



Somatic Zen Yoga

Letting Go of What's Holding You Back

By Brock Noyes

I have been a practitioner/teacher of Hatha and Taoist Yoga for over 20 years, and I created Somatic Zen Yoga as a supplemental practice (averaging 4-5 times a month) to heal personal health issues that were not being resolved on the more traditional paths. In my own exhaustive journey, I have learned that we hold trauma, stress, and anxiety in the body, and inevitable constriction impacts as impaired mobility, chronic stress, or "dis-ease. How much vital and healing energy do we expend de-pressing down our feelings 24/7? Metaphorically, we build armor to protect our hearts, and wind up living in a straight jacket

Traditional Yoga was initially designed to acclimate the body to long periods of sitting meditation, and was not specifically oriented to access core emotional issues. Feelings can arise in Classical Yoga, and I can remember kneeling in child's pose at the Wailing Wall for a full twenty minutes one day in class. But to intentionally access the emotional field, we need to bypass the sentries, (monkey mind and the observer) and drop into the limbic system, the feeling center of the brain. The constant movement of flow asana, with its focus on posture and breath, gives the thinking mind something to cling to. This keeps us in the cerebral cortex, the thinking part of the brain, and prevents us from truly accessing covert emotional "stuff." Traditional Yoga is a Goddess on the altar of spirituality, and I practice religiously, but it was not healing issues that continued to train wreck my life. Somatic Zen Yoga has been born to address the reality that for many of us, emotional issues lie covert in the body like shadows, and we need to bring light into the darkness to let our lives truly rise.

We are all feeling beings, and the practice of Somatic Zen becomes evolutionary by integrating Yoga, Zen, and Somatic Release Work to liberate constrictions and dis-ease in the body. Fear is

the main saboteur of our well-being, and our biological response to stress is to constrict, to close down and hide in the body. We react to fear by tensing, and we respond to a wound, literal or metaphorical, by squeezing. These “holdings” potentially manifest as physical and emotional blockages in our bodies, which traditional yoga tends to symptomatically liberate, but not specifically address. In the worst case scenario, unresolved covert issues in the body morph into dis-ease which is treated symptomatically, often without resolution.

Carl Jung said trauma is the great initiator in that it gives us the potential impetus to evolve to a higher state of consciousness. (“Is this a gift, can I give it back?”) Trauma can be hardwired in the survival mode of the reptilian brain, it can trickle down through the DNA, or through the cellular environment via osmosis etc. (See Bruce Lifton’s iconic book, *The Biology of Belief*.) Even birth itself can make indelible imprints; in my Norman Rockwell era we were fried under lights, flipped upside down, given a spanking, stolen from Mama, and for god’s sake, bottle fed. And if we were a baby boy, the universe had a special birthday surprise for us! Whatever the trauma may be, the emotion is fear, and the physiological response is constriction. If it becomes systemic, this “holding” manifests in the muscles, the skeletal system, and in the organs. In a sense, our bodies are like puppets, and if a string is pulling too hard, it can disfigure the whole structure. This is especially punitive when the compensatory flexibility of youth diminishes, and the natural atrophy of aging occurs.

Unfortunately, the process of opening your broken heart can be overwhelming, and for some people as elusive as hiring a thief to catch a cop. I have witnessed innumerable souls with “unsolvable” health issues confront the emotional source of their dis-ease and simply flee. To the best of my observation, they revert back out to the “you fix me” paradigm of drugs, surgery, or some arcane therapy. Most of the time, when the source is systemically emotional, no fix me strategies will work. Potentially, if an emotionally driven symptom is “solved,” the unprocessed trauma will simply seek another avenue to express itself.

A holistic approach to well-being will always be the best road to wellness, and Yoga is an awesome path; “If you don’t take care of your body, where will you live?” In my own journey, I have observed that the flexibility of my yoga practice truly opens, sometimes stunningly so, when I entered the body from the Somatic Zen Yoga paradigm. Not all practitioners will have such a dramatic shift, but the same principles apply to all of us; emotional issues hiding in the body close us down, and prevent us from taking yoga on the mat and life to its brightest light. While I wish in no way to pose a Master, I will own up to being a “spiritual warrior,” and by an obstinate refusal to give up, I have stumbled into something remarkable; in my own life I have healed “unsolvable” dis-ease through Somatic Zen Yoga, and I have done it by myself. In this regard, Somatic Zen Yoga becomes self-practice. This is not an easy road, but it metaphorically, probably literally, saves my life.

Somatic Zen Yoga is not designed to replace your current yoga practice but to support it. It is open to all levels of practitioners, and is co-evolving with other teachers to integrate Somatic Zen into their own studios in ways that are holistically synergistic. Inevitably teachers will run up against walls with students that have physical issues with emotional underpinnings, and these blockages will resist traditional asana as a solution.

Somatic Zen Yoga offers a new way out, by going back in. There are a lot of commonalities between Yin Yoga and Somatic Zen in that the supported holds in asana are of longer duration. Yin Yoga's primary intention is to open up the connective tissues, and restore the body. Somatic Zen will also significantly increase flexibility, but it will do so by releasing the emotional holdings of the muscular skeletal system rather than physiologically lengthening the system; this is a significant difference.

The caveat is that virtually any qualified Hatha yoga teacher could walk in and teach an adequate Yin Yoga class, but teaching Somatic Zen Yoga is something altogether different. Because the practice has the potential to dredge up core emotional issues, some of them volatile, a teacher must have some true experience in working through the process themselves, and be extremely versed on how to deal with emotional turbulence when it arises in students. Teachers utilizing Somatic Yoga without prior training risk putting themselves and their students in harm's way; this is a warning that should not go unheeded! In the initial to intermediate stages, students should work with a qualified guide. Furthermore, if you start the practice of Somatic Zen Yoga without a teacher, the thinking mind will probably find diversions and "rational-lies" to avoid going into where emotions are hiding. In this scenario nothing will arise, and you may conclude emotional roads are another dead end, when going into the body on an emotional level may be the only path that will free you. It is also possible something will arise you cannot understand or process; this is especially true with dissociated memories. In Somatic Zen Yoga you are metaphorically heading out to open water, and the emotional weather report can get stormy. Build a safe boat before heading out on your journey. When I created Somatic Zen Yoga, I headed out with no compass, no real idea where I was going, just knowing where I was stuck was completely unacceptable. It was truly a solitary journey, and at times it had an existential loneliness; I have found there is healing in community. Ultimately, the purpose of Somatic Zen Yoga is to create a structure in which an experienced practitioner can have a self practice, referring back to the teacher when necessary. (Holistically it is critical to continue with your primary practice.) There is a map now to Somatic Zen Yoga, and you should learn it well before heading out on your journey. There is true grace in a lighthouse.

Somatic Zen Yoga is a holistic practice that incorporates multiple modalities before eventually branching out on its own. Most of the postures in Somatic Zen are taken directly from classical

yoga, and in workshops, Hatha Yoga is practiced as well as Somatic Zen. We utilize Zen as the road of consciousness to take the journey, allowing whatever needs to be seen to rise. It is psycho-physiology, or Somatic Emotional Release Work, that makes Somatic Zen evolutionary on the path of Yoga.

Typically, the mind's coping strategy is short term gain, long term pain. By holding contact where emotions are stuck in the body, (the symptom can be quite a ways from the source) we are able to evade the monkey mind strategies that revert to guerilla tactics to avoid pain. By utilizing sandbags to replace the touch of a somatic therapist, we are able to anchor the practice into the limbic system where emotions are stored. By utilizing classical Zen, we allow everything to arise without any technique; no focus on breath, mantra, divine light, spirit guides, etc. Combining Zen with the Yoga posture, and the weight of sandbags, the emotional body is accessed, and feelings, memories and experiences start their journey to the light. I have witnessed this as a very thin mist to a full blown hurricane; its does not matter as long as emotions are starting to lift. For many of us, the road back home may be a bumpy one, but once you realize the cost of holding emotions is far greater than experiencing them and letting them go, the journey has truly begun.

There have been some remarkable advances in the field of science and psychology, and there are innumerable modalities out there promising relatively quick cures to unsolvable problems. I am sure some of these things are working for some people, so if something calls you, give it your best shot and report back! In my case, the journey in life was more like Sisyphus until I realized the problem was not out there, it was in here! Whether you are experiencing physical limitations or just an intuitive hit that something is imbalanced, Somatic Zen Yoga will give a road to access those covert places inside yourself. E-motions are what lift, and when they release, the body/mind naturally tracks back in to balance.

Recently I watched the stunning footage from Hubble on the Omnimax Screen, and saw a phenomenal nebula simultaneously blowing up and giving birth. It was an incomprehensibly beautiful display of the universal blueprint, and it blew what is left of "I know" right off the top of my skull. My intuition tells me Somatic Zen Yoga is a soul journey back to heal the unresolved issues of our lifetime, in some cases healing the inner child. This is a sweet thought, but it could also be my own metaphorical projections. What I can say for sure is that we hold emotional stuff in our bodies which has the potential to wreak havoc on our well-being, and Somatic Zen Yoga is way out, by going back.

I'm a former member of Living Yoga's wonderful Teaching Yoga in the Prison Program, and I will always remember the pivotal moment of stepping outside the barbed wire, and gazing up into the freedom of the sky. Metaphorically, our bodies can be a prison where we lock away our

memories, and the jail keeper is our own mind. Somatic Zen Yoga is letting go of what is holding you back, and it is a beautiful thing to watch those caged birds soar to the sky.

Brock Noyes, BA Stanford, MA St. Michael's, holds a Red Belt in Kouk Sun Do, a Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do, has had a complimentary Buddhist/Taoist practice for over thirty years, and is the founder of Somatic Zen Yoga. His forthcoming book, Joyride, can be accessed at brocknoyes.com, as well as information on the upcoming Breitenbush Workshop.