



## Where is Somatics Headed?

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**Articles with titles like this seem to be about predicting the future based on social conditions or somesuch. Not this one. It's about the spectrum of somatic existence and the potentials for problem-solving, growth and development along that spectrum.**

### INTRODUCTION

A tendency exists among somatic educators to categorize somatic education as if it were about the body - an understandable tendency, given the use of the term, "clinical somatic education" in Thomas Hanna's definitive article, *Clinical Somatic Education - a New Discipline in the Field of Health Care*. However, such a strictly clinical interpretation overlooks the larger meaning of the term, "somatic" (which Thomas Hanna briefly touches upon in that article and discusses more extensively in his books, *Bodies in Revolt* and *Letters from Fred* -- see bibliography at the end of this piece). This present article, *Where is Somatics Headed?*, puts clinical somatic education into a larger context: that of somatic education (without the "clinical"). As we will see, that larger context makes for a more complete understanding of clinical somatic education and opens the potential for a more comprehensive and effective discipline -- and also a transcendent one.

### UNDERSTANDING "SOMATIC"

The term, "somatic", comes from Thomas Hanna's definition of the term, "soma", which he defined in the pages of the periodical he founded, *Somatics - the Magazine-Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences*, as "the body experienced from within."

I have to lay the groundwork for what I have to say by making this point. As a practitioner of the methods he developed and as a student of his somatological philosophy (I shall try to minimize the use of ten-dollar words, from now on), I see two deficiencies in his formal definition.

1. It neglects the "mind" or subjective side of experience - counterpart to "body" or the objective side.
2. It neglects "control", or action, which is the counterpart of "experience", or sensing.

I maintain not only that these two aspects ought to be included in the definition of "soma," but that Thomas Hanna, himself, included them implicitly, explicitly and at length in his writings

throughout the years of his publishing *Somatics* and in his seminal books, *Bodies in Revolt*, *The Body of Life*, *Letters from Fred*, and of course, *Somatics – ReAwakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility and Health*, which all alluded to or spoke at length of awareness and self-regulation, which involve learning, adaptation, and control. It's just his definition of *soma* that was oversimplified.

I would modify his definition of *soma* to be:

*the body-mind experienced and controlled from within*

not much of a change of his wording, but more explicit, and more in keeping with its spirit than his oversimplified definition.

I have conceived my own wording for a definition of *soma*:

*living, aware, bodily person*

which is closer to the original, Greek meaning of the word, *soma*.

Thus, we rule out dead, unaware, or discarnate entities, such as Elvis Presley. I admit, that's a bias, but it's very hard to say anything about anyone or anything that lacks form and so make it part of a purported field of knowledge. Elvis has left the field of somatics, although he had something to say about somatic experience (as did Jesus, Moses, Gautama Siddhartha Sakyamuni Buddha, Lao Tzu, Hui Neng, Adi Da, The Dalai Lama, etc.).

So, *somatic* has to do with movement *and* sensation, body *and* mind, intention *and* attention, awareness *and* will – each of the pairs of aspects seeming different only because of the different viewpoints we take to perceive (or apperceive) each (but the “we” who does that is the same, “we” – oui? – so the different aspects are one, but divided by the operation of attention as it takes limited viewpoints).

Each of these pairs (e.g., “body” and “mind”) is the opposite side of the same coin, different aspects of the same process -- ourselves. We never have an experience of ourselves as “body” and “mind”, two things experienced at the same time; there is no “two.” We have one experience of our own process at a time because we can put our attention only on one thing at a time. (Multitasking is simply rapid alternation of where we place attention, with the ability to pick up where we left off provided by memory.) We may adopt different points of view – an emotional point of view, a mental point of view, a sensory point of view -- to tune in to different ways of experiencing our process, but all those parts belong to and together constitute a greater whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. I know that the different aspects to somas suggest the “*and*”, but I’m suggesting that we lose the “*and*” by a more correct understanding.

Just to be clearer, what makes the whole more than the mere sum of its parts is *the role each of those parts plays with and for the others* -- said another way, *the organization of the parts together makes a whole*. They are functionally inseparable. (In Buddhism, this view is called, The

Doctrine of Dependent Origination; Ken Wilber calls this inter-relatedness, “holarchy” – a hierarchy of nested wholes. I explain: All identifiable things are wholes made of parts, and all identifiable things are parts of still greater wholes – sub-atomic particles organize as atoms, which organize as molecules, which organize as cellular organelles, which organize as cells, which organize as tissues, which organize as organs, which organize as organ systems, which organize as organisms ... ) Each identifiable level of organization is a whole composed of smaller parts and a part of a larger whole. That’s what’s meant by “holarchy.”

A soma is composed of parts that are aspects of its (our) wholeness. (An aspect is anything you can “look at” or identify.) These aspects fall into “bands” of experience that we call, “body,” “emotions,” “mind,” “intuition”, and “formless awareness,” that correspond to our waking state, our dream state, and our formless sleep state, and which the Eastern traditions call, “gross” (or dense), “subtle,” and “causal” (or most subtle/supramental), and which fit together the way different colors of light fit together to constitute a rainbow. Try to separate the colors! You no longer have a rainbow.

Somas, being living processes, are a bit more dynamic than a rainbow. The different bands have special unique functions that show up as “reflections” in the other bands. Mental or emotional states show up in the body as physiological changes. To change one changes the others. Somas are totalities of identifiable, seemingly different, but inter-related aspects that are what they are because of their interplay with other aspects. Their apparent “aspectness” (distinct separateness) results from their interactions, not from their “unique self-ness”.

All we somas have memories and maintain ourselves by memory (either conscious memory, subconscious memory, or unconscious memory e.g., genetic memory), which gives us cohesiveness and persistence through time. These memories are “seated” at any and all of the levels of being, from gross-to-subtle, and they shape how the other levels function. Emotions affect physiology; physiological memories (e.g., neural connections, tension patterns, body chemistry) “maintain” emotional memories. Sensory-motor memories (e.g., of the physical traumas) color our emotional life and emotional traumas show up in our physiology as habituation of patterns of muscular tension: nervous tension.

As a practical matter, we can’t deal with emotional memories strictly through physiological means. We may provoke or evoke awareness of emotional memories through physiological means (touch or movement), and we may provoke or evoke emotional discharge through physiological means, *but the formation of new emotional behavior requires new emotional learning and that makes catharsis an incomplete means of new adaptation – a first step, at best.*

My point: because of the interrelatedness of different layers of our being, and because each of these layers has and is organized by memory into patterns of memory, “*the experience and control of the body-mind from within*” must technically take into account all of these layers of the being to be most effective. Because of the interrelation of body “and” mind and the related layers of being, the field of somatics properly encompasses the full spectrum of experience available to the attention of living beings and should be able to intelligently address each layer on its own

terms. This view is evident in Thomas Hanna's description of the *Somatics* journal as a *nexus* or meeting point of mind-body disciplines.

That means that the field of somatics is necessarily a multidisciplinary field that integrates the findings and methods of disciplines that address memory patterns at each of the layers of the being. More than that, disciplines that have evolved apparently separately and in parallel can be understood in relation to each other by means of functional principles that they share.

Here's one principle, just so I can make more concrete what I have just said: All identifiable processes operate and maintain their organization within a stable range of conditions. (examples: livable temperatures, altitudes, diet, social conditions) When some persistent influence (whether a physical action or the directing of attention and exercise of intention) pushes a process (whether a physical process or a psychological or subjective process) beyond its stable range of conditions, it first disintegrates and then coalesces into a new pattern compatible with that influence – or it just disintegrates (dies). (If the influence is temporary, the process may re-coalesce into its old form – a good reason for practice of somatic exercises until the new pattern is well-established in memory.)

This article is an influence that pushes a certain understanding of somatics past a certain restricted scope so that it can coalesce into a new, more comprehensive, more functional form.

## **THE GENERAL PROGRESSION**

In the process of human growth and development, we see a general developmental trend from gross to subtle. The first stages of incarnation involve sensory-motor development, followed by emotional development, followed by mental-intentional development, followed by higher mental developments of various sorts, each with a corresponding refinement of sensory-motor behavior.

These stages of development involve progressive subtlety of expression and increasing complexity. They “boot up” or self-activate according to a blueprint resident in the potentialities of the individual (genetic or otherwise) and according to the milieu in which the individual matures – family and social. During development, liabilities built in to those developmental potentialities and also immaturity leave the person vulnerable to traumas or failures of various sorts, each of which inflicts a kind of memory impression that affects personal functioning thereafter (or until deliberately modified).

Sensory-motor memory impressions, we recognize as the three reflexes of stress Thomas Hanna described: the Landau Reaction, The Startle Reflex, and the Trauma Reflex (See *Somatics -- ReAwakening the Mind's Control of Movement, Flexibility and Health* by Thomas Hanna, available from amazon.com or at libraries).

Memory impressions and the equivalent to sensory-motor amnesia (S-M-A) at the subtler levels of the being – emotional, mental intentional, and higher-mental or intuitive may and

commonly do form. It's also true that the potentialities of these higher levels may never develop due either to lack of demand by life or due to traumas at earlier stages, which impede growth by trapping attention and intention in dysfunctional patterns, robbing a person of the resources needed to mature. Different levels of the being may mature unevenly. I discuss some of these variations of S-M-A in another article: "Beyond the Three Reflexes of Stress – or – We Become How We Live," and so I'll not discuss them, here. But you may know what I mean.

These memory impressions constitute what, in certain psychological circles, is called "The Shadow Personality" – repressed, dissociated functional/behavioral patterns that, like S-M-A, disturb, limit function, and run on automatic. (I call this parallel form of S-M-A, "Attentional-Intentional Amnesia" and the "lack of development" form, "Attentional-Intentional Obliviousness".)

As I have said, these memory impressions at subtler levels of the being show up at the densest level as habituated muscular tension patterns (and tissue changes) that may or may not look like Landau Reaction, or Startle Reflex; they may look like inexplicable patterns of Trauma Reflex or just weird posture and movement (and weirdness is so common that it seems normal, while beauty and grace are considered extraordinary).

Just so, somatic education proceeds from the gross, sensory-motor level, to the emotional level, to the cognitive level, to the intuitive level (subtle perceptions and forms of self-identification).

At first, somatic education addresses habituated sensory-motor patterns, generally the residue of past injury or emotional trauma that has since passed, experienced as pain and changes to posture and movement. To address sensory-motor patterns requires that the individual not be narcissistically identified as the body, but capable of observing or witnessing the condition of the body, in order to develop control of movement (and sensation). Most people are able to witness their bodily condition in early childhood, but the process of self-mastery is a deliberately learned thing.

Eventually, the process of somatic education exhausts these merely residual sensory-motor patterns, but problems remain. They remain because the remaining sensory-motor limitations are expressions of habituation at subtler levels of the being - emotional memory, cognitive memory (which goes along with behavior patterns), intuitive memory (which consists of rudimentary patterns of self-identification) - habituation that is not "residual", but actively in use. Until these patterns are recognized and released, they run on automatic and show up as sensory-motor tension patterns.

The next step of somatic education addresses the next-higher level of sensory-motor functioning, which is emotional functioning. Thus, the person is called upon to observe and be responsible for emotional reactions – again requiring that s/he not be so identified with them that s/he can observe them. That is the challenge of adolescence, but many people fail this challenge well into adulthood or may never meet it. The principles of somatic education –

awareness, awakening of control, integration of the behavior into a kind of intelligent equilibrium, and transcendence – apply to the emotional level as to the sensory-motor level. In this case, the recognition is that we are creating our emotional state by what we are telling ourselves (if tacitly) about our situation and what it means for us. Our developing capacity for emotional control involves deciding what we tell ourselves about what’s happening. NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) works in this domain, as do other processes, such as The Sedona Method, Byron Katie’s “The Work”, cognitive therapy and other teachings and methods.

Following that stage is the attentional-intentional level of development. To this point, the individual has dealt primarily with challenges of emotional reactivity and socialization, but has not dealt with the challenges of deliberate creativity or problem-solving. At this level, the individual is dealing with the conditions and situations presented by life circumstances and learning to make responsible choices. In this stage, we are telling ourselves what is possible, given the circumstances. Our sense of limitation (inherited from family and society at large and from who-knows-where) at first dictates what we believe is possible, along with the degree to which we have been willing to accept responsibility. At this stage, we learn to go beyond what has been given to us to what is available. It is the challenge of adolescence – which, again, may persist for a lifetime.

The next development involves creating what is not yet available. This is the domain of art, of new technology, and of creative inspiration. “Affirmations” work at this level, creating what is “not yet.” Attention and feeling-intention operate at the subtle (rather than gross) level, the level of psyche and dream, and are brought to bear on tangible reality to create happenings – or to dissolve happenings.

To this point, individuals have been working at largely concrete levels of experience – generally, external conditions or emotional reactions to external conditions. Now, a new potential arises, which is to become increasingly aware of the underpinnings of that kind of consciousness.

To this point, the individual has been identified with body and self-sense and has reacted to conditions according to the make-up of their personality or character and perhaps worked toward a better adaptation to, or creative solutions to, those conditions. We are subject to the disturbances of conditions largely because we are unconsciously identified with our individual programming – and dealing with conditions, and our reactions, on a case-by-case basis as conditions push against our programming. The underpinnings of this consciousness are the habituated self-contraction – the sense that there is a “someone” dealing with all of this, namely, “me.” The fixation of “me” gives the sensation of the solidity of experience; “form” is felt to be not empty, but solid, because we feel solid. Experience shows up at this level as a series of (sometimes impossible) impositions that seems to press upon that seemingly irreducible self, and require more than action by that “irreducible” self: its dissolution or disintegration.

The “irreducible” self-sense is a kind of very subtle (though perhaps tenacious) contraction that is equivalent, at its own level, to the habituated behavior patterns previously

encountered at emotional and concrete-intentional levels – but now at the level of identification, itself – self-definition. Each crisis of life pushes against that self-definition, not toward some new adaptation that is obvious in the moment, but toward its capacity to enter into and *become* the unknown that change requires us to pass through. We are not just moving from one “known thing” to another, available known thing; we are moving from one “known thing” through a zone of incomprehensibility and into a new “known thing” that did not exist in our awareness prior to that time. That process has occurred in more rudimentary form at the earlier stages, in the form of learning by (and growth of) the self in service to the desire for and the resistance to certain potential experiences; now, it involves a dissolution and transformation of that self-definition through recognition of the binding forces of desire and resistance. It’s “up against the wall” learning that forces the individual to observe their subtle make-up (patterns of desire and resistance that underlie identity), rather than to identify it as “me”. The difficulty is that we have no standpoint from which to observe the self-definition, as any standpoint *is* the self-definition, so such passages can be grueling (although not necessarily).

At each stage of development, crises (or turning points) are felt in the body as stress or nervous tension, as well as at the subtler levels, as emotional and mental states of stress. The individual may attempt to mitigate the physical discomforts of the crisis (not recognizing that physical stresses may come from emotional or subtler levels), only to find that somatic exercises do not avail or help only temporarily. The reason: the habituated pattern exists in one or more of the subtler bodies and only shows up in the physical, without being anchored, there.

It’s like this: when a person attempts to deal with these habituated motor patterns by means of somatic exercises, the “person” who is doing the exercises is made up of these habituated memory-action patterns that exist at subtler levels of identification, who brings those habituated patterns into the somatic exercises without awareness of doing so – a little impediment to progress, we might say. The limitation of a strictly sensory-motor approach, via somatic exercises, is that the one doing the somatic exercises is the habit-pattern, him- or herself. “The habit-pattern” is doing somatic exercises (or meditating, or engaging in some other transformative practice). (For that reason, I’ve quipped, elsewhere, that, “Spiritual practice is a little like trying to look up one’s own nose.”)

However, the logic of transformation is the same, regardless of the level: first, directing attention to a certain level (or “band”) of the spectrum of somatic existence, then awakening of functions of that level, then sufficient mastery of those functions to the point of a reasonable degree of mastery, or equilibrium (which liberates attention for the next stage of development), and then the transcendence of (including and being more than) that level (still operating, but without need for laborious attention) into the next level of growth. The individual still (optimally) retains the capacity to enter into any of the prior levels for further growth or self-correction (as in “shadow work”), but recognizes that sometimes the self-correction must be made at a subtler level for grosser problems to correct. The challenge is still “somatic” – but higher up along the spectrum of somatic existence, which has continuity, again, like the colors of the rainbow; the techniques of somatic learning – means whereby, kinetic mirroring, and pandiculation -- apply at the subtler levels in analogous techniques.

Other perspectives, such as those provided by complementary transformative practices, often grant access to otherwise invisible habit patterns; they deal with such patterns at the level at which these conditioning memories exist (emotional, mental, subtle mental/psychic/karmic). For that reason, they are helpful, if not absolutely necessary. Ken Wilber calls application of complementary approaches, “Integral Spiritual Practice” (ISP) and gives access to various complementary approaches through Integral Institute (I-I.org) and so I won’t discuss sources, here.

From another perspective, it’s quite helpful if somatic educators be as free of unconscious, habituated patterns as possible on as many levels as possible, so that they can, in working with others, transmit and (often spontaneously) enliven freely functioning consciousness at as many levels as possible, during sessions. This is a “back-door” approach to transformation through the vehicle of somatic education.

At this point, I’m going to stop this discussion with a mention of another article, called “The Zone of Incomprehensibility”, which is about the common phenomenon encountered by participants in such growth processes as these – or any learning process, for that matter – and probably what you’re feeling, right now, from reading this article.

For now, I’ll leave it at that.

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