

# WAKING THE TIGER

with Dr. Peter Levine

THE MASTER Series







Trauma is not a disorder. It's not a disease. Trauma is a wound. It may not be a physical wound, but it's a wound to our psyche, to our soul. It leaves us bereft, disconnected from ourselves and disconnected from others. However it is a wound that can be healed as long as we have the right tools and know how to use them.

When Dr. Peter Levine began studying trauma in the 1970s, he noticed that humans react to stress differently than every other mammal. What can Dr. Levine's understanding about an animal's response to trauma teach us about healing the wounds in our own minds? And what exactly does it mean to "Wake the Tiger"?

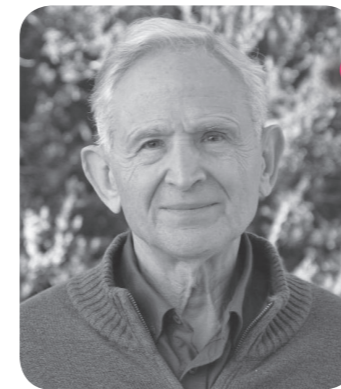
### WHAT IS SOMATIC EXPERIENCING?

Broken down, Somatic is the body and experiencing is experiencing. So Somatic Experiencing is being able to experience our bodies, not just anatomically, but in terms of its vitality, its energetic lightness. When people are stuck, their energy is stuck. And when people are able to restore their energy, they're aligned with their vitality again, that's what healing is about.

When a person has been traumatized, they get stuck in a belief such as "I'm not worthy of success", or "whatever I do, it's not going to help". These beliefs become rigid. When you work with the person using Somatic Experiencing, they learn to be able to identify and follow their inner body sensations, tensions, tingling, vibration, trembling, warmth, waves of warmth, all of these things, allow the person to experience something new. An experience

that really contradicts the experience of overwhelming helplessness. As a traumatized person, it helps to have these new experiences and from these new experiences, to have new meanings, no longer fixed beliefs, but new meanings. Such as; "I am able to love and to be loved". That's a big one for most people who have experienced trauma, as they believe themselves unworthy to be loved.

### HOW DR. LEVINE'S WORK STARTED



While working with people in the 60s and 70s he would see that sometimes the symptoms they would present with would be from a traumatic childhood, or sometimes it was something that seemed relatively minor, but either way, it had this profound effect.

An example Levine uses is of someone getting mugged at night at gunpoint. Of course, they're terrified, and they come home, and sometimes that terrorist stays with them and they are too fearful to walk around at night anymore, potentially too fearful to even go out of the house. However, he also realized that animals in the wild who had been attacked by their "muggers" or predators, couldn't go back to their "homes" and stay there, they simply wouldn't survive. They would have to be able to shake off the encounters they had had. So if you see coyote chasing rabbit, and the race goes on, and then the rabbit is just able to escape, it will then go home to a hole in the ground. And what does it say? Does it say, I don't want to ever get out of here, there's too much danger, everything's threatening? Of course not, it has to go back out there to survive.

At this point, Levine reasoned there must be something that animals do, or something that they don't do, that gives them this relative immunity. And if there was something, he began to wonder how he could use it to help people also develop in a way retrospectively, that capacity, that resilience, that immunity that animals have to being traumatized.

And so he spent a lot of time observing animals in many different situations. And on one of his many travels around the world, he was discussing his theory with an African guy from Kenya, who worked in an animal safari park, and



had observed that when they had to capture an animal for whatever reason and put it in a cage in order to re-release it somewhere else in the park, the animal would normally shake and tremble in its cage. However, if the animal didn't shake and tremble, it would die.



### THE CHEETAH AND THE IMPALA

After the revelation from the Kenyan, Levine then went on to study animals in the African desert. Watching a cheetah chasing down an impala at around 65 miles an hour, he began to think about the energy, the muscular energy, the nervous system energy that would be necessary to be able to propel that chase and that escape. Both animals giving all they have. And if the cheetah actually brings down the Impala, the Impala then feigns dead, not moving. However if, at this moment the cheetah is distracted for some reason... Perhaps a pack of hyenas fancy their chances at fighting off the cheetah and getting the impala for themselves, then in the new fracas between cheetah and hyena – boom, the impala senses his chance at freedom and off he goes. All of that energy from the chase is then expelled in the escape for freedom.

But with people that energy doesn't go into the escape, nor do they shake it off. So Levine asked himself how he could work with the energy that must necessarily be left in the body after someone experiences a traumatic incident. And this is again, one of the keys of somatic experiencing, a concept called titration; only accessing the left-over energy of the traumatic experience, one small amount at a time, so the person is not overwhelmed.

This is done because if the nervous system becomes overwhelmed, then the feeling within the person experiencing the overwhelm, is really not any different than the original trauma. So the key is to do it gently.

Levine discovered that each time he gently accessed the stored energy from someone's traumatic experience, he would slowly be bringing the person more and more into life.

Another principal Levine uses is pendulation. This is a process of helping someone as they arrive at a difficult sensation. Usually, when you come to a sensation that's difficult, you feel a contraction like you're recoiling from that sensation. But if you are guided through that feeling of recoil, that contraction then opens into an expansion, and then to another smaller contraction and then to another expansion. Being able to help people see that, even though it feels worse at first initially, when they're able to be with the sensations in their bodies, then that sensation will actually move through to another sensation, which has more open openness, more freedom. But again, the idea is to not overwhelm the person. And that's one of the key features of

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In the 60's Levine was working with a group of people who had high blood pressure. By helping them to relax in a certain sequence concentrating on certain muscles in their jaw, their neck and their shoulders, sometimes their blood pressure would go from like 160/170, down to normal. However one day he was working with a woman called Nancy, who had been going from doctor to doctor, specialist to specialist because, as well as high blood pressure, she had all kinds of other symptoms: pain throughout her body, migraines, irritable bowel, gastric distress, as well as severe panic attacks. It had reached the point that she was unable to leave the house without her husband at all.





Dr. Levine began to help her relax, and her heart rate was about 150 beats a minute. Using his relaxation sequence, her heart rate started going down, until suddenly it shot up to about 160 beats a minute. At the time he was very early on in his explorations into the mind body connection, and so he told her that she needed to just try to relax. To his relief, her heart rate started going down again. And it went down to 90 to 80 to 70 to 60 to 50. And she turned pale. Then she suddenly opened her eyes and with a fixed, frightened stare said; "I'm dying. I'm dying. Don't let me die. Help me. Help me. Don't let me die."

In that moment, on the far side of the consulting room, Dr. Levine saw an image of a tiger getting ready to spring into action. And spontaneously he said, "Nancy, there's a tiger chasing you run, climb those rocks and escape." He could see she was still terrified, but he continued to support her, offering her gentle words of encouragement. During the following 30 or 40 minutes her body would go through various states; her hands would go from freezing cold to warm. She took deep spontaneous breaths, trembled and began to sweat. And then, towards the end of the session her she was just so deeply calm. The color in her face was a healthy pink again.

When she opened her eyes finally, she asked Dr. Levine if he wanted to know what had happened. When he responded that he did, she said that when he told her about the tiger, she was terrified. She explained that she actually always felt terrified, but the thought of the tiger made her even more terrified than usual. And when Dr. Levine had told her to run, to escape, at first, she felt like she was trying to run in quicksand or mud. She just couldn't move her legs. But then when he began to give her some encouragement,



she could feel herself running and climbing. She felt her arms climbing the rocks and then both her arms and her legs started climbing, started helping her escape. She told Levine that when she got to the top and looked down, she saw the tiger and knew she was safe. Then the tiger image disappeared, and she reported seeing herself 20 years before, when she was four years old, being held down by doctors and nurses while a mask was being forced on her face for a tonsillectomy. And so for 20 years, her body had been trying to escape, but couldn't. She had been trapped. She had been ready to escape – just waiting until the coast was clear, and then in the session with Dr. Levine, she was able to complete that running response.

At the very end of the session she said, "it feels like I'm being held in warm, tingling waves". Those words gave Levine another important bit of information; that trauma, of course, can be hell on earth, but trauma transformation can be, so incredibly amazing, akin perhaps to a spiritual experience. That was another piece of his research that Levine started to realize was important – it was much more common than not common, that people would not just 'get rid' of the trauma, but in fact they would be able to transform it into very positive experiences.





## DR. LEVINE'S OWN EXPERIENCE

After working with Nancy, and studying animals in the wild Levine was able to piece together the importance of the “follow through” action after the traumatic experience. He understood that we are animals and just like animals in the wild who have had a traumatic experience, we need to be able to complete the “escape” response. If we don't the trauma gets locked within us, and over time will start to manifest itself in unpleasant symptoms.

When Dr. Levine was a teenager, he had a traumatic experience that didn't result in him holding onto his trauma. This experience further helped him see the importance of releasing the energy in the moment.



It was a beautiful Southern California day, and he was walking down to his favorite Vietnamese restaurant. As he crossed the crosswalk there was a truck on one side of the road, not seeing Peter, it went right through the crosswalk and hit him at about 25 miles an hour. He was thrown up into the air. Thankfully, a woman came over and she sat down next to him. She announced herself as being a doctor, a pediatrician. She asked him, how she could help, and he said, just stay here, just hold my hand. And having her support there, in the same way he supported Nancy, allowed him to go to where that energy was locked in and release it in different ways. For example he experienced this red rage and was angry and furious all at the same time,

but all of that was still just the energy he had needed to release. It was how he executes his “escape” with the help from this Good Samaritan.

Levine has since understood that in order to achieve this energy release and sense of “escape”, he had to have somebody there to be with him, because trauma is not just what happens to us, but what happens in the absence of an empathic person who's there with you in that experience.

## DID WE EVER “SHAKE IT OFF”?



All of Dr. Levine's work and research made him curious. He began to wonder if animals have this evolutionary baked in response that seems to be effective, why don't we do the same thing? Did we used to do it and have now stopped for some reason? That was the primary question that took him decades of thinking about. In which time he came up with a few answers to why we don't, or no longer do simply “shake it off”.

The first one is we tend to overthink things. So we interfere, we override this natural processes. Our mind thinks it can think its way out of it and instead gets more stuck. Most people who have been traumatized, they really do try to think their way out of it, but you can't. It's not a thinking thing.

There is a poem Dr. Levine sometimes recites to people when they're really struggling to just let go of their mind and come to their body experience. It's a poem that was written by a 10-year-old Ugandan girl.



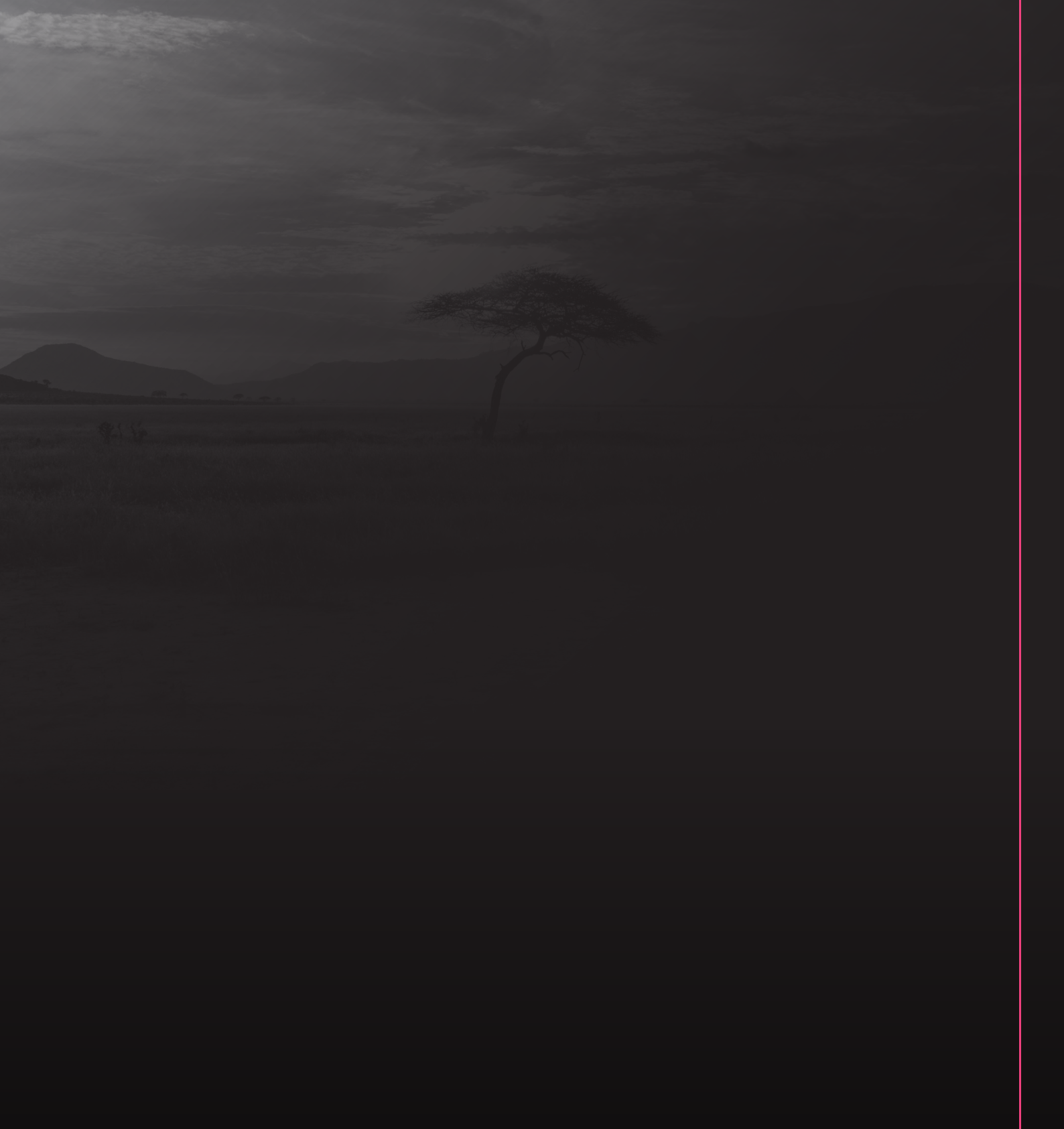
I have a little brain that's tucked safely in my head, and another one that's in the air instead, that one follows me and plays with me in bed.

The other one confuses me, the one that's in my head.

The poem perfectly demonstrates the idea of our ability to sense, to feel and to understand, rather than just thinking to understand. More – *I feel, therefore I am*, rather than *I think, therefore I am*. This is somatic experiencing in a nutshell.







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