AN INTRODUCTION TO BODY-MIND CENTERING®

by

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen

The Body-Mind Centering® (BMC[sm]) Approach to embodied movement and consciousness is an ongoing, experiential journey into the alive and changing territory of the body. The explorer is the mind — our thoughts, feelings, energy, soul, and spirit. Through this journey we are led to an understanding of how the mind is expressed through the body in movement.

There is something in nature that forms patterns. We, as part of nature, also form patterns. The mind is like the wind and the body is like the sand; if you want to know how the wind is blowing, you can look at the sand.

Our body moves as our mind moves. The qualities of any movement are a manifestation of how mind is expressing through the body at that moment. Changes in movement qualities indicate that the mind has shifted focus in the body. So we find that movement can be a way to observe the expressions of the mind through the body, and it can also be a way to affect changes in the body-mind relationship.

In BMC, 'centering' is a process of balancing, not a place of arrival. This balancing is based on dialogue, and the dialogue is based on experience.

An important aspect of our journey in Body-Mind Centering is discovering the relationship between the smallest level of activity within the body and the largest movement of the body – aligning the inner cellular movement with the external expression of movement through space. This involves identifying, articulating, differentiating, and integrating the various tissues within the body, discovering the qualities they contribute to one's movement, how they have evolved in one's developmental process, and the role they play in the expression of mind.

The finer this alignment, the more efficiently we can function to accomplish our intentions. However, alignment itself is not a goal. It is a continual dialogue between awareness and action – becoming aware of the relationships that exist throughout our body/mind and acting from that awareness. This alignment creates a state of knowing. There are many ways of working toward this alignment such as through touch, through movement, visualization, somatization[1], voice, art, music, meditation, through verbal dialogue, through open awareness, or by any other means.

After many years of pursuing this path of inquiry with students, clients and colleagues, I founded The School for Body-Mind Centering in 1973 as a means to formalize and articulate the ongoing research,

[1] I use this word 'somatization' to engage the kinesthetic experience directly, in contrast to 'visualization' which utilizes visual imagery to evoke a kinesthetic experience. Through somatization the body cells are informing the brain as well as the brain informing the cells. I derived this word 'somatization' from Thomas Hanna's use of the word 'soma' to designate the experienced body in contrast to the objectified body. When the body is experienced from within, the body and mind are not separated but are experienced as a whole. While Tom spoke of this during the 1960's, his first book utilizing the term 'soma' was ***Bodies in Revolt*** which came out in 1970. Tom coined the term 'somatics' in 1976 when he founded and named the ***Somatics Magazine - Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences***. Somatics also names a field of study – the study of the body through the personal experiential perspective. Body-Mind Centering is a small part of this burgeoning field.

and as a vehicle for the continued exchange of information and discovery. At the School, techniques, applications, and principles are discovered and used in many ways. Some people practice the techniques, and then out of their own experience the principles emerge. Others focus on the principles, and as they apply the principles in their lives, they develop the techniques. But the techniques and principles themselves are not the material – it is more the awareness and understanding of *how* and *when* to use them, or how to invent one's own. The important thing is for each person to learn how it is that they learn, to trust their own intuition, and to be open to the unique styles of others.

In BMC, we are the material, our bodies and minds the medium of our exploration. The research is experiential as is the material. We are each the study, the student, the teacher. Out of this research, we are developing an empirical science – observing, contrasting, corroborating, and recording our experiences of embodying all of the body systems and the stages of human development.

For this science to have emerged, it has been essential to have many people involved in the exploration. Since 1973, several thousand people have participated in the study and development of BMC, some briefly and some for over forty years. The large number of people who have studied at the School have given the work its breadth. The people who have consistently collaborated with me have been essential in giving the work its depth. Their contribution to this body of work cannot be overemphasized. Together we have filtered through our differences toward a common experience which embraces all of our differences. The BMC principles are drawn from this collective experience. The universal has emerged out of the specific just as the specific has emerged out of the universal. This is part of the nature of the work. As we go from cellular experience to that of the body systems, to personal relationships, to family, to society, and eventually to culture and world community, we are always looking at how these principles travel along a continuum.

In BMC we use the maps of Western medicine and science – anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, etc. – but Body-Mind Centering is being influenced by the philosophies of the East as well. It is a study coming out of this time of East and West merging, so we are working with the concepts of dualities blending, rather than sets of opposites conflicting. We are constantly looking at relationships and are always recognizing how opposite qualities modulate each other.

Though we use the Western anatomical terminology and mapping, we are adding meaning to these terms through our experience. When we are talking about blood or lymph or any physical substances, we are not only talking about substances but about states of consciousness and processes inherent within them. We are relating our experiences to these maps, but the maps are not the experience.

The study of BMC includes both the cognitive and experiential learning of the body systems – skeleton, ligaments, muscles, fascia, fat, skin, organs, endocrine glands, nerves, fluids; breathing and vocalization; the senses and the dynamics of perception; developmental movement (both human infant development and the evolutionary progression through the animal kingdom); and psychophysical integration.

As a set of principles and as an approach to movement, touch and learning, BMC is currently being applied by people involved in many areas of interest, such as dance and movement arts, bodywork, physical, occupational, movement, dance and speech therapies, psychotherapy, medicine, child development, education, voice, music and visual arts, meditation, yoga, athletics, martial arts, and other body-mind disciplines.

While the basic material of Body-Mind Centering was well established by 1982, the principles continue to be elaborated on and refined, and changes made as new viewpoints arise.

As in any journey, what we perceive is influenced by what we have already experienced and therefore anticipate. Consequently, the BMC concepts are outgrowths of the personal histories, education, and experiences of the large number of individuals who have engaged in this exploration. As we analyze our experiences, the challenge is to not be confined by what we have already learned but to continually allow our discoveries to pass into our unconscious and to approach each moment with trust and innocence.

The following are brief descriptions of tissue territories that we have mapped since 1973 at The School for Body-Mind Centering.

THE BODY SYSTEMS

Our Cellular Foundation: Each cell in our body has living intelligence. It is capable of knowing itself, initiating action, and communicating with all other cells. The individual cell and the community of cells (tissue, organ, body) exist as separate entities and as one whole at the same moment. Cellular embodiment is a state in which all cells have equal opportunity for expression, receptivity, and cooperation.

Attuning ourselves to our cellular consciousness brings us to a state in which we can find the ground from which flows the intricate manifestations of our physical, psychological, and spiritual being.

When we embody or perceive from any cell as a unique individual, the feeling or mind-quality is the same for all cells. There is a one-mindedness. However, when we perceive from any cell within the context of its community of cells or specific tissue, the feeling or state of mind is unique to each tissue. Underlying this oneness or uniqueness are general feelings on continuums between cellular anxiety and at-easement, rest and activity, inner and outer focus, and receptivity and expressiveness.

Skeletal System: This system provides us with our basic supporting structure. It is composed of the bones and the joints. The bones lever us through space and support our weight in relationship to gravity and the shape of our movements through space. The spaces within the joints give us the possibility of movement and provide the axes around which the movement occurs.

The skeletal system gives our body the basic form through which we can locomote through space, sculpt and create the energy forms in space that we call movement, and act on the environment, in relationship with the other forms around us.

Through embodying the skeletal system, the mind becomes structurally organized, providing the supporting ground for our thoughts, the leverage for our ideas, and the fulcrums or spaces between our ideas for the articulation and understanding of their relationships.

Ligamentous System: The ligaments set the boundaries of movement between the bones by holding the bones together, they guide muscular responses by directing the path of movement between the bones, and they suspend the organs within the thoracic and abdominal cavities.

This system provides specificity, clarity, and efficiency for the alignment and movement of the bones and organs. It is through the mind of the ligaments that we perceive and articulate clarity of focus and concentration to detail.

Muscular System: The muscles establish a tensile three-dimensional grid for the balanced support and movement of the skeletal structure by providing the elastic forces that move the bones through space.

They provide the dynamic contents of the outer envelope of flesh encompassing the skeletal structure. Through this system we embody our vitality, express our power, and engage in the dialogue of resistance and resolution.

Organ System: The organs carry on the functions of our internal survival – breathing, nourishment, and elimination. They are the contents within the skeletal-flesh container.

Organs provide us with our sense of volume, full-bodiedness, and organic authenticity. They are the primary habitats or natural environments of our emotions, aspirations, and the memories of our inner reactions to our personal histories.

Endocrine System: The endocrine glands are the major chemical governing system of the body and are closely aligned to the nervous system. Their secretions pass directly into the blood stream and their balance or imbalance influences all of the cells in the body.

This is the system of internal stillness, surges or explosions of chaos/balance and the crystallization of energy into archetypal experiences. The endocrine glands underlie intuition and the perceiving and understanding of the Universal Mind.

Nervous System: The nervous system is the recording system of the body. It records our perceptions and experiences and stores them. It can then recall the pattern of an experience and modify it by integrating it with patterns of other previous experiences. The nervous system is the last to know, but, once knowing, it becomes a major control center of psychophysical processes. It can initiate the learning of new experience through intuition, creativity, and play. The nervous system underlies alertness, thought, and precision of coordination and establishes the perceptual base from which we view and interact with our internal and external worlds.

Fluid System: The fluids are the transportation system of the body. The major fluids are cellular and interstitial fluids, blood, lymph, synovial fluid, and cerebrospinal fluid. Fluids are the system of liquidity of movement and mind. They underlie presence and transformation, and mediate the dynamics of the flow between rest and activity.

Fascial System: Fascial connective tissue establishes a soft container for all the other structures of the body. It both divides and integrates all other tissues and provides them with semi-viscous lubricating surfaces, so that they have independence of movement within established boundaries of the body as a whole.

It is through the fascia that the movement of our organs provides internal support for the movement of our skeleton through space, and the movement of our skeleton expresses in the outer world the inner movement of our organs. Through the fascial system we connect our inner feeling with our outer expression.

Fat: Fat is potential energy stored in the body. It provides heat insulation for the body and electrical insulation for the nerves. Its synthesis, breakdown, storage, and mobilization are greatly controlled by the endocrine system.

Static fat is stored as repressed or unacknowledged potential power and creates a sense of heaviness and lethargy. Fat that is mobilized expresses strong primordial power and a sense of graceful fluidity. Fat that is embraced offers nurturing comfort.

Skin: Skin is our outermost layer, covering our body in its entirety and defining us as individuals by separating us from that which is not us.

Through our skin, we touch and are touched by the outer world. The outer boundary is our first line of defense and bonding. It sets our general tone of openness and closedness to being in the world – through our skin we are both invaded and protected, and we receive and make contact with others.

All Systems: While each system makes its own separate contribution to the movement of body-mind, they are all interdependent, together providing a complete framework of support and expression. Certain systems are perceived as having natural affinities with others. However, those affinities vary among individuals, among groups, and among cultures. We discover their voices by consciously and unconsciously exploring them in different combinations.

DEVELOPMENTAL MOVEMENT

Underlying the forms of our expression through the body systems is the process of our movement development, both ontogenetic (human infant development) and phylogenetic (the evolutionary progression through the animal kingdom).

Development is not a linear process but occurs in overlapping waves with each stage containing elements of all the others. Because each previous stage underlies and supports each successive stage, any skipping, interrupting, or failing to complete a stage of development can lead to alignment and movement problems, imbalances within the body systems, and problems in perception, sequencing, organization, memory, creativity, and communication.

The developmental material includes Primitive Reflexes, Righting Reactions, Equilibrium Responses, and the Basic Neurocellular Patterns (formerly named the Basic Neurological Patterns[2]). These are the automatic movement responses that underlie our volitional movement.

The Reflexes, Righting Reactions, and Equilibrium Responses (RRR) are the fundamental elements, or the alphabet, of our movement. They combine to build the Basic Neurocellular Patterns (BNP), which are based upon prevertebrate and vertebrate movement patterns. The first of the four prevertebrate patterns is **cellular breathing** (the expanding/contracting process in breathing and movement in each and every cell of the body) which correlates to the movement of the one-celled animals. Cellular breathing underlies all other patterns of movement and postural tone.

Navel radiation (the relating and movement of all parts of the body via the navel), **mouthing** (movement of the body initiated by the mouth), and **prespinal movement** (soft sequential movements of the spine initiated via the interface between the spinal cord and the digestive tract) are the other three prevertebrate patterns.

The twelve vertebrate patterns are based upon: **spinal movement** (head to tail movement), which correlates to the movement of fish; **homologous movement** (symmetrical movement of two upper and/or two lower limbs simultaneously), which correlates to the movement of amphibians; **homolateral movement** (asymmetrical movement of one upper limb and the lower limb on the same side), which correlates to the movement of reptiles; and **contralateral movement** (diagonal movement of one upper limb with the opposite lower limb), which correlates to the movement of mammals.

[2] The Basic Neurocellular Patterns are sixteen sequential primary movement patterns developed by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, based upon phylogenetic (animal) and ontogenetic (human) movement development.

Development of the Basic Neurocellular patterns establishes our basic movement patterns and corresponding perceptual relationships – including spatial orientation and body image, and the basic elements of learning and communication. In **spinal** movements, for example, we develop rolling, establish the horizontal plane, differentiate the front of our bodies from the back of our bodies, and gain the ability to attend.

In **homologous** movements we develop symmetrical movements such as push-ups and jumping with both feet, establish the sagittal plane, differentiate the upper part of our bodies from the lower part of our bodies, and gain the ability to act.

In **homolateral** movements we develop asymmetrical movements such as crawling on our bellies and hopping on one leg, establish the vertical plane, differentiate the right side of our bodies from the left, and gain the ability to intend.

In **contralateral** movements we develop diagonal movements such as creeping on our hands and forelegs, walking, running, and leaping; establish three-dimensional movement; differentiate the diagonal quadrants of our bodies; and gain the ability to integrate our attention, intention, and actions.

The developmental movement-perceptual progression establishes a process-oriented framework for the dialogue of the body systems. Aligning inner cellular awareness and movement with outer awareness and movement through space within the context of the developmental process can facilitate the evolution of our consciousness and alleviate the body-mind problems at their root level. As we are more able to experience our consciousness at the cellular and the tissue level, we are better able to understand ourselves. As we increase our knowledge of ourselves, we increase in understanding and compassion for others. As we experience the uniqueness of our cells within the context of tissue harmony, we learn about individuality within the context of community. As we gain awareness of our diverse tissues and the nature of their expression in the outer world, we expand our understanding of other cultures within the context of the Earth as a whole and the awareness of our planet within the expanded consciousness of the Universe.

THE EMBRYOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MOVEMENT

It is during our embryological development that our body begins creating its form. As tissues and structures develop, some remain with us, some are transformed into other structures and some fade into the background, no longer existing or recognizable as the original structure. As with all development, though the original processes are no longer with us, they have left us with deep-rooted patterns and templates that affect our movement, mind, and spirit.

In exploring, experiencing, and embodying the embryological developmental process, we discover the primal roots of our structure, perception, respondability and presence. The understanding and integration of these aspects of development give us a doorway into:

- inner and outer processes (self and other)
- the embryonic disk and development of the front body (endoderm), back body (ectoderm), and middle body (mesoderm)
- development of our central vertical axis (primitive streak and notocord)
- development of our organs and glands
- development of our fluid system
- development of the autonomic and somatic pathways of our nervous system
- the ground for cellular unity and cellular breathing
- the dynamic relationship between form and flow

THE DYNAMICS OF PERCEPTION

It is through our senses that we receive information for our internal environment (ourselves) and the external environment (others and the world). How we filter, modify, distort, accept, reject, and use that information is part of the act of perceiving.

When we choose to absorb information, we **bond** to that aspect of our environment. When we block out information, we **defend** against that aspect. **Learning** is the process by which we vary our responses to information based on the context of each situation.

In order to perceive clearly, our attention, concentration, motivation, or desire must actively focus us on what it is we are to perceive. This aspect of perceiving we have named active (or presensory motor) focusing. It patterns our interpretation of sensory information, and without this active focusing our perception remains poorly organized.

Touch and movement are the first of the senses to develop. They establish the baseline for future perception through taste, smell, hearing, and vision. The mouth is the first extremity to grasp, release, measure, reach, and withdraw. It sets the foundation for the movement of the other extremities (hands, feet, and tail) and develops in close association with the nose. Movement of the head initiated from the mouth and nose underlie movement of the head initiated from the ears and eyes. Auditory tone, body postural tone, vibration, and movement are registered in the inner ear and are intimately related. Vision is dependent upon all the previous senses and, in turn, helps to integrate them into more complex patterns.

BREATHING AND VOCALIZATION

Our ability to embody the structural and physiological processes underlying breathing and vocal production gives us another important way to establish our relationship to ourselves and to our environment.

Breathing is automatic. It is influenced by internal physiological and psychological states and by external environmental factors. The way we breathe also influences our behavior and physical functioning.

Breathing is internal movement. It underlies movement of the body through external space. Movement, in turn, alters our breathing.

Breathing is organized in patterns. These patterns are influenced by emotional stimuli. They also evoke emotional responses. Our first breath, at birth, influences the pattern of our adult breathing.

Breathing can be consciously known. As the breathing process is sensed and felt, unconscious blocks can be released.

It is through the expressive qualities of our voice that we communicate to the outer world who we are. Our voice reflects the functioning of all of our body systems and the process of our developmental integration. Bringing kinesthetic and auditory consciousness to our vocal structures opens pathways of expression between our unconscious and our conscious mind and between ourselves and others.

THE ART OF TOUCH AND REPATTERNING

When we touch someone, they touch us equally. The subtle interplay between body and mind can be experienced clearly though touching others. The art of touch and repatterning is an exploration of communication through touch – the transmission and acceptance of the flow of energy within ourselves and between ourselves and others.

In hands-on work, through touching in different rhythms, through placement of attention within specific layers of the body, through following existing lines of force and suggesting new ones, and through changes in the pressure and quality of our touch, we come into harmony with the different tissues and their associated qualities of mind. We begin with cellular presence (cellular breathing) and focus on the resonation and dialogue between client and practitioner. Each tissue of the client is explored from the corresponding tissue of the practitioner, i.e., bone from bone, organ from organ, fluid from fluid, etc. The initiation of intent, based upon what each person is perceiving, may be shared consciously and/or unconsciously by both people.

Acceptance and curiosity guide the inquiry. Through mutual resonance between client and practitioner, attention is given to discovering the primary tissues through which the clients express themselves and those tissues which are usually in shadow, so that the supporting tissues can be given voice and the articulating ones be allowed to recuperate. This shifting of energy expression allows for more choices and expanded consciousness of body-mind for both the client/student and the practitioner/teacher.

APPLICATIONS

Body-Mind Centering stands independently as an encompassing and creative educational and therapeutic approach. Deeply grounded in the relationship between movement, touch, the body, and the mind, it can also be applied to almost any area of human experience. The following descriptions are some examples of how this work is being applied.

Dance and movement: dance technique; a full, body-systems warm-up; improving alignment, flexibility, strength and integration; injury prevention and retraining; creating themes for improvisation; expanding choreographic possibilities; increasing movement vocabulary; providing a language for analyzing dance styles historically, contemporarily and cross-culturally.

Bodywork and massage: communicating subtly through touch by differentiating different layers of tissue; multi-body-systems approach for evaluation and treatment; creating a bridge between table work and active movement repatterning, giving clients a way to integrate changes through their movement in daily life.

Physical, occupational, dance, and movement therapy: evaluating and treating through touch, movement and perception, based on a comprehensive body-systems approach; a subtle and encompassing approach to developmental movement; ways of perceiving underlying components of problems, such as fluid quality imbalances in neurological problems, developmental movement aspects of a knee problem, and organ imbalance influencing an inability to relate to others; and approaching psychophysical processes through movement, touch, breath, and voice.

Psychotherapy: accessing the mind by working with the body through movement, touch, breath, voice, and perception; the psychophysical processes underlying emotional and cognitive problems; tracing pre-verbal experience through movement and touch; grounding the past and future in one's present awareness and movement.

Child development and education: identifying from early infancy, movement and perceptual problems that influence learning, and physical, mental and emotional development; facilitating normal development in a uniquely individualized way for each child; establishing rapport through movement, touch and voice; evaluating through a body-systems and developmental approach.

Yoga: finding the organ, endocrine, and developmental basis of the asanas; supporting the asanas through the balance of the nervous and fluid systems; deepening awareness and perception; embodying breath and voice.

Meditation: the physical arts of sitting and breathing; coming into the present in the body-mind; being aware and letting go of being aware.

Athletics: performance enhancement through improved alignment and increased flexibility, strength, and coordination; development of more efficiency by integrating movement and perception; injury prevention and retraining.

Voice: identifying restrictions and freeing the natural voice; increasing breathing and range of pitch, intensity, and color of the voice; using the whole body to support breathing and vocalization; analyzing styles historically, contemporarily, and cross-culturally.

Music: improving performance through alignment, flexibility, strength, and integration; a movement-quality base for creating themes for improvisation and interpretation; injury prevention and retraining.

Visual arts: a body-based and developmental approach to freeing direct expression through one's art; a language for evaluating styles.

POSTSCRIPT

My description of Body-Mind Centering would be incomplete without acknowledging my continual gratitude to all the BMC teachers and students who have offered not only their experiences to the work but their thinking, articulation, and interpretations of those experiences. Beyond this, they have also given freely of their love and friendship through these many years.

And always by my side has been my husband Len. BMC could not have developed without his continual presence, penetrating questioning, steady guidance, and the profound caring for me and all the people who have come to share in this ongoing journey

BONNIE BAINBRIDGE COHEN

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen is a movement artist, researcher, educator and therapist, and the developer of the Body-Mind Centering® approach to movement, the body, and consciousness. An innovator and leader, her work has influenced the fields of bodywork, movement, dance, yoga, body psychotherapy, childhood education, and many other body-mind disciplines. In 1973, she founded The School for Body-Mind Centering. She is the author of the books, Sensing, Feeling, and Action, Basic Neurocellular Patterns: Exploring Developmental Movement, and The Mechanics of Vocal Expression, as well as numerous videos on embodied anatomy, embryology, cellular consciousness, dance, and working with children with special needs.

THE SCHOOL FOR BODY-MIND CENTERING

Since 1973, the School has been dedicated to sharing this dynamic approach to embodiment studies with the world. There are graduates in thirty-two countries and on five continents. Programs are now offered by licensed independent organizations in Europe, North and South America, and Australia. Graduates of these programs receive a certificate from the School for Body-Mind Centering.

BMC programs and courses present detailed and specific approaches to the personal embodiment of our cells, our body systems, and our developmental patterns. The principles and techniques learned can be used for personal growth, for professional enhancement, or to begin a career in the field of somatic movement education and therapy.

Programs include: Somatic Movement Education Program, Practitioner Program, Teacher Training, and Infant Developmental Movement Education Program. There are also two immersion series offering a dynamic approach to the practice and/or teaching of yoga: Body-Mind Centering & Yoga: Foundations in Embodied Anatomy, and Body-Mind Centering & Yoga: Foundations in Embodied Developmental Movement.

RESOURCES

For more information about School for Body-Mind Centering authorized programs, immersion series, and locations, visit **bodymindcentering.com**.

To locate a professional offering Body-Mind Centering services, visit **bmcassociation.org**.

Much of the material in this article is the basis for the first chapter of the book, Sensing, Feeling and Action, by Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, published by Contact Editions, Northampton, MA, 2012. All of Bonnie's books and videos and information about her upcoming events are available at **bonniebainbridgcohen.com**.

SERVICE MARKS

The names Body-Mind Centering®, BMC℠ and the logo, Body-Mind CENTERING® are service marks of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. They are important in maintaining our standards of education and practice. When describing one's services (classes, sessions, etc.), they may only be used by people who meet both of the following requirements: 1) they must be a graduate of an approved School for Body-Mind Centering® program; 2) and must be a Professional Member in good standing of the Body-Mind Centering® Association. Thank you for respecting the proper use of these service marks.

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