

# Trauma, Body, Energy and Spirituality

by Raja Selvam PhD

## Trauma Happens to Everybody

The experience of trauma is universal. Any number of situations, happening singly or repeatedly over a prolonged period, can traumatize us. Apparently simple incidents, such as falls and routine medical procedures, can leave us just as traumatized as physical or sexual abuse. Early in our lives, when our brains and bodies are less developed to cope with stress, we are more susceptible to trauma. Children who experience a difficult birth, medical procedures, or emotional intrusion, abandonment, or neglect may become very traumatized, impeding their ability to cope with stressful situations later on in their lives.

## Trauma Disorganizes Us

All overwhelming events, physical or emotional, eventually become overwhelming physiological brain-body crises if there is no relief, as might be the case, when a child is abandoned. When we are severely traumatized, whether from a single incident or from an ongoing situation, our brains and our bodies disorganize,

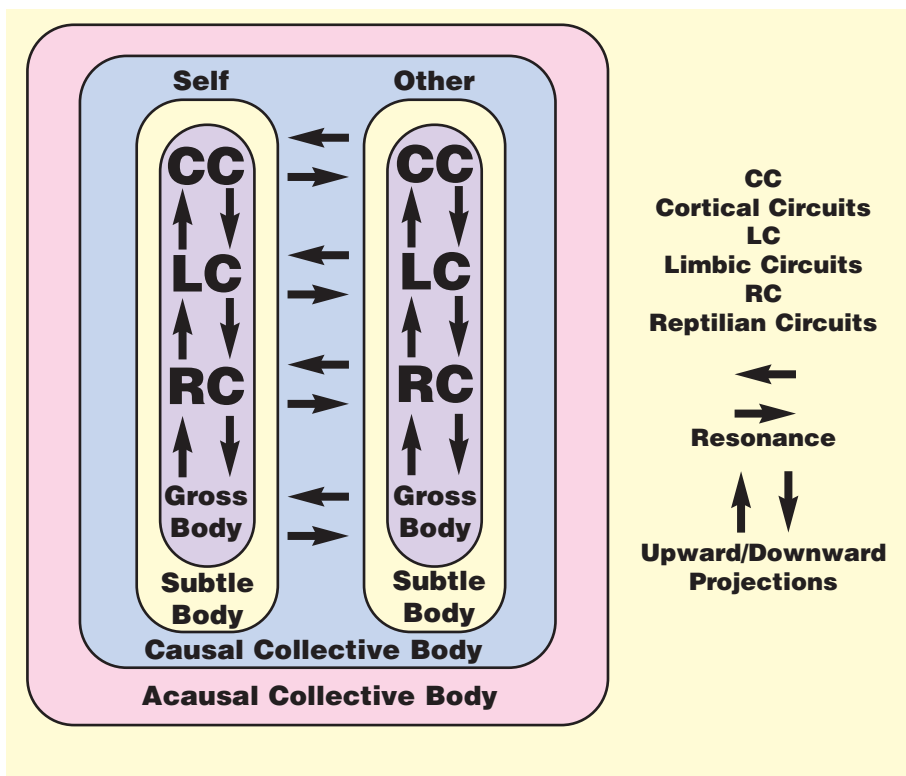
constricting or fragmenting to protect us from the trauma's impact. In an automobile accident, for example, a driver's neck might constrict to prevent more serious injury. The driver might retain no conscious memory of the impact, as the brain may cut off, or fragment its messages to avoid or overwhelm. As we meet any distressing situation, our bodies respond by heightening arousal and going into 'survival mode' responses of orienting, fight, flight, freeze, and dissociation. These natural responses are designed to minimize the threat to our lives and the potential damage to our brain and body.

## Designed from Day One to Heal Naturally from Trauma

Evolutionarily-old connections between our lower brains and our bodies equip us to deal with overwhelming situations rapidly. Our evolutionarily-old reptilian and limbic brains respond quickly to effect constriction and/or fragmentation defences and basic survival responses in our bodies to protect us from serious injury and even



death in traumatic situations. When the overwhelming event is over, our brains and bodies are designed to return to their normal states on their own, sooner or later. As long as there is enough understanding and support of these instinctual healing processes from us and/or from others around us, our bodies and brains will demobilize from basic survival responses of high autonomic arousal, orienting, fight, flight, freeze, and dissociation and reorganize from bodily constriction and/or fragmentation defences and return to a healthy state naturally. For example, a child that has just been traumatized will shake the high arousal and stress in its brain and body off, if held and supported in a safe way by a caring adult. Because of this natural capacity to heal from the impact of overwhelming, even life-threatening, events, most of us will make it through many traumatic situations throughout our lives and heal from them simply in the due course of our lives. In some instances, however, some of us do not quite recover, and the impact left by such events can continue to be a source of distress in our lives in one way or another.



Affect Circuitries

## What Can Happen if We Do Not Heal Naturally from Traumas?

### Trauma and Spirituality

There are many ways in which an unresolved trauma can be a source of troubling symptoms for the rest of one's life. If our physical bodies are stressed enough from intense experiences, we may not only freeze and dissociate, stress responses discussed earlier, but additional changes may occur as well. Our awareness may minimize our sensing of our physical bodies and maximize our sensing of our energy bodies, as a way of coping with and regulating the stress in our physical bodies.

Trauma is an intensely stressful experience for our physical bodies: a gift as well as a curse. For some of us, trauma gives the opportunity to sense ourselves as larger than, or more than, our limited, rigid identity wrapped up in our physical bodies. For others, it's so scary that we withhold from

fully sensing our physical bodies and others around us. We effectively prevent ourselves from experiencing embodied relationships with others on this physical plane. Or, we cling so tightly to our physical bodies 'for dear life', that we identify the sensing of our higher, spiritual bodies as life threatening, lest they trigger unresolved traumatic experiences in our physical bodies.

### Capacity for Embodiment

Our capacity to embody higher spiritual energies depends on the extent to which our brains and bodies can hold and contain a high charge without triggering traumatic reactions, such as anxiety or migraine. Working through traumatic reactions in our physical bodies, in our brains, and in our nervous systems, towards creating a capacity for a high charge in them becomes a necessary step towards an embodied spirituality.

### Examples from Clinical Practice

Those who do not have a capacity for embodiment of high spiritual energies in their physical bodies can run into scary retraumatization experiences and symptoms in the course of their spiritual practices. I have treated a number of people with high anxiety that emerged in spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation. I found that their persistent anxiety states came from traumatic responses as their physical bodies were trying to embody the expansion in their energies brought about by their spiritual practices. I once worked with a woman in her early forties who experienced an extra-ordinary love as a teenager that brought with it extra-ordinary states of consciousness that most would describe as high spiritual states. Unfortunately, the experience also triggered in her unresolved traumatic responses that left her brain and body very constricted and conflicted: she was terrified of encountering such experiences again, while at the same time longing for their return. The conflict between her energy bodies, possibly spurred by her longing for them, and her physical body, with its terror and constriction against the greater embodiment of such energies for fear of retraumatizing experiences, left her in life-long

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Trauma, as it disorganizes these lower brain mechanisms, therefore not only challenges our ability to survive biologically but also reduces our ability to sense a core sense of self in our body. A common experience among those I have treated successfully with traumatic disorganizations is a sense of returning to oneself, which I think has to do with an increasing ability to sense in a coherent manner a core and stable sense of self in their bodies.

wanting for fulfilment in relational and spiritual domains, in addition to life-long discomfort in sensing her own body. By working with her through the traumatic reactions in her body, we were finally able to create a greater capacity in her physical body for tolerating such experiences.

### Summary

In the course of spiritual practices, as the energy body expands and seeks embodiment in the physical body, it can trigger unresolved traumatic responses in the physical body making it constrict or fragment in survival terror, triggering high autonomic arousal, and basic survival responses of orienting, fight, flight, freeze and dissociation. Sometimes difficult experiences of retraumatization brought about by spiritual practices are thought of as spiritual emergencies that need a long period of time to be worked

through. Understanding the traumatic contents of such experiences, if any, and working to resolve them, can help to reduce the suffering and its duration and help to remove the constraints imposed by trauma on the person's spiritual quest.

### Trauma and Attachment

Relational traumas, or difficulties between children and their primary care-takers during early childhood, can also leave our nervous systems disorganized and in survival mode most of the time. This in turn makes it difficult for us to relate to others face-to-face, embodied in ourselves. Recent affective neuroscience findings (eg Schore, Siegel) indicate that face-to-face and other close interactions

between people involve much mutual charging of the nervous systems of those interacting. If charge from such interactions leaves our brains and bodies disorganized and in survival mode by triggering our traumatic reactions, we run the risk of not being able to relate fully to ourselves and to others in relationship. According to the neurologist Damasio, the lower brain mechanisms that we depend on to survive biologically and to heal naturally from trauma are the very mechanisms involved in our ability to feel a core sense of self in the body. Trauma, as it disorganizes these lower brain mechanisms, therefore not only challenges our ability to survive biologically but also reduces our ability to sense a core sense of self in our body. A common experience among those I have treated successfully with traumatic disorganizations is a sense of returning to oneself, which I think has to do with an increasing ability to sense in a coherent manner a core and stable sense of self in their bodies.

Traumatized nervous systems, with a baseline of high charge from unresolved traumatic stresses, cannot handle a higher charge without upsetting the delicate apple cart of an equilibrium that they might be striving to maintain. When we relate intimately to another and remain present to that interaction, our nervous systems can get instantly and mutually charged with high arousal. To a

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traumatized nervous system, this might be enough to send it over the edge towards an unbearable traumatic symptom. Many traumatized people cope with this by avoiding intimate relationships or by not sensing themselves and/or the other in intimate relationships so that they do not get too charged and traumatized by them. For example, a woman I treated displayed seizure-like uncontrolled movements, when I asked her to sense her body and sense me in the room

with her at the same time. It has not been an uncommon experience for patients with attachment traumas to freeze and dissociate quickly when asked to sense themselves and sense me at the same time.

### Trauma, Energywork, and Bodywork

In bodywork and energywork settings, when the physical body is prone to traumatic responses, trying to resolve physical or energy blocks without addressing the underlying traumatic reactions can lead to retraumatization experiences for clients. Traumatic forces in the physical body of a traumatized person are held together by underlying energy bodies to offer it as much stability as possible given the trauma (eg Sills). Breaking into these compensations physically or energetically, from either end so to speak, without addressing possible underlying traumatic responses, can lead to unfavourable outcomes for clients. I often treat people who have run into overwhelming disorgan-

izing experiences and symptoms from bodywork and energywork. While sounding a note of caution, it is at the same time important to note that if clients do not have unresolved traumatic stresses, then the likelihood of their being retraumatized by bodywork or energywork is all the less. Also, energywork and bodywork can enhance trauma healing when there is an adequate understanding of the dynamics of trauma. In summary, those involved in spiritual work in one way or another and those working with people with relational issues psychotherapeutically have much to gain in learning how to recognize and treat traumatic reactions in their clients when they occur. Also, being able to recognize and work with traumatic responses in bodywork and energywork contexts helps practitioners to maximize the healing that they facilitate while minimizing the possibilities for retraumatizing their clients.

### A Naturalistic Mind-Body Method for Healing Trauma

Of the mind-body psychotherapy systems that have evolved to heal trauma, Somatic Experiencing is the most insightful regarding the inherent ability of the



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body to heal itself from trauma. Somatic Experiencing, developed by Dr Peter Levine PhD offers a gentle and an effective mind-body system for healing even severe traumatic experiences that have defied treatment over time. The approach, explained in the best-selling book *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma* and on the website [www.traumahealing.com](http://www.traumahealing.com), is based on recognizing and encouraging the inherent self-healing tendencies in the evolutionarily-old connections between lower brains and bodies in human beings to resolve even age-old traumatic symptoms. This naturalistic psycho-biological approach, developed over twenty-five years by Dr Levine from observations of animals and humans as they coped with and healed from trauma, is taught in professional trainings all over the world and has been found to be of much value in diverse psychotherapy, bodywork, energywork, and spiritual settings, to help free the brain and body of enduring constraints and symptoms imposed on them by traumatic experiences.

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### About the Author

Raja Selvam PhD is based in Los Angeles. His background includes bodywork systems of Postural Integration and Biodynamic Cranio-sacral Therapy, body-oriented psychotherapy systems of Somatic Experiencing and Biodynamic Analysis, Jungian and Archetypal psychologies, and the Intersubjective and Object Relations schools of psychoanaly-

sis. His background in Advaita Vedanta, a spiritual tradition from India, informs his larger understanding of the psyche. He lectures and teaches internationally. Dr Selvam is a senior trainer in Somatic Experiencing for the Foundation of Human Enrichment and is on the faculty of Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. He can be reached on Tel: 001 310-306-1462 [RajaSelvam@aol.com](mailto:RajaSelvam@aol.com)

### Further Information

Dr Selvam is leading a series of workshops and talks in London and Devon in May 2004. For details, please Tel: 01647 221457; [www.karuna-institute.co.uk](http://www.karuna-institute.co.uk)



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