

Continuum Within Our Cultural Context: The Tao of Movement

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Over the last 50 years there has been a silent revolution that has been changing our concept of the body. Recent studies have found that even persons in their nineties can reverse age-associated disabilities and improve flexibility, strength, and mental clarity through movement regimes. This has changed our idea of aging and of being old. A host of therapeutic approaches have emerged that don't regard the body as destined for certain degeneration, but rather recognize its almost limitless potential for maintaining good physical and mental function.

Continuum takes this perspective a step further, suggesting that engaging with the body's silent language of sensations and movement offers a pathway to healing and wholeness by bringing us into resonance with the fluid intelligence of life's power for regeneration. Continuum has emerged in response to the challenges of our times, incorporating new scientific and therapeutic understandings, yet it has roots in the wisdom of ancient practices: Continuum's full engagement with the body, in movement, sound, and breath, is analogous to the Taoist concept of *wu wei*, "the action of non-action." Achieving *wu wei* means engaging fully with the fluid intelligence of the self and, through it, with the biosphere, accessing a playful, relaxed state in which potent creative forces are available.

The Cultural Habit of Equating the Body with Machines

A more holistic approach to mind-body-psyche, driven by insights from science, psychology, and body-centered modalities, is helping to heal a culturally enforced mind/body split. However, the conventional perspective of therapeutic movement has, in large part, clung to the machine metaphor of the body, seeing the heart as a pump, the joints as hinges, the brain as a computer—all parts that wear out. Movement, in this perspective, is governed by a series of levers and pulleys that operate sequentially: One segment stabilizes to allow another to move. One muscle contracts to allow another to lengthen. At the gym, we are taught to isolate muscles, working one at a time; culturally, we learn to treat each system of the body as disconnected from the others.

Our growing ability to replace parts surgically reinforces this view, presenting the body as a thing to be repaired, in the way a car is sent to the mechanic. The habit of fragmentation and specialization among health professionals, in which physicians tend to specialize in one particular system of the body, tends to reinforce this view by creating a compartmentalized sense of the body and self. Physicians treat the systems of the body. Professors educate the mind. Therapists deal with the emotions. This segmentation reinforces the divide between mind, emotion, and physical being.

Working from this mechanical, segmented perspective, movement therapies tend to focus on particular systems and defined outcomes, working through sets of exercises that are learned and repeated. Seeing the body as a machine, dividing it up in this way, limits our creative impulses, keeps us from seeing the multitude of possibilities for movement. What Continuum offers is a concept of the body's capacity to heal via its innate intelligence and resonance with life. Rather than viewing our physical form as something akin to a horse that needs to be trained, cared for, and made to service our

needs, Continuum teaches us to listen and participate with the language of the body, the silent language of sensations and movement.

The Human Potential Movement: A New Value on Mind/Body Awareness

My experience of the evolving perspectives in the emerging field of holistic somatic practices is up close and personal. I arrived at Esalen Institute in the summer of 1968, fresh from a lukewarm pursuit of a college education that ended when it came time to pick a major. I was instinctively drawn to movement, therapy, and the body, but there was not yet a formal path of study for what I was seeking.

Esalen in the 1960s nurtured an exciting ferment of ideas that became known as the Human Potential Movement. Possibly the most creative and lasting products of this time and place were therapies that placed new value on the messages carried by the sensations of the body. The field of somatics arose from the idea that attending to the body's signals could deepen or inform a psychological process as well as improve physical function. Gestalt therapy, Hakomi, Grof Breath work, the Feldenkreis method, and Body/Mind Centering are a few of the therapies that emerged from this line of thought; all were based on a similar understanding that body-mind awareness could guide us to a higher order of health and well-being.

One of the pioneers of that movement was Ida Rolf, an early leader in the field of therapeutic massage. She called her work Structural Integration, but her students affectionately nicknamed it "Rolfing" and that is the name that stuck. Rolfing was based on the premise that over time engrained psychological patterns of response and unconscious functional habits give rise to holding patterns in posture, the nervous system, and breathing; posture and coordination are a by-product of perceptual habits of the self and the environment. When the body is freed from these restrictions through

manual manipulation and the posture released from its habitual patterns, clients discover new resources and new capacities for pleasure, inner balance, and centeredness. My own first experiences of Rolfing, at age 19, enabled me to shed a painfully insecure and gawky self-image. I experienced several vivid recalls of past events that helped me to understand some of my underlying anxieties. One such recall made sense of a recurring nightmare, which then never returned.

Ida Rolf's work proceeded from five basic premises:

1. Manual manipulation can enhance physical function.
2. The body can repair as well as decline; aging does not need to be synonymous with decrepitude.
3. Trauma lives in the flesh and can be released with educated assistance and awareness.
4. Respiratory and physical restrictions hobble our adaptability and possibilities for wholeness.
5. Connective tissue, the myofascial sheath that envelops all muscle, bone, and organs, is a system with its own coherent intelligence.

These principles were considered radical in Ida Rolf's day; now, they're widely accepted in the culture and no longer questioned in schools of manual therapy. With the acceptance of the idea that an educated touch can improve function in the body, specialized techniques have proliferated in the last twenty years. No longer is massage equated with a mechanical series of thumping and kneading. New manipulation techniques, which focus variously on the lymph system, the cranial/sacral system of motility, the viscera, the ligaments, and more, are rooted in the understanding that disease and dysfunction occur when there is a breakdown in the exchange and

communication within an organism. Every cell must receive nutrients and excrete toxins to remain healthy. When there is a failure of coordination within and between the different systems of the body, the movement of nutrients and toxins stops, and isolation, immobility, and stagnation follow. From acupuncture to osteopathy to physical therapy, manual manipulation techniques are designed to restore the flow.

Dr. Rolf told her students that science would one day discover the importance of the body's connective tissue, the myofascial system. And indeed, scientific research is finding that strengthening connective tissue, creating a stronger fascial system, protects joint function and offers other important benefits. The myofascial system is an all-encompassing tensional network that influences posture, muscular force transmission, and resting tension. Referred to as the sixth sense by some, it is richly innervated with stretch receptors that continually inform us of our position and individual body movements. A growing body of research indicates that the myofascial system may function as an alternate system to kinesiology's Sherrington model of muscular movement. This is not to suggest that the muscular system is obsolete. Rather, we might postulate that just as we have a nervous system with the dual functions of sympathetic and parasympathetic regulation, so it is possible that our movement could be organized by two coordinated but different systems: one for effort and demand and one for ease and flow.

The myofascial system can be changed through manual manipulation, but it is also strengthened by movement. It is here that Ida Rolf's baton is passed to Emilie Conrad, the creator of Continuum. Researchers investigating what can strengthen the collagen fibers of the fascia and enhances awareness of the fascial web have identified seven qualities of movement that can improve function and awareness in the myofascial system:

1. Full-body movements (rather than short, segmented actions),
2. Gliding and sliding movements,
3. Undulating fluid movement,
4. Nuanced variations (small fluctuations of unpatterned variety),
5. Rhythmic bouncing,
6. Stretching, and
7. Positions that create unusual relationships to gravity.

Every one of these qualities can be found in the repertoire of Continuum explorations developed by Emilie.

Continuum asks the question, can we find a way to participate with movement impulses and sensations in order to restore mutability and higher orders of coherency? Can movement be a nutrient rather than just an expenditure of energy? Continuum movement works from the central belief that fluid, nonrepetitive movement can inform and unify the whole body if we can simply be present for the experience and resist the impulse to direct the body. The organismic display emerging from such undirected, instinctive movement resonates with nature's language of waves, spirals, micro-movements, and cloud-like shape shifting. This alternate mode of movement flows through the connective tissue rather than being segmented and assigned to muscular levers and pulleys. As those who practice Continuum discover the pleasure of effortless movement, often the biggest surprise is how quickly the restrictions in the system release without effort. Enhanced circulation and suppleness can be felt. Unsegmented wholeness and spontaneity refresh habitual patterns required for everyday action. The research on myofascia is indicating that the fluid whole-body participation explored in Continuum will create a stronger, more flexible bodysuit of connective tissue.

Continuum and Trauma Theory

As Continuum and other methods of increasing somatic awareness open new pathways to physical ease and well-being, mental health has seen a concurrent and related breakthrough in the development of trauma theory. New understandings of the nature of trauma and its effect on the body and mind are changing how we deal with returning war veterans as well as those who have endured other traumatic experiences. Researcher Peter Levine defines trauma as an “altered state of consciousness,” a state of high arousal that persists over time.¹ Levine and other trauma theorists describe how overwhelming experiences can cause us to dissociate, fragment, or freeze, stuck in a pattern of high alert. The very nature of these shocked states causes blind spots, a lack of awareness and felt sense.

While animals have these same trauma responses, the process of discharging and recovering from trauma occurs naturally for them. Humans, who depend more on social support systems than on their instincts, often override or suppress the manifestations of an attempted re-regulation of the nervous system after a traumatic experience. This results in something like shards of trauma encapsulated in an otherwise functional body and psyche. Left to fester, these shards of trauma manifest in a range of symptoms: sleep problems, immune disorders, anxiety, repeated accidents of a particular type, and behavioral aberrations can all be traced to unresolved trauma.

The therapies that seek to resolve trauma, such as Peter Levine's Somatic Experiencing, teach client and therapist to attend minutely to the signals and sensations of the body. As with Continuum and other soma-based therapies—and certain ancient Tibetan practices—these modalities arise from a faith in the ability of the body to lead

¹ Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997).

the way to healing through sensation and movement impulses. When intolerable sensations and reactions can be tolerated and perceived to begin to flow again, healing begins. While this may not be a modern idea, it is a vital rediscovery with modern applications that are supported by science and research.

Continuum shares much with this view of trauma, and has much to offer to those suffering from trauma. Besides nurturing each person's potential for awareness, wisdom, and happiness, the practice of Continuum can help those recovering from trauma to renegotiate the habitual set points of the nervous system. Slowing the rhythm of the nervous system, allowing it to open and relax, creating a sense of safety and a safe container for somatic exploration, and allowing each individual to self-pace are all elements that help resolve trauma. Accessing the power of a group to build creativity and focus while loosening the grip of habitual perceptions and patterns make this process available in the context of classes as well as private sessions.

Slowing Down

Biological time is not on the clock. The speed of our current lives is strongly influenced by the rhythms of cars, electronics, school and work schedules, and even the rhythm of speech. The nervous system needs a slower rhythm to open and relax and allow sensation to flow. One might think of it as biological time rather than electronic time. These rhythms are sought, entrained, and supported in Continuum classes.

Creating a Safe Container

We need a sense of safety before we can let go and allow ourselves to be present and engaged in subtle sensations. Therapists and group facilitators are putting more emphasis now on creating a dependable sense of orientation and a safe space that

provides uninterrupted privacy, set protocols so clients know what to expect in any given session, and a sense of respect for personal boundaries.

In this way, the container of a Continuum class offers not only the standard therapeutic sense of safety but also the opportunity to be enveloped, soothed, and comforted in the act of being together without language. Once a group adjusts to making unusual sounds and facial expressions, the experience can stimulate a sort of mammalian memory of belonging, akin to the snuffling, snoring puppy pile. Our mammalian, limbic, or relational brain thrives on communing with other bodies at ease.

Allowing Self-Pacing

To reset the nervous system's self-regulation, individuals must have the freedom to care for their own needs within the framework of the group's endeavor. The "all together now, on the count of one" that characterizes most movement classes—most classes in general—does not serve this purpose. Rather, unique self-expression and the pacing of the individual process needs to be encouraged. This self-care and self-pacing are at the heart of all Continuum explorations.

If emotion arises, it is as welcome in expression as any other sound or movement, but emotion receives no more value or attention than any other process or sensation. This is a departure from social mores that tend to keep emotions and movement separate and unrelated. Many of us learned to feel shame if our emotions spilled over in a public display. But the experience of emotion in a Continuum class may be felt as a powerful flow of energy outside of any imposed hierarchy of good, bad, sad or glad. This can bring profound relief as the brain retires from the struggle to create rational, verbal explanations. I have experienced both healing and self-understanding by being in deep emotion while moving within the field of a Continuum class.

The apparent lack of structure in a Continuum class—in a single class, one person might appear inert, in deep repose, while another is sounding and moving with a quiet intensity—encourages unique self-expression and self-pacing. Collectively, we begin to notice connections between how we move and how we think and feel, as well as the power of movement to heal. What becomes quickly apparent in a class situation is that healing and creativity are a very personal affair with a nonlinear logic. The ability to stay with subtle, varied, pleasurable sensations develops new capacities for sensing and intuition. Because it is not possible to “do it wrong” or “not get it right,” the self-critical voices engendered by familial judgments or the hierarchy of school grades are noted and replaced over time with self-confidence, trust in one's instincts, and enhanced creative expression.

Accessing the Power of the Field

Groups of friendly strangers or friends who come together with a specific focus and intention seem to ignite a fecundity of creativity, a serendipitous exchange of information that benefits all. Meditation, prayer, and ceremony all become more potent with a collective intention. Within Continuum classes we find a modern expression of these principles.

Loosening the Grip of Social Norms

Our social programming far exceeds that of all other mammals. Sitting in chairs, talking, street dress, walking, all the usual protocols of our society are designed to keep us within certain well-patterned modes of behavior and prevent other possibilities from being expressed. Highly repetitive and patterned movement tends to result in dense tissue that is fragmented, segmented, and less efficient for energy conduction as we age. Simply dropping out of language and moving freely, directly experiencing the flow of

sensation, allows us to feel into other biological realities distant from our ordinary, bipedal, well-socialized selves.

Finding our way into the unfolding movement expressions that Emilie dubbed “species inclusive,” connects us to our mammalian, reptilian, and aquatic selves. Our ancestors, without technological control over their environment, knew that their survival depended on living in harmony with the forces of nature. Their appreciation for the abundance of nature's life giving gifts was woven daily into their prayers and blessings. Now that we live in a much more abstracted relationship to nature, its forces can seem capricious and out of our control. As it goes with our relationship to nature, so it has tended to go with our attitude towards our body. Bodies are often regarded as something to control and fix from an abstracted, goal driven, top-down hierarchy.

Continuum approaches the body as a nonfragmented, intelligent whole able to lead us toward resilience. Its intelligence is in its ability to move, transfigure, modulate, transform, mix, transport, and unify. This innate wisdom is primarily the result of resonance with a larger field of fluid intelligence—life itself. This is not a promise of immortality or perfect health. It is a powerful resource to move away from neurosis and trauma and allow pleasure and a sense of being one of nature's creatures to restore our sense of perspective.

The Power of Experiencing Sound as Movement

If highly patterned movement tends to fragment, isolate, and detract from the conductivity of tissue, the question arises, what can we do to increase our capacity for healthy tissue as we age? Repetition tends to be numbing and neurologically limiting to the body just as it is to the mind, where it may, over time, impair creative thought. Neuroscientists who studied the effects of repetitive actions on aging make the

observation that the cumulative weight of experience makes it harder to change. Repetitive habits become stultifying and instill rigidity. Without new learning, the mind and body start to decline. Mastering the ability to change is a necessity for health. To stop or even reverse the decline of aging, we must innovate neural complexity throughout our lifetimes. We must see the connection between creative abilities, a vital mind, and new movement experiences. Continuum teaches a way to change the conductivity of the whole system.

But this change is not brought about by physical movement alone. As Emilie Conrad discovered, sound is vibration, and vibration is movement. When we make sounds, using our voices without language, we feel vibration. Continuum sound explorations focus on the inner experience of receiving the sensation of these vibrations as if the body were a tuning fork, noticing which tissues register the vibration of sound and which are denser and less receptive. Bringing our touch, sound, and attention to the areas of density, we can open them from the inside out. The vibratory quality of sound can “touch” places where no hand will ever go, such as brain tissue or the front of the sacrum. Sensing the vibration of sound also seems to assist impulses for micro-movements, which proliferate and complexify as we invite them with our awareness. To invoke and allow this inner dance feels a bit like lucid dreaming; should we become disinterested or distracted, the dream fades. But if we stay tuned, we can experience the augmentation of unifying participation and neural complexity.

Breath and the Nervous System

Vocal sounds are breath made audible. Breathing is so intimately interwoven with our nervous system that we cannot affect one without affecting the other. If we are anxious, breathing speeds up and becomes more shallow. Conversely, relief is

accompanied by a slowing and reopening of respiratory passages. Breath tends to be harder to change than tissue. We can volitionally direct our breathing, but it is ordinarily an autonomic function, meaning that it should function without our attention or direction.

Autonomic breathing reflects the state of our nervous system. All of us traverse a range of nervous system responses from higher states of excitement, tension, or intensity to different levels of calm, repose, and sleep. However, each of us has a characteristic range of adaptability and resiliency. One could call this the energetic signature of our unique personalities. Opening up that range takes more than the volitional directive to “take a deep breath.” For this to happen, a whole variety of changes may need to be negotiated: the diaphragm may need more flexibility, other areas may need release first, the whole body may need to let go of a defensive bracing. The nervous system needs to find and practice a new set point of relaxation, and the renegotiation of that new set point is unique for each person. The results are highly personal, as well. For one person, finding a new set point for the nervous system could mean a reduction of hyper-vigilance when meeting strangers. For another, it may bring a new capacity to contain an energetic charge rather than discharging it in an emotional outburst or hyperactivity. Thus, the goals of trauma renegotiation can be reached without addressing any specific event.

When participants in a Continuum class relax into the field of sound created by the group, we begin to feel touched by the interpenetrating sound streams. Our curiosity in the interplay between sound, sensation and movement impulses tends to produce a more complete exhale. A more complete exhale allows a fuller inhale. This is a different process than telling ourselves to take a deep breath. There is no directing here. Our breath is free to move the way it needs to in the intervals between the sounds.

Seeking more resonant sounding is a form of biofeedback that affects breathing and tissue alike. As our tissue opens and becomes more receptive, our structure is able to relax in a way that allows for a more pliable diaphragm. Breath and the nervous system go hand in hand, creating new openness and flexibility.

Whatever the individual's particular energy signature, this interplay between sound, breath, and movement changes habitual set points of relaxation and perception. Over time, Continuum participants often report that they are making new choices that support their general well-being. Typically, these choices relate to more appropriate self-pacing or a gentler, less driven and judgmental relationship with oneself. These are all precursors to standing guard at the door of one's own well-being. The gentle, allowing quality of Continuum movement strengthens this ability.

Continuum and the Action of Non-Action

The insights available through this movement practice far exceed the physical. When the judgmental voices appear, they are loud and clear. We discover how dexterous we are with change. Can we abide stillness? Can we sustain interest in subtle self-nurturing? Do we feel alone in silence or irritated by unexpected sounds? In class settings, many insights occur that do not tend to emerge in the context of the practitioner/client, care-giver/patient hierarchy.

Given half a chance, the body will find ways to open and rebalance at a higher level of order. Imagine an organism relaxed, in spontaneous play. The slightest curving of a wrist or a tailbone initiates a reshaping of the total body that is both simultaneous and sequential. For the participant, the sensation is to be on the cusp of becoming without a goal of arriving or staying. The next impulse can initiate from any vector or angle of the body, taking it again into a new configuration. The dissolving of one form

is the creation of another. It is a deep peace of being exactly in the moment and richly informed without a need to know what comes next or what it all means. Because the neo-cortex is not directing the process of movement, there is a sense of participating in the unfolding of a mystery. It is after one of these explorations that the body, freed from linear, problem-solving modes of assessing, has created an upgrade apparent in relaxation, fullness of breath, more supple tissue, and increased circulation.

In Taoism, the term *wu wei*, also called “the action of non-action,” sums up the context of this profound engagement. Huston Smith, author of *The World Religions*, calls *wu wei* “pure effectiveness” or “creative quietude”:

Creative quietude combines within a single individual two seemingly incompatible conditions—supreme activity and supreme relaxation. The seeming incompatibles can coexist because human beings are not self-enclosed entities. They ride an unbounded sea of Tao that sustains them, as we would say, through their subliminal minds. . . .

One way to create is through following the calculated directives of the conscious mind. The results of this mode of action, however, are seldom impressive; they tend to smack more of sorting and arranging than of inspiration.

Genuine creation, as every artist knows, comes when the more abundant resources of the subliminal self are somehow tapped. But for this to happen, a certain disassociation from the surface self is needed. The conscious mind must relax, stop standing in its own light, let go. Only so is it possible to break through

the law of reversed effort in which the more we try the more our efforts boomerang.²

This is the inner context that changes everything. It requires a state change from our everyday action mode, in which we are getting things done, to a state of dynamic relaxation. When this state is courted during moving explorations, the body seems to guide while the mind appreciates the unfolding. Pleasurable sensation becomes a nutrient that is vital to our organism's harmony, and a reflection of our fluid natures. Again, to quote Smith, "Infinitely supple, yet incomparably strong—these virtues of water are precisely those of wu wei as well. The person who embodies this condition . . . acts without strain."³

Thus, a Continuum experience feels like diving into the stream of life and learning either to be carried by it or to swim with it. Aligned with the same principles that revitalize water when it can flow freely, the body immersed in this stream can access a spontaneity, freedom, and agility that is completely unexpected. The body knows itself to be in harmony and resonance with the biosphere; it is from this state that self-care and self-healing are most effective.

Conclusion

I have a somatic practice, a meditation if you will, that not only leaves my body more alive and ordered but also brings me back into harmony with nature, mind, emotion, and soul. It is less discouraging to observe the aging process when the inner world of my being can thrive in the pleasure of this harmony. I thoroughly expect to be

² Huston Smith, *The World Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 207.

³ Smith, pp. 208–209.

used up by life, like a drop of dew absorbed by the sun. Yet, I wonder if this process can refine certain capacities for ecstasy that will continually take me home even as I lay dying. Many times in my movement practice, I have discovered through the dissolving of one form into another the wedding of seemingly un-resolvable polarities, such as mind/body, life/death, spirit/material, belonging/aloneness, pleasure/pain. Life gives us many small deaths and some great sorrows and disappointments. The practice of meeting these with more presence and ability to stay true to the moment, rather than with diversion and dissociation, has continued to empower me. Emilie was able to transmit her passion for this inquiry into the nature of being fully alive, experiencing the intelligence of life at play within us as well as outside of us.

Thank you, Emilie and the full, gracious, graceful, gorgeous Continuum community.