

By Bill Scholl

THE TRAGER

Approach

Well, how should it be? What could be freer? Hmmm... freer than that?...

This is the sort of musing that a practitioner of The *Trager Approach* uses as a tool to guide clients into release of unconscious patterns of holding tension, into greater ease and freedom. Each gentle contact, each communication between practitioner and client holds the suggestion of something fuller and more satisfying.

The release of long term, deep seated physical and mental patterns of tension is possible. Dr. Milton Trager's approach to body/mind integration has always been focused on the connection between the physical structure of the body and the unconscious mind.



“Every feeling experience you have ever had is stored in the unconscious mind and cannot be erased. Since there are no erase buttons in the unconscious mind, all of its information regarding feelings, perceptions, memories and understandings is at our disposal to be tapped and utilized like the data stored in a computer. It is our most powerful resource.

This also means that one does not have to 'get rid of' anything in order to develop into a more fully realized person. One can simply add more positive experiences to one's life. This can happen through The *Trager Approach*."

Trager Mentastics, Movement as a way to agelessness, Milton Trager, MD Station Hill Press 1987



The work consists of two parts, Mentastics movements and table work.

Mentastics is a word coined by Dr. Trager and his wife, Emily, to mean the gentle, self-directed movements that the practitioner can do for his or her own benefit and can give to clients to prolong and enhance the value of the session. The gentle, shimmering movements of Mentastics have a vitalizing influence on the mind and body. The body is able to use its own weights with gravity, creating waves of motion from the extremities that can resonate to the deepest core levels.

Given a choice between tension and the grace and freedom of fuller movement, the mind will choose the more pleasurable option. This is a process of education. The mind is engaged in a manner that is safe, secure and present. The gentle, non-intrusive movements allow the client to recall the feelings of playfulness and the sense of presence that we experienced as children, and perhaps less frequently, as adults. To recall feelings such as these, not intellectually, but at a tissue level, can be powerful and transformational.

and lies draped on a well padded table. The practitioner moves the client's tissues gently and rhythmically, emphasizing rotation, extension and rocking, but without any undue force, pressure or pain. The client becomes deeply relaxed, and experiences a shift from his or her own habitual tensions to a more graceful, freer and fuller range of motion. After the table work, the practitioner may again lead the client through some Mentastics, giving some specific suggestions for continuing the movements. The value of these Mentastics are twofold: they bring the client conscious awareness of newly found ease of movement, and will assist the client to recall these feelings of ease and lightness.

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By asking, "what could be freer than that?" between the movements, and by not trying to be "freer than that", it is possible, with the simplest of movements, to find greater and greater release of restriction and deeper and deeper levels of peace and ease. The goal of this gentle form is to bring us closer to the possibility of an ageless body; to teach us to play with gravity, rather than be bent and defeated by it.

The work at the table takes place as the practitioner finds the weight of a particular part of the client's body, for example the neck, and gently assists it to move freely in the range in which it can move freely. Upon finding the places in which there are restrictions in the ability to move freely, the practitioner will play, will dance along the meeting point between restriction and freedom, never forcing more movement, suggesting to the unconscious mind of the client that there is the possibility of something more free and more open.

Deane Juhan has said that it is important to understand that "Dr. Trager's manner of manipulating the body is not a technique or method, in the sense that there are no rigid procedures which are claimed to produce specific symptomatic results. There is no formula, no recipe, no standardized practical procedure. Rather, it is an approach, a way of learning and of teaching movement re-education."

What then does occur in a session? A Trager session can take from one hour to ninety minutes. The format of the session can vary, depending on the needs and desires of the client and the approach that seems appropriate to the practitioner for the specific client. The session may begin with a brief period of observation of the client's movement. The practitioner may then suggest Mentastics to the client, to give feelings of greater freedom and awareness. The table work usually follows. No oils are used. The client is dressed in a minimum of shorts or underpants,

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Dr. Milton Trager

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Milton Trager developed his approach to body/mind integration over a 70 year period of time. At seventeen, Milton was a professional boxer. He had the opportunity one day to put his trainer on a massage table, and the man's response was, "I never taught you anything like this, kid. You got hands!!!" Milton then went home, and in one session cleared up his father's acute sciatica. Milton continued to explore movement, and as time progressed, he did a number of different things, each of which broadened and enriched his own life experience and gave more depth to his work. Besides boxing, he was a bodybuilder, and later an acrobat and dancer on the vaudeville stage.

He studied to become a Doctor of Physical Medicine, specializing in rehabilitative medicine, and spent time during WW II working with wounded soldiers. After the war, he used the GI bill to go to medical school, moved to Hawaii, completed a residency in psychiatry, and then went into general practice. While in Hawaii, he studied with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and became one of the first Americans to practice Transcendental Meditation. As Dr. Trager continued to develop and refine his work, he found that he was getting results treating a broad range of conditions, including migraine, lower back pain, asthma, emphysema, polio, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis and other forms of neuromuscular disturbance.

It was not until 1975 that Dr. Trager demonstrated his work. The initial demonstration was at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. While there, he met Betty Fuller,

who was so impressed with his work that she took Milton and Emily to her home near San Francisco. He spent three days teaching Betty some of his approach to bodywork, and she began organizing classes for him. Betty later became founding director of The Trager Institute. There are now approximately 2,000 practitioners and students of The Trager Approach around the world, with classes being taught in the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, South America and Japan.

What is the value of receiving sessions or studying The Trager Approach to someone who is successfully practicing another form of bodywork? I believe that the core values and principles of our work translate beautifully to any form. The Trager Practitioner reminds the muscle memory, and therefore the mind of the client, what the feeling of softer, of easier, of freer is. How do we do this? By doing less. The more tension, the more restriction we find in the tissue, the softer and more present we become. It is necessary to remember that while what we do is important, how we are able to be with our client is of greater value. It is not enough for our client to understand the value of change. Nothing has happened until there is the feeling experience of something different, something more. This is the essence of The Trager Approach.



And so, when the practitioner finds tension in tissue of the client, s/he moves toward the feeling experience by dropping into a mind set of wondering, "What is softer? How could it be?" This simple process takes some practice. As a body worker, our first inclination when we find blocks in the client's body is more likely to be something such as, "What do I need to do to fix this?" or "This technique has worked for me in the past, I'll try it." Instead, the Trager Practitioner may step away from the client and take a moment to drop more deeply into his or her own body, into his or her own grounding and feeling experience. From there, it is possible to reenter into contact with the client with greater presence. The practitioner might then, by being softer, be able to suggest to the client what the feeling of softness in the tissue could be; by dropping tension from the practitioner's own body to suggest what the experience of being freer might be. It is then up to the client to take in the information and process it, to allow and accept the experience of greater freedom to become part of his or her feeling experience. The entire process may take only a few seconds or may be part of an ongoing series of small shifts and awakenings that can occur throughout the session. These changes may be immediately profound or most noticeable to the client when they are standing and moving after the table work. Many times, clients report noticing great differences when they are doing some of the ordinary things that happen

in everyday life, things as simple as opening a door or brushing their teeth.

By suggesting that something more free is available, by pausing frequently to allow the client sufficient time to feel his or her tension and release, by not "trying to fix the problem", the practitioner is offering a possibility that the client may pursue if he or she chooses. When given the choice between tension and release, the client will almost always choose

the more pleasurable option. It is then, in an instant, that both practitioner and client can feel the release in the tissue. It is clear to both that the client is taking the action, and that the practitioner is acting as facilitator. The intention is to empower the client.

Training in The Trager Approach focuses on being aware of your own body as the practitioner, of finding and releasing your own tension, feeling your own freedom of movement, your own grounding and weight. As this awareness deepens, the practitioner is then able to feel, to a greater degree, the pattern of holding in the body of the client. There is focus in classes on how we move at the table and how we use the relationship between our weight and our client's weight. The ongoing intention is to find even easier ways to interact with the client. As the work becomes easier, it becomes more effective.

Mentastics is an important tool used by the practitioner as self-care and as a way to find deeper presence during the table work. If I feel discomfort in my low back or shoulder while in a session, I know to step back and take care of myself. I can then return to my client and be there more fully. I am also modeling the value of *Mentastics* for both of us.

Much of the additional training has to do with observing and feeling

patterns in the tissue and structure of the client. Each of us, both practitioner and client, brings our own unique structure and patterns of tension and freedom to the session. Each session with the same client will be different. We train to be able to feel the weight, the tone, the rhythm of this particular client in this particular moment. We learn to do this without effort. This requires allowing the

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possibility of being present in the moment. A part of the training is spent in learning to notice when we as practitioners let our minds drift, and in developing easy ways for us to then return to now, and to our client. Dr. Trager called this ability to be present in the moment "Hook-Up" and he spoke of it as simply a place of connection.

"Hook-up is not a passive state. It is dynamic, alive, vibrant, yet peaceful. There isn't anything one has to do to be in hook-up except to allow it to happen. Even learning and trying to let go is an effort. There is no effort. There is no design. Just spend more time walking about with the knowledge that you are surrounded by all of this help. Hook-up is like basking in a vast ocean of pleasantness. It is a natural state of being. Do not make it special or mystical. For me it is like meditation! For other, it is similar to religion. It is peace. It is a perfect state of being."

Dr. Trager has said that we can only give to our clients to the degree of our own development, and not to one degree more.

It therefore becomes our responsibility to do what we can in order to be more present with our clients. As the practitioner develops and is able to open to still greater degrees of letting go of his or her own restrictions, the quality of feeling and influencing the tissue of the client through the practitioner's hands can become exquisite. This is an awareness that is not only of value to practitioners of The Trager

Approach, it is of importance to any of us in the field of bodywork.

This article written by Bill Scholl, Trager Instructor living in Austin, Texas. It was printed in *Body Therapy*, Sept/Oct 1993.



Biography:

- Trager Mentastics, movement as a way to agelessness, Milton Trager M.D., Station Hill Press, 1987
- Job's Body, Deane Juhan, Station Hill Press, 1987
- "Moving with Milton Trager: Interview with a bodywork pioneer" by Richard Leviton, East/West Journal, Jan. 1988.
- "Trager Psychophysical Integration" Philip Wit, Physical Therapy Today, Spring, 1989

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