

ZERO BALANCING

In bodywork, some practitioners focus on physical structure and others focus on energy. Zero Balancing is unique in that it focuses on both simultaneously and consciously. At 90 years old, the founder of Zero Balancing, Fritz Smith, MD, is still teaching, innovating, and contributing to this systematic approach to the whole person.

BORN FROM BONE

The genesis of Zero Balancing goes back to Smith's childhood. His father, Ernest Smith, DC, was an early chiropractor who opened the first four-year chiropractic college, the Cleveland College of Chiropractic, in 1923. Smith's mother was more artistic—writing fiction, composing music, and directing local theater. Smith (whose given name is Frederick Reindel Smith) embodies both the scientific curiosity and altruism of his father and the creativity of his mother.

His childhood curiosity for the skeletal system steered his vocational interests as a student. "I have always had a personal bias toward bone. It began in my childhood playing with a skeleton in my dad's school and



A Conversation with its Founder, Fritz Smith, MD

By David Lauterstein

developing a personal relationship with the skeleton.” In the 1950s, he became an osteopath and medical doctor in California. Early in his practice, he was drawn to cranial osteopathy and studied with Edna Lay, Rollin Becker, Harold Magoun, Ruth Gostch, and Viola Frymann (among others)—all students of William Sutherland, the founder of cranial osteopathy. In 1961, the California Osteopathic Association merged with the California Medical Association, and Smith received his medical degree from Irvine Medical School. Smith has said jokingly, “Some MDs are congenital, mine was acquired.”

His “bias toward bone” deepened in osteopathic school as he studied the work of Andrew Taylor Still and learned the biomechanics of structure—what Smith calls “a beautiful system.”

“My understanding of the biomechanics changed, however, as I studied the cranial approach. Rather than using the high

velocity thrusting manipulation of osteopathy, in cranial work we tend to hold things longer and allow the cranial rhythm to respond to your touch. The ideas of holding, allowing, and waiting (pausing) later became vital elements of Zero Balancing.”

STIR IN ROLFING AND ACUPUNCTURE

With a medical degree in his pocket, Smith began exploring the body, mind, and spirit at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, in the 1960s. By 1970, he began training with the renowned Ida Rolf, who was also at Esalen. As Ida Rolf’s student model, Smith had several experiences that influenced his later work. He learned that tissue-held memory is real, that deep touch (as in Rolfing) does not need to hurt, and that one can work from “split-level consciousness,” conjoining the highest quality of touch with high-level observation skills. Smith later

became one of the first medical doctors trained in Rolf’s work.

The same year he completed his Rolfing training, Smith met J. R. Worsley, an acclaimed English acupuncture teacher at Esalen. Smith was so struck by the new and mysterious, yet powerful, teachings of Worsley that he traveled to and from England to continue his studies with Worsley for the next eight years. In particular, Smith was interested in Worsley’s ability to diagnose and treat the root causes of problems. In 1979, Fritz earned his master’s degree in acupuncture and became a Fellow in the College of Chinese Medicine.

“The major effect from my study of acupuncture and Chinese medicine was to introduce me to the concept of energy—also known as *chi* or *prana*. Everything changed as I began to integrate Eastern thoughts of energy, vibration, healing, and meditation with the scientific thoughts of the West,” Smith says. “I learned that energy had its own anatomy, physiology, and patho-physiology. For me, vibration is almost synonymous with energy—when I think energy, I think vibration.”

The Fulcrum

Zero Balancing seems to engage the person in profound ways through apparently simple hands-on work. Smith says that comes from the Zero Balancing working tool, called a fulcrum. “A fulcrum is a field of tension that we create in the client’s body and then hold it stationary to allow the opportunity for the person to respond to it. Some of the fulcrums I’ve developed come from listening to people who have a worldview that makes sense to me, like Deepak Chopra or the Dalai Lama. I may hear an idea and then design a field of tension, a fulcrum that creates a kinesthetic experience for the client that may transfer that idea into their experience.”

Because acupuncture teaches us that meridians are the energy pathways in the body, Smith says that early in his acupuncture training the meridians represented the anatomy of energy. “Meridians were for me, for a while, what energy was. However, one day I was working with the meridians, and I had the insight that meridians were actually just one form of energy movement; that, at a deeper level, there was the unseen world of pure energy or pure vibration—the underpinnings of the body,” he says. “To me, this resonated with the quantum physics idea that the fundamental building blocks of nature are energy and structure, the particle and the wave.”

It also resonated with the current models of the *field*. “From this broader perspective, we are all fundamentally in a ‘field’ of vibration or energy—nodes in a multidimensional web of what is. These ideas are all woven into the world of Zero Balancing.”

MIXING ENERGY AND STRUCTURE

So how does Smith see energy and structure as related? “Of course, in the scientific world it’s Einstein’s $E = mc^2$. However, to understand the relationship of structure and energy in a more meaningful way, I use a model of a sailboat. Talking in metaphor is sometimes easier than reciting facts to help convey ideas in an *image-able* way.

“In the sailboat metaphor, the wind represents the energy and the boat represents structure. Somewhere, the wind meets the sail; somewhere, energy meets structure. Some people have an easier time sailing than others, depending on their skill level. A skilled sailor is able to tack the boat into the wind in a manner that serves his navigation. In our bodies, our energy meets our structure. A fundamental health question is: How well tacked is a person into their own energy flow? Some people are better integrated in themselves than others. There are a number of ways to

improve this relationship, which improves one’s function and feelings of well-being.”

BECOMING A TEACHER

While Smith was studying acupuncture, Worsley’s students began asking Smith to share some of his methods for evaluating the structure and functions of key joints they were working with. Later, they asked to be shown the techniques he was employing to arrive at better balance. This core group organically gave rise to Smith’s new role as a teacher—and his groups of students in the UK and US spontaneously grew.

By the mid-70s, Smith’s ideas and techniques became known as Zero Balancing, which implies that the physical body is leaning neither right nor left, front or back; that it is in balance, at the *zero* point. Later, Zero Balancing became more explicit—that this work also helped evoke emotional, mental, and spiritual alignment through the mindful engagement of energy and structure. For Smith, all his years of study coalesced into an awareness that the structural armature is also the core energy pathway—or what Chinese medicine identifies as *ancestral chi*, and what yogic philosophy describes as the deepest energy flows of *sushumna*, *ida*, and *pingala*.

In fact, it’s the direction his Zero Balancing took—focusing on the skeletal side of the musculoskeletal system. “One reason for this is that the skeleton is the core of the body and conducts the strongest currents,” Smith says. “Bone is also piezoelectric. Because of its density, it is an easy tissue to palpate, perceive, and affect energy directly. Bone contains our ancestral history, early childhood conditioning, and some effects of major trauma. Although energy is everywhere in the body, bone gives us a unique doorway into a person’s body, mind, and spirit to help integrate and balance the person.”

Smith soon found himself teaching Zero Balancing in the UK, in a variety of US cities, in Mexico, and eventually in India, Japan, Spain, and Switzerland. The



Top: Smith highlights the importance of the sacrum. Middle: Author David Lauterstein and Smith in discussion. Bottom: Smith and wife, Aminah Raheem, at his 90th birthday celebration in Palm Springs. *Photos by Giovanni Pescetto.*

FAR FROM DONE

At age 90, Smith is still filled with passion, energy, and ideas. “My current passion is the *field* and how meditation and bodywork affect the energy field. I’ve been listening to Bruce Lipton, and he says only 5 percent of our mental activity is conscious and 95 percent is unconscious. He goes on to say the first six years of life lay down the blueprint for your unconscious. In those first six years, the child just downloads information; they don’t analyze it,” he says.

“So, if we want to provide the opportunity for change, we need to find a way to talk to the 95 percent of us that is below consciousness. And how do we do that? One way is to quiet the mind, and that is where pauses and longer-held touch come in. When nothing apparently is happening, the person goes to a deeper place, to an expanded state of awareness, and they are more open to change.

As to the future of Zero Balancing, Smith has hopes for its place in the world.

“Developing Zero Balancing many years ago, I had no idea where it was going to go,” he says. “It started out as a biomechanical system that was very good at stopping pain and helping function. But now I’m seeing it as a holistic system. I think it is a therapy that really belongs in this world because it helps a person become awake and break away from their old habitual patterns toward self-actualization. There is movement in the culture to raise the consciousness of the world. I think Zero Balancing is totally in accord with that movement. I think, and hope, Zero Balancing will contribute to a future in which we see a higher level of healing and self-actualization—not just for individuals, but for our whole world.” **m&b**

6 David Lauterstein is the cofounder of the Lauterstein-Conway Massage School in Austin, Texas. He is the author of *The Deep Massage Book: How to Combine Structure and Energy in Bodywork* and *Life in the Bones: A Biography of Dr. Fritz Smith and Zero Balancing*. He teaches in Austin, as well as in workshops throughout the US, in Costa Rica, and in the UK.



demand for classes, and the enthusiasm of his growing and devoted groups of students, led to a series of teacher trainings that resulted in hundreds of certified Zero Balancing teachers all over the world.

Smith’s growing insights led him to create advanced courses and teacher trainings. “The Alchemy of Touch” explores working in higher energy states to help relieve more intractable problems. “Geometry of Healing” amplifies the experience of spaciousness within the person, using the concept of the “gap” as elaborated by Deepak Chopra. When a person has the experience of a gap between thoughts and of greater spaciousness in the body and in time, they have a greater opportunity for change. Other courses followed. Many were created by Smith, and others were created by his faculty members as they focused on special conditions, populations, or ideas about healing.

Zero Balancing has developed quite a structure—there is the Zero Balancing Health Association in America, the Zero Balancing Association UK, other international associations, and the Zero Balancing Touch Foundation, which engages in research and approval of new courses and refinement of the core trainings. There is a long association with the Upledger Institute, the Lauterstein-Conway Massage School, the Traditional Acupuncture Institute, and the many cities and areas, especially in the US, where there are high concentrations of Zero Balancers.

