

Healing and Releasing Samskaras – A Somatic Approach

By Sandra Coombe

As we travel through this journey of life our bodies receive a tremendous amount of input. In a perfect world this physical and emotional input is processed and released, leaving us in a state of balance – both physically and emotionally. Unfortunately, the world is far from perfect and many of the physical and emotional traumas we experience remain stored in the bodymind. In Yoga, we refer to these stored experiences as Samskaras. Samskara is a Sanskrit word which roughly translates as a habit or pattern, in this context it can be seen as a habit or pattern which exists at the physical level or one that exists due to how we perceive and think. In this article I will look at how samskaras are formed at the physical and emotional levels and how we can use Yoga and somatic (soma = body) exercises to release stored tensions to bring us back towards our essential nature – which is joyous and pain free.

For many, the path of Yoga opens us up to the idea of a link between the body and emotions. In the Yogic view the human being exists simultaneously on many levels, these levels or ‘sheaths’ of existence are called the Koshas. The Koshas include the physical body (Anamayakosha), Energy Body (Pranamayakosha), Emotional Body (Manomayakosha), Wisdom Body (Vjanamayakosha) and Bliss Body (Anandamayakosha). When any of these ‘bodies’ is individually or collectively injured and our experience is not fully integrated, a samskara results. Generally it is at the level of the manomayakosha that the human being gets stuck in the healing process. It is in the Manomayakosha that our past conditioning and judgements live, it is the ‘monkey of the mind’ that judges our innate ability to heal. The mindful practices of Yoga - posture, breath, and meditation – form the link that brings the Koshas into alignment and how the ‘union’ of Yoga is achieved. Lets look at a couple of examples of this process in action.

The body inherently seeks balance. When we are physically injured, the body ‘copes’ by borrowing resources from other places; in the quest for survival the body re-creates balance. Different muscles are called into action to support the injured area. As these muscles are activated, and others are de-activated so they may rest and heal, we unconsciously change the way we move and hold the body. This coping mechanism remains long after the injury is healed and becomes a ‘habitual’ movement pattern. This manifests as the chronically tight neck, that one hip that just always seems out....the list can seem endless at times. Most physical trauma has an emotional component whether that emotion is present at the time of the injury or develops as a result of the injury. In either case, if these emotions are not processed they remain locked in the physical and energetic bodies.

Emotional injury is stored in essentially the same way. A traumatized child will learn to hold their breath in order not to be seen or heard. When our self esteem is injured we learn to close our hearts and develop rounded shoulders, or we become quite military in our bearing, armored against attack. The practices of Yoga offer us a gentle way to open and explore these injuries to the bodymind.

In the early stages, Yoga movements are new to the body; when practiced slowly and mindfully they can begin to awaken muscles long ago shut down. As we are taught to breathe deeply and

slowly the diaphragm is re-awakened. As we begin to explore and release in this way, we can experience subtle and at times dramatic releases in the body of both a physical and emotional nature. These releases may manifest as tingling, shaking, laughter or tears. Occasionally we know where the emotions come from – there is a ‘story’ that belongs to them; often we don’t. The important thing is to allow these releases to occur so that energy is freed up and the old patterns can be replaced with new more balanced ways of being. It is also essential that we keep our practise firmly grounded in the physical body and to not actively seek these releases. If we are well taught we learn to take our Yoga ‘off the mat’ and find ourselves changing how we move and ‘be’ in our bodies on a day to day basis.

Unfortunately, Hatha Yoga can also become ‘habitual’ movement. In order to continue our opening and growth and remain pain free we need to approach our practise as an exploration – seeking new and different ways of moving and being in our postures; adding variation to the type and duration of our prannayama and other practices. Occasionally we need to explore complementary modalities such as Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique and Hanna Somatics to assist the body in finding harmony on all levels. In doing so we become richer, our meditation becomes deeper and we are led gracefully toward the ‘union’ we seek.



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