

Preparing the Body for Sikh Contemplation

A Cross-Traditional Somatic Framework

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About the Speaker

Vikass Hothi

Scholar–Practitioner · Author · Internationally Recognised Authority on Chinese Martial Arts

Martial Arts:	34th-generation Shaolin disciple · World champion · International Martial Arts Hall of Fame · Best-selling definitive treatise on Wing Chun Kuen
Somatic Training:	Structural Integration (Tom Myers / KMI) · Chinese Tui Na & Herbology · Corrective Health Kinesiology · Fascia-oriented bodywork · Daoist internal cultivation
Daoist Lineage:	Trained under Priest Lao Zhì Chang (老至昶), Four Dragons Institute, Dao Li Jiao tradition — encouraged to follow the classical wandering-Daoist cultivation path
Sikh Grounding:	Raised in a Sikh household · Guided by Amritdhari mother · Explores how internal softening and interoceptive awareness shape Sikh contemplative experience
Academy:	Founder & Head Instructor, Shaolin Martial Arts Academy, Slough, UK · Presented at Sikh Colloquium 2025, Los Angeles · BSc Sports and Exercise Science

Overview

The presentation proceeds in four moves:

- 1 Daoist Neigong as a somatic grammar of internal softening, structure and breath
- 2 Chan/Zen attentional phenomenology, Vedantic/Haṭha postural principles and somatic science
- 3 Anjani Teves' Polydiaphragmatic Breathwork as anatomical elaboration of diaphragmatic freedom
- 4 A unified five-stage model of embodied preparation oriented towards Sikh contemplative aims

The Missing Body in Sikh Contemplative Discourse

The Gap

Sikh contemplative scholarship has focused primarily on scriptural hermeneutics, doctrinal debates, colonial histories and diaspora dynamics — with comparatively limited engagement with the bodily substratum of contemplative experience.

Historically, agrarian and martial lifestyles naturally conditioned posture, breath and presence. Contemporary practitioners inhabit sedentary, screen-centred environments.

Somatic Realities of the Modern Body

- Thoracic breathing and shallow respiration
- Forward-head posture and spinal compression
- Chronic myofascial tension in diaphragm and psoas
- Elevated sympathetic arousal, reduced interoception
- Difficulty sustaining stillness during Simran or Paath

These somatic realities directly influence the ability to inhabit Sunneeā and Sehaj in practice.

Daoist Neigong: A Somatic Grammar of Internal Softening

Song 鬆

Dynamic Relaxation

Minimisation of redundant muscular effort; joints slightly decompressed; myofascial tissues elongating continuously. Decreased sympathetic activation. Somatic analogue to Visrām — removing obstacles to Sunneeāi.

Wuji 無極

Neutral Structural Alignment

Skeletal stacking allowing gravity transmission with minimal muscular interference. Pelvis neutral, spine elongated, ribcage free, head balanced. Grants the practitioner capacity to sit through Paath without excessive distraction.

Dantian Breathing

Natural Diaphragmatic Breath

Emerges when internal softening and structural neutrality are present. Associated with lower respiratory frequency, increased HRV and calmer affective states. Foundation for ajap jap — the continuous rhythm of Simran.

The Neigong Five-Stage Process: A Phenomenology of Settling

1

靜

Quiet (jing)

— Lowering the internal noise floor; precondition for Sunneeāī

2

沉

Sink (chen)

— Weight settling through the support surface; resonance with embodied Hukam

3

舒服

Ease (shufu)

— Expanding physical and affective comfort; parallel to Sehaj

4

慢

Slow (man)

— Temporal spaciousness; supports unforced Simran and receptive Sunneeāī

5

軟

Softness (mian)

— Cotton body — embodied nimratā; posture of saraṇ, trust and receptive alignment

The Diaphragm and Fascia: Anatomical Gateways to Sikh Contemplation

When the Diaphragm Moves Freely

- Smoother, more economical respiration
- Improved heart rate variability
- Vagal activity supports affective regulation
- Interoceptive signals become clearer
- Conditions for Simran and Paath become fluid and unforced

When the Diaphragm is Restricted

- Upper-chest breathing perpetuates
- Anxiety and shallow affective states
- Difficulty staying present with recitation
- Encourages fidgeting and micro-movements
- Constitutive obstacle to the somatic possibility of Sunneeāī

Polydiaphragmatic Breathwork (Anjani Teves)

Engages anterior/posterior ribcage, lateral ribs, pelvic diaphragm and thoracic outlet through guided full-body breath sequences — directly supporting the quieting and softening associated with nimratā, saraṇ and the lowering of the internal noise floor that precedes Sunneeāī.

Cross-Traditional Attentional and Postural Frameworks

Chan / Zen · Attentional Grammar

- Attentional settling without suppression — from scattered (luan xin) to collected (ding xin) to clarified (ming xin)
- Non-interference: allow thoughts to arise and pass without following or fighting them
- Parallel to Sikh orientation to Hukam — phenomena recognised in a larger order without reactive control
- Gradual softening of haumai through breath awareness — thinning the habitual egoic contraction
- Transparency of embodiment: body present and clear, no longer an obstacle — analogue to saas-giraas Simran

Vedantic–Haṭha Yoga · Postural Framework

- Sthira sukham āsanam — simultaneously stable and comfortable; a structurally unstable posture requires constant effort
- Legitimises adapting seated position to reduce pain and improve stability as a contemplative act, not failure
- Synergies of diaphragm, pelvic floor, deep spinal stabilisers, ribcage positioning and cervical alignment
- Supports durational stamina for long Paath recitations and extended Simran sessions without postural fatigue

Somatic Science: Physiology of Internal Softening

Autonomic Regulation & Vagus Nerve

Slow diaphragmatic breathing → increased vagal afferent activity, enhanced HRV, improved emotional regulation (Porges 2011). Greater capacity to remain with Simran or Paath through emotional turbulence.

Interoception as Inner Listening

Interoception — the sense of the physiological condition of the body — is foundational for self-regulation (Craig 2003). Heightened interoception allows Sikh practitioners to feel, track and stabilise states like Sehaj somatically.

Myofascial Tension & Cognitive Noise

Chronic myofascial tension sustains sympathetic activation, alters proprioception, diminishes interoceptive clarity (Schleip et al. 2012). Releasing fascial restrictions reduces 'embodied cognitive noise' — prerequisite for Sunneeai.

Psychological Safety and the Ability to Settle

A body under chronic autonomic hyper-arousal cannot settle into contemplative practice (Goleman & Davidson 2017). Diaphragmatic breathing, structural support and internal softening create the felt sense of safety required for deep Sikh contemplative work.

A Unified Cross-Traditional Framework for Preparing the Sikh Body–Mind



This model frames somatic work not as an optional adjunct but as a foundational layer of Sikh contemplative life.

1

Legitimise embodied preparation in Sikh educational settings alongside scriptural and ethical teaching

2

Foreground embodiment within Sikh Studies — enrich textual/theological analyses with somatic phenomenology

3

Open empirical research using HRV, respiratory, fascial and interoceptive measures of contemplative depth

Conclusion

*When the body is prepared with care and intelligence,
the path of Sikh contemplation becomes more stable, accessible and deeply lived.*

Internal softening, diaphragmatic decompression and structural neutrality are not peripheral techniques. They are foundational conditions for the emergence of Sunneeaī, Sehaj and sustained Simran in modern bodies.

Cross-traditional dialogue with Daoist, Chan/Zen, Vedantic and somatic science frameworks need not threaten Sikh theological integrity. Engaged at the level of embodied method and phenomenology, such dialogue serves Sikh aims by making contemplative practice more accessible to the contemporary body.

Future work: empirical studies · qualitative practitioner research · theoretical exploration of embodiment and Gurmat frameworks