

## Somatics as Philosophy: From Spinoza to Damasio

*Shin Somatics® Moving Consciously*

When we dance reflectively, we are in a process of becoming more fully conscious—returning what we have forgotten of our intrinsic perfection. *Consciousness matters.*

—Sondra Fraleigh

*Movement and feeling belong to each other*, and in terms of experience cannot be separated. To bring *awareness* to movement is an intentional act that invites alertness and responsiveness. In these moments, we become more conscious of the life of feeling. Indeed movement is the key to feeling. We don't usually pay attention to how our movement feels, or consider its affective potential. Dance in its first and most innocent manifestation is really about the freedom of moving with attention to the feelings that emerge. In theater we often dance out toward a viewer, another. This is an important kind of communication, as long as we don't lose track of the original purposes of dance—pleasure, freedom, praise, and the opportunity to listen to our hearts in the making. Somatic movement designates a whole field of movement modes that elicit feeling states and emotion. Some of these are:

- Dance and yoga conceived and performed reflectively
- Repatterning of dysfunctional movement
- Explorations of self-awareness through movement
- Methods to improve performance
- Exercises in extending imagination
- Sensory explorations—tuning in and focusing
- Movement conceived and administered in bodywork
- Dance/Art/Life Experiences—drawing forth body memory and image

As we look over this list, we see three categories of movement that sometimes overlap: *aesthetic, educational, and therapeutic*. The intention behind the movement makes a difference—the intention embodied in the teaching, and also the intention of the participant or performer. Consciousness is important, in other words. We can move without thinking, as we usually do, or we can move intentionally and with awareness: consciously, that is. In becoming more conscious, we learn how to be more fully who we are. In our work, we begin where we are, not seeking anything at first, but learning organically through exploration, growing the self and capacity along the way. At the same time, we pay attention to relatedness and community. The self is not for itself alone; it can only grow in relation to others.

Three hundred years ago the philosopher Spinoza saw movement as a quality of nature and of all things human including mind. His philosophy posited mind as a creation of embodiment, pointing toward today's discoveries in neurobiology. In our somatic practices, we also have a deep interest in the embodiment of mind. In *Shin Somatics*, mind is qualitatively expressed in movement, dance, and bodywork. We understand that the conscious embodiment of mind is necessary for health and wholeness, and that the life of the mind occurs through the physical. In group work, our teachers cultivate verbs of permission such as play, allow, and breathe. Rather than teaching through imitation and command the teacher asks, "what is available to you now"? This question presupposes an intrinsic connectivity of body and mind as well as the power of choice. Regarding the latter, the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, enabling better function in movement and mind, is influential in our work.

The Shin Somatics® work we have evolved takes a somatic approach to dance, art, yoga, and therapy; and it carries the work of imagination toward bodywork as well. *Shin* is a Zen word, also Japanese and Chinese, which has several related meanings. Body, mind, spirit, soul, center, and tree trunk, are a few. These attributes are parallel in *shin*. One of my butoh mentors, Yoshito Ohno, son of Kazuo Ohno-sensei, sees *shin* as a slow growing orchid representing, "the patience of not starting." He inspires dancers to wait for movement to come from a deeper source than can be willed, as in Japanese phenomenology where spirit is ever present as a quality of embodiment. *Dancing through shin, I wait for spirit and wisdom to move through me.* In terms of progress, I realize that any change or improvement of movement function also enhances spirit. Shigenori Nagatomo writes extensively about the sedimentation of somatic knowledge in the personal body from a Japanese phenomenological perspective in *Attunement Through the Body*.

We learn through recent studies in cognitive science and neuroscience that movement is as much a part of our brain activity as thought is. Motor functions, speech, and thinking are related, and our bones have a history. How our ancestors behaved shaped the neural structures of our present brains. Movement matters, dance matters, all of the arts matter, and they all have a basis in movement and aesthetic (affective) communication. Our attempts to enhance the neural networks of our brains through somatically designed dance experience and through somatic bodywork matter. In fact, we expand consciousness and awareness through use. Extended consciousness, Antonio Damasio explains in *The Feeling of What Happens*, permits close interaction among feelings of self and external happenings. We extend consciousness through the direct associations made in somatic movement forms,

movement repatterning classes, somatic yoga, and somatically conceived modes of dance improvisation.

*Somatic movement* is especially designed to draw up presence with awareness, focusing alternately in stillness and the ongoing flow of life, not looking back with regret, or surging forward in anticipation. Such designs are intelligent and non-intrusive when oriented toward healing, and they often involve attention to psychological process. We are not always conscious of movement and stillness. In fact we seldom are, unless we enter processes that cultivate attention. Designing and learning how to teach somatic processes for optimal living is the major work at Eastwest Somatics Institute. In this sense, we are architects of dance/movement experiences and of meditation in motion.

We believe that consciousness is vast, welling up through our emotions, and that it has somatosensory sources in movement, touch, and stillness. Thus do we hone consciousness in movement and skillful care in teaching through touch. We also believe that human associations with nature are keys to conscious awareness. *Shin* is a term that relates us to our own bodily nature and to our natural surroundings. Dances and meditations in nature are an important part of our work. In this, we are interested in how the environment “holds us,” as does the mother, or mothering principle of unconditional love. It is not by accident that mythically, we have called the earth our mother. None of us had a perfect infancy or childhood, but is never too late to experience “being held” by a supportive environment, and to learn self-love.

Bodily, consciousness grows from a nonverbal, somatic source, eventually elaborating what Damasio calls the “autobiographical self.” This is the self of self-development—the self that cherishes aloneness, but needs the security of oneness, as in infancy with a mothering person, or later with family, friends, and lovers. In our somatic work, we explore oneness and separation through studies in infant and human development. In *The Feeling of What Happens*, Damasio explains the conceptual basis of the autobiographical self this way: “Unlike the core self, which inheres as a protagonist of the primordial account, and unlike the proto-self, which is a current representation of the state of the organism, the autobiographical self is based on a concept in the true cognitive and neurobiological sense of the term.” The autobiographical self elaborates implicit memory and grows continuously with new life experiences. Somatic processes that involve dance and movement make explicit associations with life experience, as we do at Eastwest.

*Self-reflections concerning consciousness in bodywork:*

When I use contact and touch with people in *Shin Somatics Therapy*, I call my body to consciousness, breathe easily, and feel my feet on the ground. At first I use gentle micro-movement techniques that invite and listen for developmental paths to become available. When they arrive, I can expand upon them in tandem with the body of the other. This is *flow repatterning*, the use of developmental movement patterns in bodywork. I understand that I'm not doing anything to anyone, but that I'm in a process together with another. I let go of doing, and enter the space between us in a state of being, as thought and sense impression blend. I don't consider that I have any special healing powers. I believe that most people can learn how to be with others in a beneficial way. Healing begins with feelings of trust, and ease rather than dis-ease. Those who have a desire to assist others in healing can learn how. It isn't a special talent, but maybe it is a special calling—in the desire to assist and the patience to learn. One of the fascinating parts of this calling is the personal growth one undergoes. The body itself changes, accruing consciousness through movement and words. Thus the mind expands, and the heart finds its purpose.

Integrative somatic bodywork is a conversation without words—intrinsic and responsive. It invites trust, and in this interval, *flow repatterning* emerges between the partners in the dance, the teacher/therapist and the active recipient. Eventually words arrive, as sure as light brings out color. Words are very important in any educational and therapeutic context, thus, we study effective communication skills: listening, not judging, not interpreting, and not advising. We encourage options in thought processes and life situations, so that clients can find their own solutions. Life coaching and somatic leadership models influence our perspective on effective communication. (More on how we communicate can be downloaded at the end of this essay.)

*My way into philosophy goes back to Nietzsche, the first poet philosopher of embodiment in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century:*

But I have had to find a dancer's way through philosophy and phenomenology, the branch of philosophy that pays particular attention to the body. Mythology and world religions have also informed my outlook. My project has been and remains an expansion of personal voice in the relationship between theory and practice. I have added somatics to the project. When writing *Dance and the Lived Body*, begun in 1970 and finished in 1987, I was immersed in a state of dance as a choreographer and performer, even as I also studied yoga and meditation, and began somatic studies in the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method.

Eventually, I studied Zen meditation and butoh in Japan, and I traveled to India to study and lecture. While there, I participated in yoga and meditation at Sri

Aurobindo's ashram in Baroda for several weeks. It was there I was inspired to create a somatic yoga based on infant movement development, which I later called *Land to Water Yoga*.

*About Metaphysics in Motion, my updating of phenomenology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:* *Metaphysics in Motion* contains a somatic perspective that has been maturing in my practice and philosophy for many years; I hoped to add a poetics of somatics to my writing, while updating my theoretical phenomenology and inclusive feminism. In this I remain close to my body and the body of others through memory and community. It moves between us through responsive improvised dances, once we have found a reference point and agreement around which our dances can shape themselves. The same is true when I tune my dance toward the environment or in bodywork with another. Together our dance evolves, as the bones become spacers, and we listen to them and learn. Sometimes conflicted, memory-filled connective tissue melts in our agreed upon movement. I wait a lot for this to happen. *Nothing can be forced.*

*About Butoh: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy in 2010:*

In 2010, I published *BUTOH: Metamorphic Dance and Global Alchemy* to show how butoh has grown internationally, and to document its history, philosophy, and healing impetus. This form of dance coming out of Japan after World War II, explores spirit from an Asian point of view. In butoh as in Zen meditation, images can morph, admitting shadows and spiritual darkness—austerity, earth, and ash. The butoh dancer empties her face as she turns toward light. Nothing special: everything special, as in Zen. In butoh, images move through non-rational surrealist methods and in the active imagination manner of Carl Jung, whose psychology explained the shadowy unconscious as a rich, morphic resource for healing. Jeanne Schul, a graduate of Eastwest Somatics and a teacher/trainer in our programs recently received her PhD in Jungian Depth Psychology, utilizing her experience at Eastwest in her doctoral project: *Making Dances from Dreams*.

*Speaking about the pain body at the Eastwest Somatics Network Conference in Zion, Utah, 2011:*

I speak about rehabilitation of the pain body involving depth-movement processes and *flow repatterning*, which we teach at Eastwest Somatics. As in *mindfulness meditation* and *metamorphic dance* influenced by butoh, our *Depth-Movement Dance Therapy* relies on the total absorption of the senses and spirit. Nathalie Guillaume, an advanced student at Eastwest and Doctoral Candidate at Bastyr University's School of Oriental Medicine, writes: "With this absorption comes a rebalancing

where most of what was out of tune seems to make itself known in the body so it can take a proactive approach towards recovery.”

Most dance forms ask us to “endure pain,” as another Eastwest student, Ashley Meeder, wrote in a provocative paper. What if we could admit pain in the act and art of dance, as we do in therapeutic art processes? My experience with butoh has taught me to admit the pain body, to let it morph and move, and not to deny it.

*Moving with pain*, we allow ourselves to feel the condition through movement, detoxifying emotions and allowing the pain body to shift. Many art therapists believe the act of creating art influences brain wave patterns and endorphins released by the brain. The need for an inter-arts and interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of pain can be witnessed in the growing fields of the sociology of pain, patient-centered biomedical ethics, illness narratives, holistic theories of health, gender studies in relation to pain, as well as the development of creative arts therapy, and somatic approaches to dance and dance therapy.

#### *After Spinoza*

We have been outlining a view of somatics as philosophy, and finding confluence with the philosophy of Spinoza – one of the first to challenge the dualism of Descartes. Spinoza has influenced the history of biblical criticism, literature, and such different twentieth-century thinkers as Freud, Einstein, and Damasio. Contemporary physicists have viewed his monism as a harbinger of twentieth-century field metaphysics. The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* calls him a leading intellectual forebear of twentieth-century mind-body identity theory. As concerns somatic studies, Spinoza identifies mind and body as one, and the emotions as part of the oneness. The propositions of Part III of his *Ethics* contain forty-eight definitions of the emotions: pleasure, pain, desire, love, benevolence, hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, hope, disappointment, humility, anger, pride, shame, cruelty, and further. Because of its focus on the primacy of mind, philosophy has had a hard time admitting the body and its emotional terrain as a serious subject. But we have a counter example in Spinoza, the hero of this small essay. Human feeling is part of the flowing seamlessness of life for Spinoza. And to be a body—to have life—is to be a part of God. Spinoza saw God, nature, and humans as integrated, which alienated him from both the synagogue and the church. To view God as immanent, inmost rather than most other, in Spinoza’s day was heresy.

*Do we teach about Spinoza at Eastwest?* No we don’t, because philosophy is not our major concern, rather it is *soma* and movement. It isn’t necessary to understand Spinoza in our program. But it is interesting to draw a line back, from our work to

his, and to see how philosophy takes on living dimensions in somatic practice. As one of the first philosophers of unity, and in his admission of the emotional core of life, we might say Spinoza has a great deal to teach about *soma*—our primordial body of infinite awareness—and why consciousness matters.

We do study the work of Antonio Damasio and other leading experts on neurobiology and the plasticity of the brain in relation to feeling and movement.

*Somatic Principles of this Essay:*

Consciousness Matters.

Movement and feeling are inseparable.

Movement and body are inseparable.

Body and mind are inseparable.

Intention makes a difference in learning and healing.

Movement is a quality of nature, mind, and embodiment.

Presence with awareness can be cultivated.

Mindfulness is more powerful than willfulness.

Thoughts are just thoughts until we examine them.

Movement is just movement until we become conscious of it.

We can improve our sense of self through movement.

We can heal through intrinsic dance and depth-movement.

Self and community grow in relation to each other.

We learn less stressfully through verbs of permission, not command.

Learning doesn't have to be difficult.

Movement can be pleasurable and fun.

Nothing uplifting or lasting can come from force.

We can exercise our powers of choice and thus our freedom in movement.

Movement can be a source of knowledge and healing.

Moving from deep states of awareness can excavate pain and body memories.

In admitting pain, we can allow it a metamorphic path through movement.

We can detoxify painful memories through dance, movement, and bodywork.

We can change at any time of life.

Infant and human development provide templates for growth and change.

Unconditional love, the constancy of oneness, prompts secure individuation.

When Martha Eddy, a prominent teacher of somatic movement education and therapy, asked me to name the principles that guide my work, I answered as quickly as I could, and off the top of my head:

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Patience  
Objectivity  
Nearness  
Distance  
Not Fixing  
Not Judging  
Not Interpreting  
Not Knowing  
Not Doing  
Listening  
Waiting  
Accepting  
Allowing  
Presentness  
Softness  
Silence  
Gentleness  
Clarity  
Craziness  
Amazement  
Wonder  
Love  
Kindness  
Disappearance  
Reappearance  
Vision  
Sense  
Phrasing  
Rhythm  
Form  
Pattern  
Perception  
Play  
Music  
Poetry  
Darkness  
Luminosity  
Compassion



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