

# Yoga for Menopause

A Holistic Approach to the Health and Fitness of Women over 50



## Somatic Ways of Knowing

In Yoga philosophy we often separate the Body and the Mind, suggesting that they are two distinctly unique entities. But all too often this separation is misunderstood, even by the most sincere Yoga practitioners. Phrases like "I am not this body" can lead us to believe that the body is insignificant, undesirable, or unnecessary, and that the ultimate goal of yoga is to transcend the body. Though scientists and doctors label the body as remarkable in its ability to self-regulate and regenerate, the average person's primary body-related goal is merely an enhanced appearance. For the most part, we take our bodies for granted and fail to fully appreciate the body's potential capabilities. Though we might give lip service to the body as being our temple or vehicle, we often conclude that the body is nothing more than a time-consuming maintenance problem.

The general consensus is that any truly worthwhile endeavor originates in the psyche. Ideas are associated with the kingdom of the mind, while common everyday experience is the domain of the body. Intellectual status is considered infinitely superior to the more-or-less automatic (yet essential) somatic and organic functioning that supports the body's life.

The separation of Mind-Body unity originates with the common belief that consciousness is an exclusively mental attribute, while *sub-consciousness* is a catch-all term used to describe all other non-intellectual ways of knowing. Though we tend to think of the term subconscious as meaning the opposite of conscious, this is not an altogether accurate deduction. *Conscious* refers to the awareness of one's own existence, while *subconscious* means not wholly conscious but still capable of being made conscious. Though subconscious functions such as autonomic or involuntary bodily processing occur outside of our normal state of awareness, these functions do include an element of consciousness or at least potential consciousness. Thus *conscious* and *subconscious* indicate different levels of awareness which vary by degree or by form. Eastern philosopher Yuasa Yasuo states that "transformation of the self can be *psychophysically* attained through successful integration of the 'bright' (mental processes) consciousness with the 'dark' (autonomic, somatic-based) consciousness" (Yuasa, 10). This traditional Eastern view suggests that personal cultivation via a practical method that utilizes the body will enhance the psyche and nourish the spirit.

## **Wisdom of the Body**

There are five possibilities that can explain why we think of the body as having wisdom or consciousness.

### (1) Innate consciousness

At its very essence, the body is alive. It is a living being in its own right. Composed of billions of microscopic entities that thrive, relate, and function, the body itself is consciousness. It is aware. The somewhat esoteric term ‘wisdom of the body’ implies that the body has innate consciousness.

### (2) Somatic awareness

Thomas Hanna, founder of the Novato Institute for Somatic Education, defines Somatics as the art and science of the inter-relational process between awareness, biological function, and environment. Somatics refers to the individual having a sense of one’s Self as a “living body” that interacts with an internal (bodily) environment as well as an external (surroundings) environment. Hanna distinguishes between the body that a physiologist studies from an externalized, third-person view and the soma or living body that represents the self-sensing, internalized perception of one’s self (Hanna, 20).

Somatic scientists believe that the body automatically and continually self-monitors and self-regulates. The body is capable of redefining and restructuring itself as it adapts to any contact with external or internal sensory information. The body’s autonomic behavior provides involuntary, self-generated functioning that occurs without mental direction. Though this type of autonomic functioning is not consciously controlled by the mind nor considered to be part of the traditional psychological processes, this amazing and wonderful basic bodily consciousness is extremely valuable for one’s survival. This is the body acting as its own mind.

### (3) Subconscious ways of knowing

The body operates and communicates at a deep, subconscious level, though it does not speak English or use words. It has its own language, a language that is constructed from concepts like intuition, tension, inner voice, energy flow, and health. Our awareness of the body’s ways of knowing is based on sensation and emotion. Though we tend to consider such non-intellectual ways of knowing as being less evolved, they are still valid. They represent mankind’s innate, habitual, and most primitive ways of knowing because they are linked to the human being’s earliest stages of evolution. As such, they are generally classified as unsophisticated and instinctual.

These ‘lower’ instinctual responses originate in the brainstem, which is the oldest area of the brain. The ‘higher’ cognitive thinking processes register in the more recently evolved frontal lobes. Enhanced cognitive processes and the ability to think logically and reasonably is the result of structural evolution of the human brain. Most ways of learning honor the ability to intellectualize. We are taught to depend on logic and reason instead of intuition or sensations like the level of bodily tension. Spontaneous, reflexive, and unconscious reactions are often not socially acceptable. From an early age, we are told to deny our natural, bodily ways of knowing in favor of consciously learning to override, restrict, ignore, or inhibit feedback from bodily sensations.

For example, we might force ourselves to put on our ‘game face’ at a stressful business meeting, but our bodies cannot live the lie. In spite of superficial smiles and expected courtesies, underneath the tailored business suit the body wears its truth in the form of tight shoulders, a constricted abdomen, and pinched buttocks that signify tension, anticipation, or fear. We have evolved into a species that functions by denying or disguising the innate body-mind connection.

#### (4) Expressive consciousness

The body is expressive. It expresses the Self through movement. Movement is nonverbal yet it communicates. Expressive body movement is one of numerous ways to give form to the unconscious. Instead of relying on imitation as the primary method to produce movement, expressive bodywork focuses on freeing the individual’s creativity, feelings, sensations, and intuition. This type of [spontaneous] movement cannot be anticipated, explained, specifically worked for, nor repeated exactly (Johnson, 243). Examples of functional bodywork as a means to contact the subconscious mind through expressive movement include Dance therapy, Continuum, Kinetic Awareness, Wetzig Coordination Patterns, Yoga, and certain spiritual dance-trance techniques.

#### (5) Memory

The body remembers. Scientists have discovered that emotions have an effect on muscle tone, and learning theorists conclude that the emotional state affiliated with any experience is incorporated in one’s memory of the event (Johnson, 371). If memory includes emotion and emotion includes a certain physiological feature, then every memory bears the record of a particular somatic state. All of these recorded memories and their perceived significance are ultimately available for recall. The problem for most of us is gaining access.

Debauched kinesthesia and kinesthetic amnesia and debauched kinesthesia are two types of problems that can affect the body’s memory. Debauched kinesthesia refers to a misidentification regarding the body’s innate sensory awareness. In other words, we think that what we are feeling or sensing is true and accurate, but we are mistaken. In this case, our sensory-perception for a particular area of the body has become skewed, inaccurate, and unreliable, which causes us to misinterpret the meaning of the somatic-based data. The main problem with debauched kinesthesia is that we have mistaken a non-truth as the truth.

Kinesthetic amnesia refers to an absence of sensation(s) regarding some type or some area of our sensory awareness. This is a form of numbness that inhibits our ability to access, explore, and assimilate historical sensory data that has become imbedded and immobilized somewhere within the body’s structure. The main problem with kinesthetic amnesia is that we are unaware of its existence. In other words, we cannot correct the problem because we don’t know that there is a problem.

Innate consciousness, somatic awareness, subconscious ways of knowing, and the capacity for expression and memory are all associated with the wisdom of the body. Though the ‘subconsciousness’ of the body shares similarities with processes of intelligence, it functions in a different language/mode than the

consciousness of the mind. If we never learn to access, understand, accept, and incorporate this important subconscious information provided by internal sensory awareness, we will continue to isolate the body from the mind.

## **Somatic Integration**

Through Mind-Body techniques like Yoga we have the opportunity to learn how to live our lives from a harmonious state of unified, somatically-integrated consciousness. Without such unity, we will eventually find ourselves living in pain or poor health, under stress, or burdened by psychological, emotional, or physical ailments and limitations. With the unity, we have the opportunity to be blessed with good health and happiness.

Somatic integration is important because it produces body comfort (reduction or elimination of pain), body confidence (awareness of own physical abilities and capabilities), psyche strength (awareness of own mental abilities and capabilities), and psyche comfort (reduction in or freedom from fears). Unfortunately, the importance and value of somatic awareness and somatic education in our society has, for the most part, faded into oblivion and been replaced by an emphasis on appearance. The combination of a fast paced world, hectic schedules, multi-tasking and perpetual hurrying, coupled with poor health habits and an increasing dependency on addictions and coping behaviors have contributed to a significant decline in the value we place on the innate, primitive, and evolutionary types of wisdom that reside in our own bodies. For this reason, virtually no one is absolutely somatically aware and somatically integrated unless they have had extensive formal training in Mind-Body techniques.