

The Yoga of Maturity

E. Christopher Mare – Somatics Seminar

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“Besides, it is a shame to let yourself grow old through neglect before seeing how you can develop the maximum beauty and strength of body; and you can't have this experience if you are negligent, because these things don't normally happen by themselves.”

~ Socrates, from Xenophon's *Memoirs of Socrates*¹

I wish to make these words attributed to Socrates my creed, my standard, my reason for being. The older I get the more I value my strong, healthy body. It's a real treasure – perhaps the most precious treasure of all; for what good are other treasures without the enabling embodiment to enjoy them?

I haven't always given this much priority to enabling embodiment; in fact, as a young man I took it all for granted. I used to smoke and drink and stay out late, then drink cupfuls of coffee in the morning to get going again, finally to recover in time to repeat the whole process the next night. It's just what we did: West Palm Beach in the mid-80s – I sure wouldn't have wanted to miss anything! I often was amazed at how resilient the body could be.

Fortunately, the pizzazz of partying-down eventually lost its luster – I guess that anything that could have happened eventually *did* happen, and so there was no longer any adventure in it. Even with the interest waning, it took many years to recover from this lifestyle as one-by-one the somatically compromising habits inherited in youth faded away: first went smoking tobacco, then drinking bourbon, then drinking coffee; eventually I removed fast food, then refined sugar, then television; finally beer, then gasoline, then meat altogether were removed from my system.² This was a *cultural* inheritance from which I was weaning: indeed, my parents are still actively consuming this stuff – and yes, they do often complain about the perils of aging.

Somewhere amidst the general trend of de-conditioning from my cultural inheritance, I began to perceive an impetus moving in the other direction; that is, instead of simply removing somatically compromising habits, I began to introduce somatically *encouraging* activities: I dabbled in meditation, I tried breathwork, I started gardening, I took hatha yoga classes, I rode my bicycle everywhere. Fortunately, I was fairly athletic as a youngster so I had a strong body

¹ As cited in Richard Shusterman's *Body Consciousness*, p. vi.

² Gasoline was removed from my system when I gave up the ownership of internal combustion engines in 2001.

base from which to build; yet, the new activities were more than simply 'exercise,' for there was an implied 'consciousness' dimension. I cannot say from where the interest originated; I can claim, however, that with each passing year the discipline increases while the fullness of the experience gets richer and more satisfying.

And so now I've recently turned 52, took a "Somatics" seminar in my doctoral program, and want to make Socrates' statement my creed. What does it all mean? Just this: at a stage of life where the cultural expectation is to begin physical and mental decline, I am prepared to move in the other direction and anticipate physical and mental melioration.

I am encouraged by some recent learning. Consider:

- 1) Thomas Hanna (1988), who coined the term Somatics, states unequivocally: "As we grow older, our bodies – and our lives – should continue to improve, right up until the very end" (p. xiv); that is to say, "the bodily decrepitude presumed under the myth of aging is not inevitable. It is, by and large, both avoidable and *reversible*" (p. xii, added emphasis).
- 2) This reversibility theme is echoed by Elisabeth Haich (1982), speaking from experience at her Yoga Centre in Switzerland, who claims to have witnessed gray-haired men regain their natural color after extended disciplined practice. Haich focuses on the transmutation of potent sexual energy as key to regeneration; and, she is quick to point out: "Admittedly there is one thing we must never forget and that is that, however great our determination to make progress, we can only advance as far as the potentialities of our body and our nervous system will allow" (pp. 30-1).
- 3) In an actual handbook of yoga, from the Bihar school in India (Saraswati, 1997), we read about the "scorpion pose:" "Vrischikasana reorganizes prana in the body, *arresting the physical ageing process*" (p. 333, emphasis added). Other poses are described as stimulating the thyroid or pituitary glands, alluding to the fact that "yoga therapy is successful because of the balance created in the nervous and endocrine systems which directly influences all the other systems and organs of the body" (p. 5).

This sampling is enough to register that there are established disciplines and techniques whose practitioners have observed an attenuation of physical and mental decline, *at least*, and apparently, in some cases, an actual reversal of indications of aging. It's very important to note, however, that each of these sources – and whichever one you may find – emphasizes the absolute necessity of *practice* in order to see any results. Hanna states it this way: "In brief, if we are intelligently aware of our bodies, and if we use positive countermeasures such as Somatic Exercises to improve our bodily self-regulation, the presumed "inevitable effects of aging" will, by and large, not occur" (p. 88). In other words, you shouldn't expect to see results if you'd rather sit on the sofa watching TV and eating potato chips.

And for me, that is exactly the joy and excitement of it all: to get this far in life and to realize that I am just beginning! It took this long for me to understand how to organize my life for optimum benefit and now all I need to do is arrange everything accordingly – I'm sure not ready to begin fading just yet! I would say that this means a regular yoga practice becomes the very centerpiece of daily existence – and don't worry: there's enough variety in yoga to keep things interesting for many lifetimes to come (see for example Desikachar, 1995; Fuerstein, 2008; Raphael, 1990; Vishnudevananda, 1959). Still, the actual physical act of moving the body in a purposive way – which, as I understand, eventually can assume the potential for apprehending an energetic body – must remain integral.

Even without the allure of enlightenment (samadhi), supernatural powers (siddhis), or even a reversal of the aging process, such a daily practice of working with the body comes with its own inherent rewards. I like the way Richard Shusterman (2008, p. xii) says it:

The body is not only the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed, but it is also where one's skills of perception and performance can be honed to improve one's cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness.

I think that what he's saying here is that an optimally tuned body increases the chance for excellence in all other pursuits, including "cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness." This would suggest that *the very mark of wisdom* is to continue working with the body right to the very end, for successful culmination in any other endeavor absolutely depends on it. Why, then, is a popular image of having "made it," of having reached "the good life," a person reclining idly in a lounge chair sipping a mai tai? Would this not render degeneration?

I've seen and heard enough to affirm that the centerpiece of my life as a maturing man in his fifties is a daily yoga practice to maintain fitness of body-mind – and whatever embellishments may accrue with seasoned effort. What joy of discovery awaits?! What are the limits of human potential?

I know that some practitioners, including Sri Yukteswar (2006), speak about the onset of a Dwapara Yuga, the successor to the Kali Yuga. Whereas the Kali Yuga is known to be the densest and darkest period of planetary evolution, when human beings live relatively short and brutish lives, the Dwapara Yuga is said to be a time of advancement, both mentally and physically. Human beings are said to inherit lighter bodies; they grow taller and live longer. They are able to perceive subtle energies undetectable to the *Homo sapiens* of the Kali Yuga. With so much somatic advancement, people are able to communicate telepathically – there is no need for cell phones or I-pads. With the body becoming ever more sensitive and luminous, emotions like love and bliss are felt more intensely. People's priorities begin to change from stockpiling material wealth for some future contingency to enjoying the spontaneous beauties of the moment. According to Sri Yukteswar, the Dwapara Yuga is already underway. So then what are we waiting for? Let's organize our yoga routines so that we can begin to grow out of

the dense acquired conditioning of cultural inheritance and start realizing the enhanced human potential of a body with enlivened energy centers.

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