

# Body-Mind Centering

*Grounded in the physical body, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's pioneering work is an approach to studying the entire range of our being in an extraordinarily detailed, conscious way.*

**By Stephanie Golden**

In a videotape produced by the School for Body-Mind Centering, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen crouches on the floor next to Oliver, a blond three-year-old in a green shirt. As Oliver lies on his belly propped on his elbows, his mother feeds him bits of apple and carrot while Bainbridge Cohen's fingers play gently over the sides and back of his head.

Oliver has Down's syndrome. When he first came to work with Bainbridge Cohen four months before, all he could do was crawl on one side, sit, and pick up food placed right in front of him. He did not play, wouldn't hold a toy, and was motivated to move only by food.

During their first two sessions together, Oliver learned to crawl using his arms and legs on both sides. Now, in this third session, Bainbridge Cohen lifts him into her lap and drops a piece of apple into a large clear bowl that his mother holds before him. At first Oliver is afraid—to reach the bottom he must thrust his arm in up to the shoulder—but he wants the apple so badly that he goes after it and gets it.

Bainbridge Cohen then puts a rubber squeaky frog in the bowl, and Oliver must pick up the next bit of apple off the frog. Again his desire overcomes his fear.

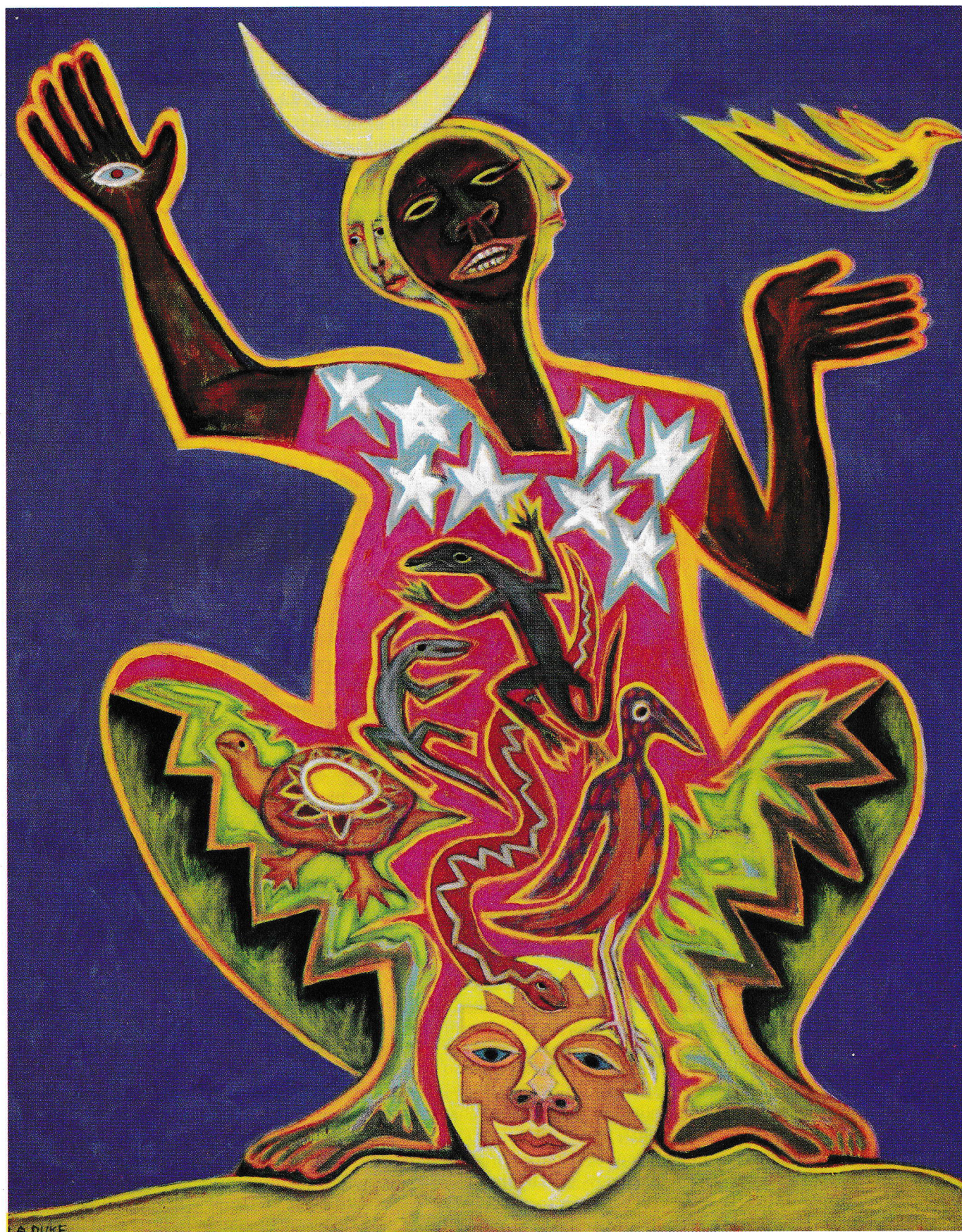
With each successful retrieval he grows more intent, until one bit of apple lodges beneath the frog. He reaches in with both arms, fails, tries again, fails, then finally plunges one arm in, plucks the frog out of the bowl, tosses it to the side, dives back in and snatches up the apple.

The group of Bainbridge Cohen's students observing this session break into applause. "No way would I put that frog inside the bowl—another day," she says, laughing. "That's what play is about—having control over your environment."

Bainbridge Cohen explains that until he moved the frog to get the apple, Oliver "didn't understand what for us is so simple: taking hold. A tremendous change took place when he grabbed that frog. It enabled him to have some kind of relationship with an object. Once he had that, he could have it with any object." Eventually Oliver became a "play king" who could play alone and with others; he learned to talk, walk, and read. "For me he was a teacher who showed me about the process of engagement, the importance of having an emotional, physical, and mental relationship to an activity."

The subtle but powerful change that initiated Oliver on a vastly expanded path of development exemplifies the possibilities for healing offered by Bainbridge Cohen's work, which she calls body-mind centering (BMC). BMC is not a system of bodywork, but rather an approach to studying the entire range of our being—mental, emotional, and spiritual—that is grounded in the physical body in an extraordinarily detailed, conscious way. It is expansive work whose nearly limit-





Painting By Betty La Duke from Multi-Cultural Celebrations: The Paintings of Betty La Duke 1972-1992 (Pomegranate Artbooks, 1993)



## Body-Mind Centering

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less applications range from perceptual-motor development to yoga (see sidebar), dance, psychotherapy, and bodywork.

So vast is the content of body-mind centering and so variable is its form that its practitioners, and Bainbridge Cohen herself, have difficulty defining it. Its foundation is "experiential anatomy," a way of learning about the body that involves not just knowledge of structures but personal experience of each separate tissue, felt from the inside—experience that practitioners develop after long, intensive study. This exquisitely differentiated awareness is the key to BMC's therapeutic potential. Using it, practitioners can facilitate change by transmitting energy and creating movement in specific tissues of a client's body. Such movement can be the flow of the lymph, the motility of the visceral organs, even the passage of fluid in and out of a cell.

In BMC, the practitioner's hands provide this feedback, enabling the client to become aware of a particular tissue and release holding or congestion there. For example, if you're aware of the flow of your lymph, you can tell when it's not flowing well and can facilitate the flow, perhaps to help fight infection by breaking up a toxic accumulation of protein.

With Oliver, Bainbridge Cohen used her hands on his skull to "give him a cellular boost through his brain centers, helping him coordinate his eyes, mouth, and hand." This stimulation enabled him to focus on the frog and seize it, leading him to the awareness that taking hold of an object is possible.

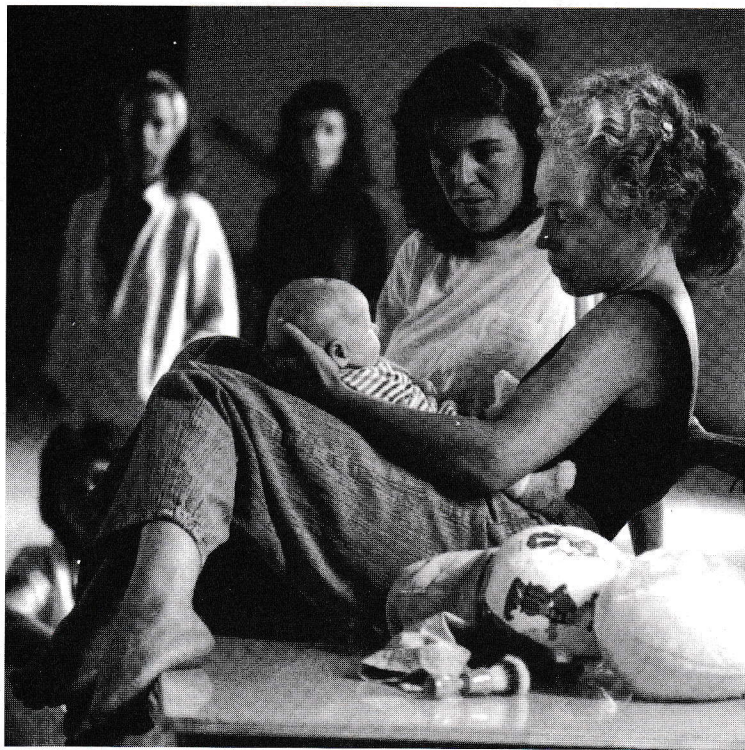
Bainbridge Cohen's teachings derive from her own experience of the separate elements of her body at extremely fine and subtle levels. Last fall, in a weekend workshop covering the body fluids—synovial, lymph, cerebrospinal (CSF), blood, intercellular, and cellular—I got some sense of the practice she calls "embodying" a tissue. Since BMC has its own language, which uses body imagery to represent realms of experience normally expressed in terms of emotions or mind states, participating in the exercises was rather like learning a foreign language by the total immersion method.

### Embodying Our Tissues

"It's not just synovial but synovial with blood, freedom with density," Bainbridge Cohen is saying, as she leads a group gathered in a dance studio in Manhattan's East Village in movements designed to give us the experience of "mixing" fluids. First we focus attention on and "initiate movement from" each fluid in turn, then we combine them. "Now become more rarefied, change density: synovial with CSF. Now keep the lightness but allow some lymph to come in so you're moving in a specific path, you're no longer nonspecific." Each time she gives a new direction, the quality of the movement—and of the energy in the room—changes.

When movement is initiated from the blood, she explains, there is a feeling of density in the body, a sense of being inside oneself instead of on the surface. She originally discovered the quality of blood by experiencing her own. Now she's embodying that quality in these movements, so that by imitating them her students can experience the same "bloodful" feeling.

"The blood is the fluid of this planet, which brings us into gravity," Bainbridge Cohen goes on, whereas the CSF "binds us more to the heavens." As we bend forward and then slowly come up, she tells us to feel with our imagination inside the vertebrae, find the space within the vertebral arch through which the spinal cord passes, and then feel the fluid inside the spinal cord.



Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, during her summer program, illustrates her theories through subtle structural analysis and treatment of an infant.

The change is not merely physiological, but also a change in awareness, for a basic principle of BMC is to actively engage the client in the process. What enables you to move your little finger, Bainbridge Cohen explains, is knowing you have a little finger—having an inner sensory awareness of it. By the same principle, it's possible to develop sensory feedback from any tissue or organ and actively move and change it.



"The CSF is a rarefied fluid; it gives the feeling of being suspended between heaven and earth. Find the internal fluid and let it travel; it goes into lightness—not because I push up but because I rarify through the CSF." As she says this, she rolls over on the floor, then rises on her toes with arms floating upward. For those less able to experience the CSF quality kinesthetically, she suggests, "Play with images, like a leaf falling." Around the room the students resemble an introductory modern dance class—waving, dipping, rolling.

Later, Bainbridge Cohen teaches us to switch between blood and CSF. We sit with partners, our four

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***"The cell is all of the intelligence in us. The brain gets information from the body and names it, but it's the body that tells the brain what it's doing," says Bainbridge Cohen.***

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hands resting on a large ball between us. First, in a "bloodful mode," we try to feel the other person's hands through the ball; then we "get into our CSF" and feel the other's hands around the ball.

By this point I'm lost, bewildered. Michael Ridge, an artist who works at Bainbridge Cohen's school and is assisting in the class, comes over and puts one hand over my hand and the other on my upper back. Suddenly I feel the blood coming into my fingers, which tingle and grow warm. I wasn't in my blood, he explains; my hands were sensing the surface of the ball instead of giving it their weight. What did he do? "I went into my own blood and resonated it to you," he says. "I could feel when you got it because you resonated it back to me."

Bainbridge Cohen's students develop the ability to connect with other people's tissues by learning to connect with their own. Some become practitioners of BMC; others adapt it to their own disciplines. This weekend's group includes dancers, movement therapists, teachers of Alexander technique, Trager work practitioners, a psychologist, a physical therapist. Many, having worked with Bainbridge Cohen for years, have developed an astonishing subtlety of inner perception and can easily follow her nearly inchoate directions. She demonstrates with her body more than she describes verbally; her instructions are often brief phrases that trail off into movement. During an exercise in which we are invited to move the bones of the in-

ner ear, one woman remarks that she feels them as little fishes swimming in a bowl.

In addition to the fluids, Bainbridge Cohen has explored and mapped the bones, ligaments, nerves, muscles, fascia, glands, skin, organs, and fat. (Fat, Bainbridge Cohen says, is potential power, which often becomes stagnant. "There's something so luscious about fat, and so powerful," she remarks. "But in our culture, this soft power has been repressed.")

Bainbridge Cohen's halo of frizzy gray hair surrounds a high pure brow and wide-open eyes. Her pale, porcelain skin and prominent cheekbones give her a fragile look. At 51, she has a certain childlike quality that derives not from immaturity but from a spontaneity in her movements, which are remarkably supple and unconstrained by the habitual tensions and mannerisms that lock most adults into set, characteristic patterns. One woman has brought her baby to the class, and at one point, as Bainbridge Cohen is speaking, the baby flaps her arm. Bainbridge Cohen impulsively flaps her own arm in response. It is not the movement of an adult mimicking a baby, but the baby's exact gesture.

On the second day I work with Sandy Jamrog, a childbirth educator and BMC practitioner and teacher. Her clients include dancers and equestrians who have sports injuries or want to improve their performance; musicians with repetitive motion syndrome; pregnant and postpartum women; and babies who have colic and nursing or movement problems.

With babies, for example, Jamrog releases the jaw, chest, neck, and digestive system so the baby can nurse better. "I can feel tension in a baby's intestine and can touch that part and calm it down or wake it up," she explains. "Sometimes the tissue is immature and doesn't know a better pattern of movement. I can educate that tissue to show it where it needs to go next."

To demonstrate, she works very delicately with one hand on my forehead, the other at the back of my neck. Holding my head bent forward a bit, she asks me to swallow. She moves my head slightly and has me swallow again; then she moves it a third time and has me swallow yet again. Each swallow feels different, as though the articulation of its mechanical components has been readjusted.

She was working, she says, with the CSF, with the rotation of the bones between the C1 and C2 vertebrae, and with the flexion and extension of the occiput and C1. Babies shown these three ways to swallow will quickly learn the one that works best for them. I feel no effects while her hands are on me, but when she finishes, I sense an opening like a flower growing out of the back of my skull. This, she tells me, is "the tissue releasing and understanding what it is. The cell is all of



# Body-Mind Centering and Yoga

Imagine for a moment that you're a gifted artist, but your only tool for expression is a #2 pencil. You may do quite well with that pencil, but you will inevitably be limited in your artistic expression by the narrow parameters of the tool. Now imagine how you would feel if, after working with that #2 pencil for years, you were given a big box of new tools—paint brushes, paints of all varieties and colors, charcoal, pastels, sculpting clay. Suddenly you would find a whole new range of possibilities not only in the way you could express yourself, but in what you might come to know about yourself through the process of exploring each new material.

Many years ago, I was introduced to some "new materials" when I began studying Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's work during my training as a movement therapist at the Institute for Educational Therapy in Berkeley. I followed her work through her writing and began to integrate it into my yoga practice and teaching. Recently, through the help of Lynne Uretsky, a certified body-mind centering practitioner, I've come to use BMC as a way to understand the mind of the body.

Body-mind centering offers yoga students and teachers a way to experience their bodies more accurately by including body systems that may have been previously ignored or unfelt. Just as important, Bainbridge Cohen has given us a language to describe and articulate movements and sensations that may have previously defied description. Through the work, yoga students can learn

what body systems they have habitually relied on (and possibly exhausted) and begin to access other systems (such as the fluids) that can bring about a balance and unification to the whole organism. Exploring the different systems allows us to remake ourselves "whole."

The other main thrust of Bainbridge Cohen's work is her study of human movement development. Hatha yoga is often taught as a collection of "details" and "techniques" that have no underlying integrating foundation. This approach is like being given a pile of pieces of rope when what you need is a net. By understanding the development of fundamental human movements from prebirth to adulthood—and the ways these movement patterns determine successful, effortless movement—we can begin to see, experience, and understand (and for teachers, instruct) the body from a cohesive perspective.

Problems that may have always been viewed from the reductionistic perspective of the musculoskeletal system, for instance, may be resolved when looked at through the lens of the nervous system or from the vantage point of a reflex that was undeveloped at a young age. Instead of applying details and techniques as band-aids, this information allows us to go right to the source of a problem.

I continue to be amazed at how quickly people learn movements when taught from this cohesive perspective. Recently, I led a group of older students in a week-long retreat. During one class we began by reawakening some of the frontal

tonal reflexes that give support to the spinal column. After an hour, many of these so-called inexperienced, out-of-shape students were easily performing Chaturanga Dandasana (a movement like a push-up), a pose that had eluded me for almost two years when I began my study of Iyengar yoga as a fit professional dancer.

Traditionally, all these different body systems were known and experienced by yogis. Yogis engaged in ongoing experiential research into the nature of the glandular system (the chakras), the fluid system, the nervous system (the nadis), the organs, and so on, as well as the nature of the mind. Since the introduction of yoga to the West 100 years ago, much of its original intention has been lost, because it is often taught and practiced through the reductionistic Western paradigm, as if it were a slow form of calisthenic stretching, rather than a complex technology for calibrating the subtler aspects of a human being. Body-mind centering gives us a unique opportunity to blend our own contributions based on experiential investigation with the accumulated wisdom of the sages, forming in the process a language that can describe an essentially Eastern esoteric tradition in tangible Western terminology.

—Donna Farhi

*Donna Farhi writes the Asana column for Yoga Journal*



the intelligence in us. The brain gets information from the body and names it, but it's the body that tells the brain what it's doing."

By the end of the weekend I am beginning to grasp what it means to "embody" body tissues. "Moving from" synovial fluid means being loose-jointed and free-flowing. Movements from lymph, by contrast, involve directness, clarity, and specificity and are sculptured and precise. After describing the chemistry of the cellular fluid (the fluid within the cell membrane, in which the primary life functions of metabolism occur), Bainbridge Cohen explains that this fluid "is expressed as the primary state of being, a place of rest where there is no going or coming." At the end of the fluid-mixing exercise, we "let all the fluids come to rest in the cellular." In other words, we enter a restful state that resembles—that is, I realize—meditation.

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### **The Development of BMC**

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen grew up in the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, where her father sold tickets and her mother was a trapeze and high-balance artist and "Roman racer" who rode two horses while standing with one foot on each. The young Bainbridge Cohen was influenced not only by the many ways in which the performers and animals moved, but also by the "fantasy world" nature of the circus. "I grew up with the extraordinary being natural," she says, "and therefore things other people considered miraculous or impossible never were impossible for me."

She started formal dance training at the age of three, and while in high school she began doing dance therapy with children who had cerebral palsy, without even knowing such a discipline existed. At Ohio State University she studied occupational therapy and dance. After graduating in 1963, she studied in New York City with Erick Hawkins, a founder of modern dance, who taught movement based on an effortlessness in which grace and beauty are the natural state of being.

Returning to Ohio State, she applied Hawkins' principle of effortlessness to her work in a physical reha-

bilitation center. After only a month of daily work with this approach, one woman, who had never walked normally because of a brain injury at birth, was able to take 10 regular steps.

In 1968 Bainbridge Cohen went to Europe, where she taught movement and bodywork at the Psychiatric Research Clinic of the University of Amsterdam and worked with injured dancers at the Pauline de Groot dance studio. Unable to speak Dutch well, she gave instruction with her hands, and thereby developed the basis of her hands-on work. During her year abroad, she also trained in England with Karl and Bertha Bobath, originators of neurodevelopmental therapy, a method of restoring developmental movement patterns in children with brain injuries.

Returning to New York, she met Leonard P. Cohen while studying aikido. They married, then spent two and a half years in Japan, where he continued studying aikido while she helped establish a school for occupational and physical therapists for the Tokyo city government and taught at a second school run by the national government. On their return to New York in 1973, Leonard entered chiropractic school, while Bonnie continued to develop her work and established the School for Body-Mind Centering, today located in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Along the way Bainbridge Cohen studied many forms of therapy and movement, including yoga, Laban movement analysis with Irmgard Bartenieff, dance therapy with Marian Chace, and neuromuscular reeducation with Andre Bernard and Barbara Clark. "In my first lesson from Andre Bernard, he gave me a pelvis, had me hold it, and said, 'Feel the sit bones, then feel your own.'" The idea was to see what the bone felt like from inside.

After working intensively with the musculoskeletal system, Bainbridge Cohen realized that movement entailed more than bones and muscles. Her work with children and adults who had chronic and severe physical disabilities due to arthritis, strokes, cerebral palsy, and other neurological disorders showed her that other body systems—in fact, "the whole person"—were involved.

Deciding to explore the organs in the same meditative way she had investigated muscles and bones, she had groups of people in her workshops breathe into their organs, sound into them, initiate movement from them, then share their experiences. By pooling their common observations, they began to distill the essence of each organ.

From organs and glands, she and her students moved on to ligaments and fluids. "It took me two years to figure out how to get into my blood, to differentiate it



# An Exercise in Experiential Anatomy

Like Iyengar yoga, BMC is "about alignment and is anatomically correct," says yoga teacher Genevieve Kapuler. She finds in both systems a focus on precision and on a long, slow learning process based on specific knowledge of what is happening inside the body.

The following "exploration," which Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen chose for its usefulness to yoga students, will help give you a sense of "experiential anatomy" and of "somatization," the sensory-motor work that underlies body-mind centering.

If you don't move something, you can't sense it; correspondingly, as soon as you acquire that sensation, you can move it. The point of this exercise is to develop increased differentiation in sensation and movement.

Place your hands on your ribs, then start exploring ways you can move each rib individually. Keep touching different ribs and see which directions you can move them—up, down, forward, back. One way to do this is to feel the movement of the ribs as you inhale and exhale.

To move a rib, start with the intention of moving the rib, then think yourself "inside" it—using a mental image, a sensory feeling, or however you can—and imagine it moving. The presence of your finger on the rib gives you the sensory feedback that lets you know it has moved.

Now explore ways of moving all your ribs together. You can move them asymmetrically, with one side going up and the other going down, or you can move all of them forward or backward. Put your hands on them so your hands can inform the ribs about where they are moving. Your intention to move will facilitate your attention, and the hands help your attention bring the movement to fruition.

Try all the movements of the ribs that you can imagine. Bainbridge Cohen gives students only some possibilities of movement, since learning movements by being told what to do is different from discovering them from the inside. An essential part of BMC is self-discovery.

Just as you moved different ribs individually, you can initiate movement from different places inside the rib cage—that is, from different organs. To do this, again put your hands on your rib cage, but instead of moving the bones, start the movement from inside the rib cage. This is what Cohen calls somatization, which involves, as she puts it, "moving from the feeling of the place you're moving from. You have to actually do this to make sense of it."

Next, stand with feet together and raise one hand over your head. Bend the body to the side opposite the raised hand and feel that you're moving into this position with your bones. Go as far as you can. Your organs have

come along passively with your bones.

Now "go inside" your rib cage—just as, earlier, you went inside a rib—and enter that same position by moving from the inside. If you differentiate your organs from your ribs and initiate the movement from the organs, you will go farther.

Come back to center. Now stand with feet apart, raise the hands over the head, then rotate at the waist and reach down to one foot with the opposite hand. Do this movement twice, moving first from the bones and then from the organs. See what differences there are between these two movements. Then integrate them by doing both at the same time, so all the tissues are active and the consciousness of all the tissues participates in the action.

Finally, practice returning to center, actively initiating this movement in the bones, then in the organs, then in both together.

You can explore any yoga posture in this way, practicing it first from the bones, then from the organs, then combining the two.

One of the major reasons people are injured practicing yoga, Bainbridge Cohen believes, is that they move farther with their skeletons than the organs underneath can support. In all yoga postures, she says, it's important that the organs are actively involved, not just passively brought along as the skeleton moves.

—Stephanie Golden

from lymph. That's where the circus influence came in—it gave me the sense of possibility."

In this manner, experiential anatomy evolved. Recalls Genevieve Kapuler, one of Bainbridge Cohen's earliest students and now a BMC practitioner and Iyengar yoga teacher, "We looked at pictures, colored in photocopies of, let's say, the skeleton of the hand, then we learned the name of each bone, then we found the bones on ourselves, then on each other. We would sculpt each bone in clay, we would draw it—it was like an art piece to know where your pelvis really was. We explored the knee joint, separated the fibula from the tibia. We

spent a long time really sensing that there are two bones in the lower leg. Bonnie's work is so slow, you have time to learn it in a sensory way, not just in your brain."

"Instead of learning about the colon from a book, we learned what it feels like to mobilize it, to move from it," elaborates Phoebe Neville, another longtime student, a choreographer and BMC practitioner. "It can be very intense because the innervation of the organs goes up to the limbic system in the brain, the center of emotion and memory. When one starts exploring different organs, memories and emotions come up—

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old accidents, eating disorders." These connections recall "the Chinese medical model, where organs are associated with different emotions."

Today the certification training in BMC takes about four years to complete. Students take a total of four terms of four to seven weeks, covering movement and the art of touch and repatterning in the body systems; developmental movement; vocalization; breathing; the senses and perception; and psychological processes. They must also fulfill requirements for additional studies in anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, counseling, movement, bodywork, music, voice, visual arts, nutrition, and psychological and spiritual practices. Shorter programs, like the workshop I attended, are offered for noncertification students.

One such student is Don Van Vleet, a former classical ballet dancer and now a Rolfer, who initially used BMC to improve his dancing by changing the quality and range of his movement. "Bonnie's work allows you to go, through attention, from your body as an organism, to a particular organ, to the actual cells that make up the organ. Once you get to that depth, you can decide what tissues you'd like to access. Then you allow those cells to initiate the movement.

"To go into, say, my heart, I move my attention to all parts of the heart tissue, then in my imagination I get an outline or visual form of what it looks like in there. Once I do that I can kinesthetically feel all the parts of the heart. Then I stay with my awareness long enough in whichever part I choose to see if that area will express itself. From whatever I'm experiencing, I allow my mind to form a sculpture of movement out into space."

At perhaps the subtlest level of experiential anatomy, Bainbridge Cohen can feel the relationship between patterns of movement and the firing of neurons inside her own brain. She developed this ability by practicing *katsugen undo*, a method for training the involuntary nervous system that she learned from Haruchika Noguchi in Japan; it has

been her daily practice, for one to three hours, for over 20 years. Katsugen undo involves following an internal thread of movement in an improvisatory way. The new movement that emerges develops from the body rather than being imposed by the brain.

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formation from it, Bainbridge Cohen says, a sensory pattern of effortlessness is established in the nervous system. This pattern, which releases the body from overcontrol by the cortical brain, permits new experiences, new patterns of movement—like the swallows Jamrog taught me. "I'm very much in tune with the pathways of movement in body tissue and how the movement in the tissue is related to the movement of the body through space," says Bainbridge Cohen. "The basis of BMC is being aware of these two levels of movement and aligning them. The movement of your arm through space, for example, is supported in the tissue so all the tissues are participating."

In other words, not just bones and muscles but other body systems can support movement, a concept that dancers find particularly valuable. Phoebe Neville works with the organ system to help dancers become more integrated and efficient movers. "Organs aren't just stuck inside our bodies," Neville says. "They have a great deal of vitality, their own motility, their own axis of rotation. And they also have mobility in relation to all the different body rhythms like the rhythms of blood and CSF and peristalsis and breathing."



To help a dancer stand on one leg without wobbling, she might tell her where the ascending or descending colon is located and have her imagine the energy of the colon continuing down the leg. Using organ support can also alleviate some back problems. "If you're turning the back to the right and you just turn from the outside, the back may be overstressed by simply muscling it around as far as it will go. Whereas if you think of the movement as initiating from the liver and lungs, the whole spine and ribs respond."

Isn't this like other practices in which visualizing movement helps extend its range? "It's similar, but instead of just working with imaging the change through the cortex, we're bringing in the specific awareness of what's happening inside the actual tissues that are moving." Bainbridge Cohen calls this kind of visualizing somatization, since it involves not a visual image but a kinesthetic experience.

I personally experience initiating movement from the organs when Carolyn Rosenfield shows me my liver. Rosenfield is a BMC practitioner and dancer whose knowledge of BMC informs the dance classes she teaches. Middle Eastern dance is good for women, she says, because "it's very fluid, and the strength comes from organ support." When you rotate the pelvis, "you feel that the intestines are actually moving it. Maybe you start with an idea or an image, but the movement takes on a different quality—that's why a good belly dancer looks so luscious. Otherwise it would look muscular, like aerobics.

"I think experience with organ movement would be good for you," she goes on. "Your movement is skeletal and a little tight." Sitting down beside me, she places her hand over my liver and moves it very subtly in a wavelike, slightly rocking rhythm. "I'm finding your natural rhythm," she says, "and I'm going with it. My hand gives you the feedback of what it is."

Then her hand guides my torso into small gentle flowing movements, leading from the liver area. "And we can match that with the stomach." She puts her other hand on my left side, slightly higher up, making a lateral rolling mo-

tion. "After half an hour of this, you'd have a different feeling in your body than if you were doing twists in a yoga class."

What I do feel is a presence, a faint but distinct vibrating fullness giving me the sense that this area of my upper right abdomen contains something distinct. "The presence is a support," Rosenfield comments. And I recall how Genevieve Kapuler told me that once she felt present in this way inside her physical body, "I began to feel safer in the world, that I could take refuge in my body. I could stop running. And I felt happy; it was like I learned the language of being able to sit in my bones and muscles and walk on my axis. It gives a lot of dignity when life is so complicated and difficult."

### The Body-Mind Connection

Like Eastern traditions, BMC explores nonmaterial aspects of the body, but it articulates these on a Western map of physiology and anatomy. "When we say someone has a lot of organ quality or skeletal quality," comments Leonard Cohen, "we're not only talking about the tissue but about a kind of consciousness that manifests through the tissue."

BMC practitioners associate each tissue with a characteristic mind-state. For them, phrases like "I'm feeling downhearted," "he has guts," or "she can't stomach that" literally represent "the voice of the organs talking," as Neville puts it. Since, as Bainbridge Cohen says, "In my experience all the movement we do is expressed through a tissue," different qualities of movement also express different mind-states. Changing the quality of movement, therefore, creates physiological, psychological, and even spiritual changes. "This is the link between movement, body, and mind," explains Leonard Cohen. "Movement is our handle on this body-mind complex, our entry into the system."

The connection between mind and movement implies that the infant's perceptual-motor development has profound effects on adult life. Thus a major component of BMC is Bainbridge Cohen's work with developmental movement. Previous researchers identified a series of primitive reflexes, righting reactions (which allow us to remain upright), and equilibrium responses (which

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## Body-Mind Centering

*continued*

maintain balance) whose successful integration into the child's nervous system provides a foundation for efficient adult movement. Building on the work of these researchers (especially Karl and Bertha Bobath, who treated children with cerebral palsy by inhibiting reflexes and facilitating other reactions), Bainbridge Cohen identified a series of 16 basic developmental patterns of movement. She created a method of "re patterning" children and adults in whom inadequate development of certain patterns caused physical, perceptual, and emotional difficulties.

When Bainbridge Cohen first saw Oliver, for example, he put no weight on the floor and did not push into it as most babies do. During their first two sessions, she "patterned in" the "push pattern" that would enable him to propel himself through space. In the videotape, as he lies on his belly she holds him and folds his legs under him. When his mother offers food, Oliver's desire for it impels him to push his feet back against the floor, which moves him forward. At the same time, through her hands Bainbridge Cohen is feeding the force of the push through Oliver's abdominal and chest organs and his brain. This helps him push while giving him the experience that he himself is doing the pushing, not being pushed. Not only the muscles and organs but the brain cells, too, are repatterned.

In adults as well, Bainbridge Cohen believes, underdevelopment of certain patterns is a factor in almost any social, physical, or psychological problem. Infants whose parents sit them up too often, too early, for example, don't develop the push patterns through the arms and lack full arm strength and action. As adults, such people may feel unable to act effectively upon their environment.

Linda Tumbarello, a BMC practitioner and teacher, discovered a relationship between underdeveloped reflexes and adult psychology in her own training. "I had a big fear about falling, and as a kid I was very clumsy and used to hurt myself, so I stopped doing much physical

activity," she says. "We were working on reflexes that kids develop to catch themselves when they fall. I realized I didn't have these reflexes very well developed, and that was one reason I had these fears. This work helped me move more."

Tumbarello treats people with eating disorders by having them "feel the connection between their mouth and stomach. When people are eating compulsively, they aren't listening to their stomach, and it feels neglected and unheard. I might put my hands there, use an 'organ touch,' which is full and soft, jiggle a bit, ask them to feel that part and give it a voice if it wants to say anything."

She may show clients anatomical pictures, have them experience the different qualities in the mouth by touching the soft cheek and hard jaw, help them feel the esophagus by gently moving the neck from side to side, then have them go inside and imagine the space and softness where the esophagus lies. The point is to build up the ability to tolerate sensation. Once people start feeling and "listening in" to their digestive tract, they can begin to realize what foods they don't like and become able to sense what they do want to eat and when the stomach is full.

Dr. Joyce Wyden, a psychologist in private practice, uses BMC in similar ways. "If somebody has problems with their boundary, I'll give them a sense of their bones as the structure of their house," she says. "I have them lean back against a pillow, show them a model of the spine, help them feel they have a spine. Most people don't know how much space their spine occupies. You can tell the difference in how they sense themselves and move in the world when they feel they have a backbone."

Beyond its psychological applications, BMC can reach even subtler levels. "As you connect to the physical aspects of an organ, you find that they have an energetic resonance that goes out beyond the organ to levels of the auric field," says Don Van Vleet, who uses BMC in his Roling practice. "If someone's having trouble with their third chakra, I can first work with the energies around the pancreas and heal the physical body,

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### Body-Mind Centering

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which may automatically heal the other levels of the field."

What Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen has done, then, is to spiritualize the physical body without dephysicalizing it. "The work includes body, mind, spirit, emotions—it's all on a continuum, and we don't separate it. We don't say it's spiritual now to sit and meditate, and it's not spiritual to go out to lunch," says Kapuler.

"Her work is like a jumping-off place," Van Vleet concludes. "She wants you to become so conscious of the energies of the physical form that they become a melody or theme on which you can travel into subtle energy forms. What sets it apart from other work is this bridge from the physical to the spiritual plane." ♦

*Stephanie Golden is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her book on homeless women, **The Women Outside: Meanings and Myths of Homelessness**, was published in 1992 by the University of California Press.*

### RESOURCE

The next BMC certification training programs will begin in summer 1995 in the U.S. and Europe. Two- to five-day noncertification programs, open to people with and without experience, are offered in various locations in the U.S. For more information, contact the School for Body-Mind Centering, 189 Pondview Dr., Amherst, MA 01002; (413) 256-8615.

### Ageless Body, Timeless Mind

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10. I love myself.
11. I've spent time in therapy and/or other self-development practices.
12. I don't buy into everything about the New Age, but it intrigues me.
13. I believe it is possible to know God.

14. I am more leisurely about things than most people.

15. I consider myself a spiritual person; this is an area of my life I work on.

Part 2 score \_\_\_\_\_

### Evaluating your score

Although everyone usually checks at least a few answers in both sections, you will probably find that you scored higher in one section than the other.

If you scored higher on Part 1, you tend to be time-bound. For you, time is linear; it often runs short and will eventually run out. Relying on outside approval, motivation, and love, you have not grappled with your inner world as much as with the external one. You are likely to value excitement and positive emotions more highly than inner peace and nonattachment. You may cherish being loved by others too much and lose the opportunity to find self-acceptance.

If you scored higher on Part 2, you tend to be timeless in your awareness. Your sense of loving and being loved is based on a secure relationship with yourself. You value detachment over possessiveness; your motivations tend to be internal rather than external. At some time in your life you have had a sense of being larger than your limited physical self; your life may have been shaped by decisive experiences of God or your higher Self. Where others fear loneliness, you are grateful for your aloneness—solitude has developed your ability to know who you are. ♦

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### CENTERING

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Some of us are drawn to mountains the way the moon draws the tide. The great forests and the mountains live in my