I have taught many hypermobile student and teachers over the past eighteen years. Some of them have felt like they were 'falling apart' and had challenges in everyday walking. Others were battling larger injuries like tearing their hamstring tendon off their sitz-bones. Still others had long-term chronically inflamed sacro-iliac joints.

In all these cases and more, education is the key to long-term change and helping to make what is unconscious conscious for the student. This can be



delicate and complex, depending how long the student has been entrenched in their way of thinking and moving. Unfortunately, I have found that it often takes multiple years of injury before some students are willing to ask a new question.

As teachers, we can ask ourselves what higher allegiance does this student have? What system, method or lineage have they adopted and what made they give up their self-sovereignty? Where are they sacrificing stability for mobility? How has this affected their joint function? What muscular imbalances have been created? What makes flexibility so important that they are willing to endure pain and injury in order to be bendy? Understanding the students' motivation can help us decide how to be creative when we approach their rehabilitation. It also helps us frame our language and reasoning. If the student has been in our care for some time, I think it is ethical that a teacher also asks themselves 'have I contributed to this person's condition?'

Ultimately as a teacher of a hypermobile student, we are looking to create new movement pathways. Practices that train cohesion and strength should be included, and push patterns from developmental work are invaluable. A focus on certain systems like the structural integrity of bones instead of muscles may help. Also the question where is this student moving too much and where are they moving too little? Can there be a little bit of movement in a lot of places?

A hyper-flexible or over mobile practitioner should seek to work with an experienced teacher that they trust intuitively. They could ask themselves the same questions I indicated for teachers above especially, what is so important to me about flexibility that I choose to ignore the pain signals my body is sending? An active practice of compassion, such as the Buddhist practice of *metta*, is invaluable when we come to repatterning and looking ourselves straight in the eye, as is an equally lively sense of humour. Don't forget to pack them in your suitcase if you're going on a new journey.