



REVIEW: THE TRAGER APPROACH

Trager[®]: Mentastics[®]-presence in motion— part 4[☆]

Jack Blackburn*

5762, 27th Ave NE, Seattle WA, 98105, USA

Received 26 April 2004; received in revised form 20 May 2004; accepted 27 May 2004

KEYWORDS

Mentastics;
Hook-up;
Shimmer;
Effortless;
Playfulness

Abstract This paper is the fourth in a series on the Trager Approach from the perspective of an experienced practitioner. Trager emphasized to his students the physical effects of motion as apprehended by the client's mind. He guided his clients toward actively recreating off the table, as 'mental gymnastics (*Mentastics*), new movements they had passively experienced on the table, *Mentastics* are the playful side of *Trager*. Most *Mentastics* moves do not involve muscular contractions or forced stretching, and as such may compliment remedial exercises. *Mentastics* involve engaging and releasing muscles while consciously monitoring for minimal exertion, creating movements that do not involve activating the muscles that would normally produce a particular movement, using gravity to create movement, taking advantage of momentum to sustain movement, and using visualization to create a parallel reality in the mind. Trager was convinced that the regular practice of *Mentastics* would produce an attitude of "agelessness" in the client.

© 2004 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Historical Perspective on *Mentastics*

"I do them [*Mentastics*] because they pleasure me."
Milton Trager.

Mental Gymnastics

The term *Mentastics* is derived from the words "mental" and "gymnastics." Trager used this term

in two ways—gentle freeing motions that are apprehended by the mind as it feels into the moving body, and gymnastics that take the mind into the uncertain realms of paradox and riddle, inaccessible to rationality and intellect, control and effort; where it cannot think its way into solutions and where it has to surrender to the realm of somatic awareness (Fig. 1).¹

[☆]This article, as well as the other articles in this series, derives directly from the author's experience as a Trager practitioner, tutor and workshop leader. None of the text is drawn from proprietary sources. Unless otherwise noted, all materials, explanations, and descriptions are the author's alone.

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-206-527-0908; fax: +1-206-522-8290.

E-mail address: jackblac@oz.net (J. Blackburn).

¹In an interview with the author, Emily, Trager's wife, described how he was teaching a new form of *Mentastics* for seniors who, like himself at the time, were confined to wheelchairs, practicing the movements by somatically creating them in their minds. "They're sitting down and exercising their bodies. The thing they are most afraid of losing is their minds... so now we're teaching *Mentastics* as an exercising of the mind!" (Blackburn, unpublished manuscript 1994.)



Figure 1 Trager Leading Mentastics—reprinted with permission from author (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

The first article in this series detailed Trager's early devotion to the Physical Culture movement and its most influential leader, Bernarr McFadden. Trager followed the regimens of the movement, which stressed the development of physical and mental strength and agility. The practices for men and women included regular strengthening routines, acrobatic workouts, fresh preferably unprocessed food, vegetarian-based nutrition, doing away with tight or restrictive clothing like corsets, being outdoors with plenty of sun and fresh air, development of a strong and healthy vital energy, cultivating a strong will to overcome unhealthy thoughts and habits, and, perhaps most significant for Trager's early formation, the eschewing of allopathic practitioners, drugs and medical procedures. Later, when Trager finally met McFadden, he was surprised to find that McFadden had softened in his personal emphasis upon physical strength. McFadden told this erstwhile disciple that he'd learned to exercise smart rather than strong. Trager used this encounter as one of his reasons for de-emphasizing physical prowess with his clients and students and stressing the awareness of feeling (Liskin).²

²Perhaps McFadden's words and personal conditioning changed over the years because of the illnesses and divorce he experienced with his own family due to his closed-minded imposition of his regimen for health. (See: www.bernarrmcfadden.com.)

The focus in *Mentastics* upon letting go has given some Trager protégés a false impression that requisite strengthening is unnecessary.³ Trager kept himself in good physical condition for most of his life. He was very fond of acrobatic workouts and would display his body and physical prowess into his eighties. However, many of his students and clients did not have the same ardor for these attributes as they had for letting go. In the following exploration of *Mentastics*, the author has attempted to describe a physical and mental regimen that may be truly unique in terms of the inner awareness and the undoing of holding patterns it facilitates. It is certainly an antidote to those who, through aerobics and physical strengthening, overemphasize self-control over weakness and feelings. However, as may be recognized from the above discussion, the emphasis upon positive change through presence, and letting go, needs to be balanced with the whole picture; Trager's own life is one example of that kind of balance.⁴

Lighten up—another side of Milton Trager

Mentastics is the portion of the work where Trager's playful side emerges. By the time of Trager's first trainings for bodyworkers he was emphasizing two areas of the work: hook-up (*presence* or awareness of the present moment through the continuous monitoring bodily felt-sense),⁵ and *Mentastics*. In his mind the tablework was secondary. In his medical practice in Hawaii, which was made up mainly of tourists, he would see patients in the morning and a few clients each afternoon for Trager sessions. Typically he saw these afternoon clients once or perhaps a few times and would give them training in *Mentastics* so that they could recreate the effects of his sessions on their own. After seeing his clients he would commonly do acrobatics on the beach. Like the performing bodybuilders at Muscle Beach in Santa Monica,

(footnote continued)

It must also be noted that Trager lost his first wife to cancer, despite the fact that they lived in Hawaii and practiced the healthiest regimens possible. Because Trager was a physician he suffered greatly at his powerlessness to save his wife's life. (The author is indebted to relatives of Trager for this information).

³In the author's opinion Trager's de-emphasis on physical conditioning has encumbered the acceptance and application of *Mentastics*. While practitioners and clients have benefited greatly by practicing the principles that underlie *Mentastics*, those who have benefited most are those who have kept themselves strong, agile and active.

⁴Readers can learn more in Jack Liskin's biography of Trager (Liskin, 1996).

⁵For a fuller explanation of Hook-up, see second article in this series (Blackburn, 1994).

California, he grew out of the Physical Culture movement and loved to perform. He had had a short stint in vaudeville as a “hooper” or dancer. When demonstrating *Mentastics* to students he would display some dance steps, to show how light you could be on your feet. He would often repeat the words he used when competing with his brother on the beach. “Instead of who can jump the highest, let’s see who can land the softest.” (Liskin).

He readily displayed his muscular physique in his eighties. He had a good sense of humor and loved to clown. Part of his way of talking reflected that humor. Phrases like “I didn’t do nothing,” made light of his physician status and those who would take him too seriously. *Mentastics* for him had to be fun at the very least; funny would be even better. “Stop trying... it just gets in the way,” he would say to students; “Like this,” and then he’d do a little dance and spread his arms out as if he were embracing the world and just laugh. He loved to play trickster games with the minds of his students: “What could be lighter... even lighter than that?” “Use half that effort... now half of that... even less than that! Now I like it!” (Fig. 2).



Figure 2 Trager “Hoofing”—reprinted with permission from author (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

Trager’s Gifts—an incredible lightness of being

Trager wanted to pass on his inner sense of lightness and effervescence, a feeling of communion, of unified wholeness; he called “bathing in an ocean of pleasantness.” Trager created a process, a combination of the mind’s conceptions of beauty and light, with the body’s expression of effortless-ness and vibrancy, that he hoped would help anyone reach this state of awareness. He foresaw that the pleasurable effects of presence in motion would take his clients and students to greater awareness and consciousness.

All movements on the earth—waters, winds or living creatures—follow the undulating curvature of a wave. Sound and light exist as waves with specific frequency and length. Mentastic movements create wave-like shimmerings⁶ that resonate through the body and have a loosening and lightening effect on both the body and mind (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).⁷

Because he was able to discover his own sense of wholeness, he felt assured that the keys to the fullness and joy of life were implicit within each person and that each person could be helped to find those keys. In teaching *Mentastics* to clients and students he would emphasize that the person’s own internal experience was the medium and the message. And he was convinced, as one who has had his own personal epiphany, that epiphanies can be shared. Trager taught clients ways to recreate these feelings for themselves, whether they ever saw him again or not. Trager taught therapists healthy ways to empower their clients and relieve themselves of the burden of treatment and cure.

Example: Shifting Authority to the Client

Two elements of *Mentastics* can help to illustrate this shift in perspective. First, instead of showing a client the best way to *perform* a movement, the practitioner guides the client into the *feeling* of the movement. This guidance shifts the client’s focus from the external: performing for the practitioner, to the internal: creating pleasurable sensations for her/himself. Trager believed that unless the movements were pleasurable, the client would not do them. Second, the practitioner taught the client to refine the movements by *sensing into the feeling* rather than *suggesting* what the client should be feeling. The client is thus encouraged to be the

⁶In Trager bodywork the term *shimmer* refers to a feeling of lightness and effervescence, a kind of sparkly feeling in the tissue.

⁷Compare with the ecstatic words of Walt Whitman’s poem: *I Sing the Body Electric*.

author and re-creator of his/her own experience. The practitioner is thus relieved of the responsibility for the client's experience.

Principles of *Mentastics*—movement for the body

A different feeling experience

Clients often lack words that can adequately describe their inner sensations.⁸ A very important part of the practitioner's role can be teaching a client to feel inside and helping the client develop a feeling vocabulary. This is especially useful with *Mentastics* because the client is not aware of the many sensations that are occurring that can aid the movement rather than restrict it. For instance a client who feels pain while moving his/her arm who starts to become aware of the gentle pull of gravity lengthening his/her arm and the momentum that is keeping his/her arm in motion discovers that these other signals, though less intense, can actually become more compelling.

As the client learns to feel all the sensations rather than just react to the pain, the holding pattern that may be responsible for most of the pain can be released. The client who was so overwhelmed by the pain may find that he/she now feels lighter, freer and livelier. Many of the *Mentastics* introduce the client to the feeling that Trager liked to call "shimmering," a kind of effervescence throughout the whole body. In Buddhist meditation this is sometimes called the movement from gross to subtle sensations. When this happens for the client he/she may notice a powerful emotional shift towards wholeness and optimism.

Move within range of comfort

Another important aspect of *Mentastics* is teaching the client to limit his/her movement, using minimal effort and maximal perception. Clients will often attempt to expand their range of movement beyond the range of no resistance, *trying* to reach a certain goal rather than feeling for ease. The practitioner who is observant can spot the signs of restriction in the client's body language and confirm his/her hunch by palpating the tissue adjacent to the body part in motion. Then the practitioner can ask the client "What are you

feeling?" If this does not produce a refinement in the movement, the practitioner can use words that tie up the intellect like: "What would be half of that?" The words lack specificity and take the client into a feeling state that bypasses thought. The client then makes an adjustment that comes from within the confusion. These enigmatic words can help the client to stop *trying*. Then all the practitioner needs to do is anchor that experience of least efforting for the client by asking: "And what do you feel now?"

When you feel pain, discomfort or fatigue while doing *Mentastics*, then allow the movement to become lighter... decrease the range, slow down, stop and rest (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

Inward vs. outward reference—shifting from watching to feeling

Feel into your joints as you do fluttering, strumming movements and feel the shimmering that is left over... feel into each joint, feel the effervescence streaming to your fingertips... feel the skin, connective tissue and fluids shimmering over your bones. Feel the bones shimmering within the tissue. Feel the energy body come alive from within (Author, class, 2002).

The principles that underlie *Trager Mentastics* are dynamic and kinesthetic, based upon *inner anatomy*, somatic awareness, or felt- sense. Inner anatomy could be described as the client's awareness of the patterns of sensation produced by: proprioception, five sense data, expenditure of effort or work, signals of restriction and limitation—such as tightness and pain, emotional states, mental states, degree of association or disassociation, and the degree of presence or hook-up.⁹ As such *Mentastics* could be described as a dynamic yoga that allows the subject to monitor and interact with all the body's sensorial reflections in each moment. One of the difficulties in teaching *Mentastics* to groups is convincing the students to remain somatically aware. Most are self-conscious and as a result of compare themselves to others. The goal is to help them to shift their point of reference from external comparison to internal somatic awareness.¹⁰

⁸According to Gendlin this vagueness can be very helpful to the emergence of somatic awareness or what he calls *felt-sense* (Gendlin, 1996).

⁹See second article in this series—Blackburn 2004a JBMT 8(2):114-121.

¹⁰See Buber on the of shifting from external to internal focus; I-it to I-thou (Buber, 1986).

Moving with presence

The unique feature about *Mentastics*, as compared to other movement systems such as Feldenkrais,¹¹ is the emphasis upon *presence* or *hook-up*. As elaborated in the second article of this series (Blackburn, 2004a), Trager found very ingenious, body-centered ways to teach continual presence.¹² By far, the most difficult time to remain present is when the body is moving, when most of our sensory awareness becomes outwardly referenced. Trager's genius, whether native or trained, was to discover ways to keep the mind actively involved in *maintaining* presence during movement.

Practitioner self-awareness

When teaching *Mentastics* to a client the practitioner is aware of the feeling of weight, free movement, shimmering, rebound and inner felt-shifts in his/her *own* body. This self-awareness allows the practitioner to show movements and give verbal accompaniments that bring out similar awareness's in the client. For instance, the practitioner is aware of a feeling of lightness or ease when demonstrating a repetitive movement. This feeling is transmitted to the client by visual and tactile cues and by open-ended questions that accompany the movements like: "How free can it be?" or "what could be lighter than that?" These open-ended questions bypass the intellect and initiate a somatic inquiry that leads directly to presence. The practitioner may speak from her/his own felt-sense and encourage the client to do the same. Through this shared process there is a *merging of presence* that is probably unique for

¹¹Feldenkrais, an engineer, used his experience with martial arts, in combination with feedback and cybernetics, to train his body and refine his movements to achieve a certain target or goal—free and efficient movement. Until the advent of cybernetics humans didn't really have a way to describe the complex feedback interactions of the mind and body in motion. By studying the process he could efficiently interact with his body. Feldenkrais was training himself to perfect the warrior within vis-à-vis the martial arts. See Hanna's discussion of Feldenkrais. (Hanna, 1993) Trager did a similar thing in his beginnings in the Physical Culture movement. Instead of drawing upon cybernetics, Trager used a feedback system that, like the process of iteration in applied mathematics, deals with approximations. By asking questions like, "What could be easier?" "What could be freer?" "What could be lighter?" Trager is challenging himself and his clients to go deeper towards a goal that has no absolute end point—presence.

¹²Most meditators find presence, like grace, an elusive state of awareness. It seems to occur in the small spaces of somatic awareness that show up when the conscious mind stops thinking. When the thinking mind realizes that it is experiencing something different, almost in self-defense it starts to reassert itself.

both persons. For example, the author still recollects the felt-sense of presence his first *Trager* session in 1985. As Trager emphasized over and over, that felt-sense has remained as a body memory. Each session given and each session received has built upon that memory of presence.

Feeling the rebound and elasticity

Many of the moves in *Mentastics* are experienced through the natural elasticity of our connective tissue and joints—e.g. in free-fall, pushing off, tossing and catching. This elasticity acts like a shock absorber in compression and an elastic band in distraction. This elasticity is built into joints, connective tissue, fascia, and in the tensegrity of the body's structural relationships.

The subject is encouraged to become aware of the sensations of letting go, stretch, spring and bounce. The effects of these sensations are a lot like playing on a "rebounder" or trampoline. The subject becomes more energized and flexible. Not surprisingly these motions very possibly can have a helpful effect upon joint strain, conditions of overuse, and diseases like arthritis (Savage, 1990). They can be especially helpful for manual therapists who experience a lot of joint strain and compression due to their use of force to mechanically overpower clients' tissue tonus.

The importance of recall

Mentastics are an attempt to enhance the client's own movement and awareness and to recreate the effects of the tablework. It was Trager's intent to give the client some techniques that he/she could practice in order to reinforce the changes that had occurred in the session. By *recalling* the feeling that he/she had, the client could then start from that felt-sense¹³ when practicing the movements. Trager was a master at the tablework and in his hopeful and positive encouragement of the client's own capabilities. But he would have considered himself a failure if he were not able to pass on his own key for self-renewal: *Mentastics*. He would often get the client up during the tablework and teach *Mentastics* to confirm that he/she could recreate the effects. Clients recall sessions in which he spent only a short time working on their body, and spent most of the session teaching them *Mentastics*.

¹³For purposes of clarity Gendlin's terms *felt-sense* and *felt-shift*, Hanna's *somatic awareness* and Trager's *feeling* are used interchangeably in this article (Gendlin, 1996, Hanna, 1993).

Table 1 The trager approach—tying together components and principles.

Principles	Three main components		
	Hook-up ^a	Tablework ^b	Mentastics
Felt-sense	Practitioner monitoring own body sensations to remain present.	Bringing client into somatic awareness creates a merging of presence with the practitioner.	Client encouraged to feel into the movements in order to adjust the effects, creates somatic awareness.
Less is more	Practitioner questions in order to come into state of deep presence: “How soft can this be? What can be freer than this?”	Applying the negative iteration to touch: “When you meet resistance do less;” thus inviting client into feeling of nothingness and ease.	Refining client’s movements towards lightness and playfulness by asking: “What could be easier than that... and even easier than that?”
Pausing	Practitioner pauses to come back into hook-up, and tastes his/her own sense of spaciousness and emptiness and feeling into being or “not-doing”.	Breaking physical contact, stepping back from the table in order to create space for client to integrate his/her own somatic experience.	Pausing often and closing eyes in order to feel after-effects of “shimmering” and peacefulness in the body. Trager’s “bathing in an ocean of pleasantness”.
Movement	Practitioner is maintaining hook-up by feeling the effects of movement in his/her body during <i>Mentastics</i> and tablework.	The movement that is imparted to the client’s body is entrained with the movement that comes from the practitioner’s body.	<i>Mentastics</i> captures the benefits of gravity, pendular, momentum, centrifugal and centripetal force and positional release. Imparts feeling of playfulness and grace to the client.
Rhythm	Practitioner becomes rhythmically entrained with the client, which opens the doorway to merged presence.	Client feels his/her bodily rhythms mirrored as the practitioner matches those rhythms with his/her hands.	Client is taught that by matching his/her own body rhythms, movements become resilient and effortless.
Recall	Practitioner can bring him/herself back into hook-up by closing eyes, weighing hands, and recalling what hook-up feels like.	Suggesting to client that he/she can bring this feeling and it’s effects back by just asking inside: “What was that feeling I experienced...?”	Using memory to recall the feeling of previous <i>Mentastics</i> sessions, to recreate the experience of the tablework and continue the therapeutic effects of the movements.
Weighing	Trager’s profound discovery that feeling weight of one’s own hands is a simple and sure way to come into hook-up.	In tablework the practitioner is either feeling weight or giving weight. The client’s body is cradled and moved or stretched, compressed and moved.	The effectiveness of <i>Mentastics</i> relies upon developing the client’s ability to be present to weight and the playful effects of weight in motion.
Curiosity	Curiosity is the most singular factor that allows the mind to stay in presence. Questions like: “How could it be? What wants to happen next?”	Changing the mind of the client. By his/her curiosity both verbally and with touch, the practitioner invites the client into a different somatic relationship.	The client is encouraged to maintain a healthy curiosity about his/ her body; how it moves, it’s forms of communication, and its potential for change.
Mind	Hook-up allows the practitioner to connect with universal Mind. Trager believed that this connection could be transferred to the client.	Trager believed that all bodily restrictions exist in the mind. Therefore the focus of the tablework is to change the mind of the client.	<i>Mentastics</i> are an attempt to enlist the mind to fully apprehend the messages of the body. By doing so the mind can grow in conscious awareness and release its hold on the body.

^aSee second article in this series—Blackburn 2004a JBMT 8(2):114–121.^bSee third article in this series Trager: At the Table, Blackburn 2004b JBMT 8(3):178–188.

An approach of mind

In Trager's view *Mentastics* were entirely interwoven with the tablework and hook-up (see accompanying Table 1). All are directed at *changing the mind* of the client. Hook-up or presence underlies everything in a session from the intake and assessment to the tablework, from the practitioner's self-care to the gentleness of the touch, from the passive movement of the client on the table to the teaching of movements to the client off of the table. While there are unique principles and applications to *Mentastics*, they must be seen as part of a whole with the other aspects of the Trager Approach.

Mentastics do not consist of a technique, or a routine. It is an approach of mind and motion perfectly synchronized. *Mentastics* are never about how many, how fast, how far or how physically powerful the movements are. *Mentastics* are done with a feeling of how light, how beautiful, how free, how complete the movements can be. (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

Principles of *Mentastics* two—Gymnastics for the mind

Measuring effort—paying attention

How much mechanical effort does it take to move a body part through a certain path of motion? To what degree is that effort influenced by mental attitude? And what is the effort expended in overcoming internal resistance? Example: When you laterally abduct your arm into a horizontal position and continue to vertical, and measure the effort it takes to accomplish that action, you may feel changes in effort along the path. As we go through different parts of that range, various muscles and connective tissue are engaged and released. Muscles already engaged in structural guarding (splinting) may not be available to do their share without the expenditure of extra effort and perhaps pain. So part of the effort is in overcoming pain and resistance.

Measuring effort—work vs. play

Human beings have various ways of overcoming their blocks or resistance to movement. Play vs. work: When something feels playful, our attitude changes, resistance seems to disappear or become less... could the reverse be said for feelings of competition? For instance dancing or playing a sport for fun involves mental participation that is *joyous* and thus feels much less effortful, much less

tiring. Song, music, rhythmic entrainment, momentum, bounce, and flow are all examples of stimuli that change our subjective experience of effort. Another example that changes our internal experience of effort is our affection for our fellow participants.

Playing with effort—metaphor and breath

Another principle in *Mentastics* is creating metaphorical mental scenarios that enlist the mind in support of the movement. These are effective because, just like the previous section of play vs. work, they show just how powerful the mind is in creating a sense of effort or ease. When we replace our usual thoughts about creating movement with different body parts, we shunt past the ingrained mental habits that may retard physical movement. When someone says to us "Move as if you are as light as a feather," that message stirs up feelings of lightness and ease in us. Many of the *Mentastics* movements are coordinated with the breath so that the client feels the in-breath metaphorically as accompanying the efforting part of the movement and the out-breath as expressing the letting go. For instance in raising the arm up to horizontal if one imagines that there are helium filled balloons attached to the arm—or that the inhaled breath inflates the arm and thus lightens it, the subjective experience feels a lot less effortful.¹⁴

Trying is out!

Trager would tell his students to "Stop trying;" this can be described as the cessation of mental and physical efforting. *Trying* cannot assist *Mentastics* movements, where the object is to let go. These words produce a conundrum for the conditioned mind. We are accustomed to equate "trying" with worth. Most systems of movement, like athletics and professional dance, and even some systems of stretching and relaxation, emphasize efforting to achieve the desired results.

In exercise one pursues increased tone, strength endurance or speed. This takes effort. The goal of *Mentastics* is hook-up. Personal feelings of lightness or softness are developed within oneself. This is an effortless process (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

Most practitioners in manual therapy have observed the conflicting results produced when the client is *trying* to relax a specific body part. When the client or practitioner is trying to produce

¹⁴Compare with Sweigard's *ideokinetic facilitation* (Sweigard, 1974).

a certain result with *Mentastics*, he/she is absorbed the control, rather than letting go. In his classes Trager would encourage his students to stop trying to figure out what he was doing and just *feel* his state of relaxation and effortlessness.

Applications of *Mentastics*—a series of exercises

Playing with balance

A good beginning *Mentastic* is finding the vertical center line of balance in any direction, becoming aware of that centerline, noticing how the awareness of that center line affects our movement, learning to make adjustments to our posture in order to keep that feeling of the center line alive as we make different movements, noticing the fine adjustments our body is making in order to maintain a sense of balance.

The same thing applies to awareness of the horizon. The eyes and inner ear and our muscle memories give us a sense of where the horizon is located and help us to maintain our sense of balance in relation to both vertical and horizontal directions. All of our movements center around these axes, but through trauma, emotional upsets, and other inhibitions, we may lose our sense of playfulness and expressiveness.

***Mentastic* Example 1 (20 min) Playing with Balance**

Stand erect, feet shoulder width apart, knees soft. Close eyes and start to shift your weight from side to side. Feel the muscles of the legs engage and release as you shift back and forth. Notice that there is a place where the amount of muscle engagement in each leg is the same. Raise your forearms and feel the weight of your hands. Notice the tingly sensations of gravity as your hands pass through the lines of force of gravity. Now slow down and discover the thin vertical line of balance between right and left. When you feel that line your inner awareness will light up—like the power signal on a radio tuner. Now rock forward and backward on your feet. Notice how your toes dig in as you rock forward and how they lift off as you lean back. Then slow down and discover the thin vertical line of balance between back and front... notice the feeling as you line up on the vertical. Check both directions: back-to-front and side-to-side until you feel perfect verticality. Store away that feeling. Take a deep breath and as you exhale softly open your eyes. As you look with your eyes remain aware

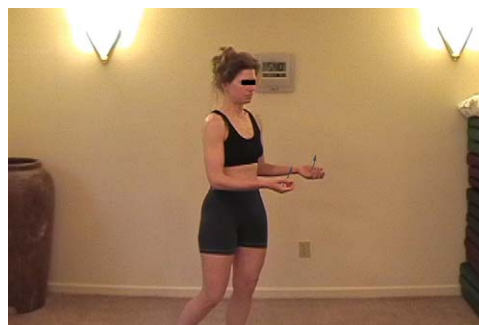


Figure 3 Playing with balance. Author photo.

of your inner somatic awareness. Now go for a walk and notice how your body remembers that feeling of vertical alignment. Notice what you feel in your extremities and how they move as you walk. Notice the relationship between your external senses and internal somatic experience (Fig. 3).

Awareness of gravity

Playing with our gravitational senses, noticing how weight ($\text{weight} = \text{mass} \times \text{gravity}$) and movement show up as forms of proprioception. Letting go into gravity, feeling the body in free fall—the more restriction, the less ability to release a particular body part into free fall. Learning how to take advantage of the downward pull of gravity to create movement, through many kinesthetic fine adjustments, to find movements that require the least amount of effort. And feeling and interacting with the gentle effects of releasing into gravity—stretch, rebound, toning, and fluid dynamics in the joints, muscles, connective tissue and vascular systems. The client determines the amplitude or height of the free fall subjectively. For instance—an elderly person with arthritis would probably be advised to start with minimal movements and gentle gravitational releases—striving for a range that *feels* soft and effortless.

***Mentastic* Example 2 (10 min) weighing hands—dropping the arm into gravity**

See Weighing Hands exercise from article 2 in this series (JBMT 8(2):114–121)—feeling the sensations of weight and movement through the gravitational proprioceptors. Now raise one of your forearms... weigh and gently drop your forearm and hand.¹⁵

¹⁵Note: from Calais-Germain (1993) *Anatomy of Movement* "All movements of the body result from contraction of muscles." Question: When I drop my arm from horizontal to vertical what am I experiencing... the passive results of previous muscle engagement?



Figure 4 Dropping into gravity. Author photo.

Notice what happens at the bottom of the drop... you should feel a little elastic rebound in each of your joints from your fingers to your shoulder. If you feel any resistance to letting the forearm go or any pain then don't raise your forearm as high. Pause before you do the same thing with the other arm and notice the difference between arms. You may feel a sense of length, tingling and warmth in the arm you dropped (Fig. 4).

Playing with pendulum effects

When a body part is put into a pendulum-like action, we start to notice small details like how much of a pulse does it take to keep the body part in motion or how much of a pulse does it take to increase the momentum, and at what point in the path do we initiate the pulses so that the rest of the path is experienced as passive playful motion? It is relatively easy to create a pendular effect when the joints and motions permit.

In gymnastics on the free bar the whole body can become a pendulum. If one pays close attention to the point-of-reversal there is one moment when the motion stops, a still point that is also experienced as weightless because the upward momentum is exactly matched by the downward pull of gravity. When the subject focuses on that still point he/she can become aware of the feeling of weightlessness. This is also the weightless place where trapeze artists can most easily catch another performer or swinging bar.¹⁶

Just as the rope is lengthened by the weight and momentum of the artist, so the connective tissue and joints of the client's body parts are lengthened by the weight and momentum of the arm or leg swing. The subject can feel this lengthening and the elasticity of the stretch. The interesting thing about pendular effects is that, while changing the height of the swing can alter the momentum, the

¹⁶The physics of pendular motion and the permutations of that movement have their greatest expression in trapeze artists.

period or frequency of cycles remains the same, unless the length of the arm is changed.

Mentastic Example 3 (5 min) playing with pendular movement

Following on from Exercise 2, lean towards the side when you let the arm drop. What you will notice is that the arm keeps moving in a pendular movement for a time until it stops. This pendular movement is determined by the length and mass of your arm, and any dampening imposed by the tonus of your tissue and unconscious holding patterns. Notice how long the arm keeps moving until the movement is fully dampened by inertia. No matter how high you raise your arm the period of the pendulum or the frequency of the movement remains the same. Notice that once the arm has dropped the pendular movement takes no effort, no muscle engagement. As you feel into the movement notice the changes that are occurring in your willingness to let go into the movement. After you have performed this movement a few times with both arms pause to notice the effects (Fig. 5).

Playing with momentum

Many *Mentastics* movements are performed in a way so as to take advantage of pendular momentum—feeling into a body part in motion and timing change-of-direction impulses so as to sustain the momentum. When subjects become aware of how easy it is to take advantage of momentum they experience the same feeling of effortlessness of an ice skater that is skating on an almost frictionless surface. The only things that inhibit the movement are the contraction of the joints being rotated and any resistance patterns held by the unconscious mind of the client.

Even if the range of free movement is small the attention of the client to this small range of freedom is exponential in its effects. Subjects who are used to pain or hypertonic inhibition rarely know ahead of time how effortless it is to move.



Figure 5 Pendular movement. Author photo.

Once they feel this ease they let go of some of the unconscious guarding. This letting go can be progressive—building up a repertoire of unchallenged movement.

Over time the subject self-learns by paying close attention to feedback signals of *free movement* that it is okay to trust the signals that are coming from the body. The effects of momentum ($\text{Momentum} = \text{mass} \times \text{velocity}$) are surprising. For instance when large persons bring body parts into motion, their larger mass generates greater momentum. Thus they could have an easier time sustaining the motion. Once the large person feels this ease of motion, he/she may find it easy to let go of other movement inhibitors.

Mentastic Example 4 (10 min) playing with momentum

Following from Exercise 3, as you let your arm drop rotate your torso so that you follow the upward and downward movement of your arm. Use just enough muscular control so that your arm tracks a vertical pendular arc. Notice that the rotational momentum of your torso is enough to create a pulse that keeps the arm moving freely with almost no effort from the arm, upper back or shoulders. Start to follow the movement with your eyes... you will notice that at the exact point where the movement changes direction the arm is perfectly still. The upward momentum has matched the downward pull of gravity. If you feel into this point you will feel sensations of weightlessness. As you become aware of this feeling, notice how it affects your whole inner environment... it is much like the stillpoint at the center of the movement that Elliot describes (see Article 2 in this series—JBMT 8(2):114–121). Notice how little effort it takes to keep your arm in motion. Pause and feel the effects of this motion in your arm, shoulder and upper back (Fig. 6).

Playing with rotation

When the torso is rotated and the arms are outstretched, the subject can experience the effects of centripetal, centrifugal and gravitational forces. Like a horizontal pendulum there is a periodicity to this movement based on the degree of torsion allowable by the body parts, the momentum generated, and the timing of the reversal. Unlike the vertical pendulum, the client decides at what point in the rotational swing to alter direction and what speed to rotate. One of the best places to notice the effects is in a child's musical top. Unlike the pendulum in which the



Figure 6 Playing with momentum. Author photo.

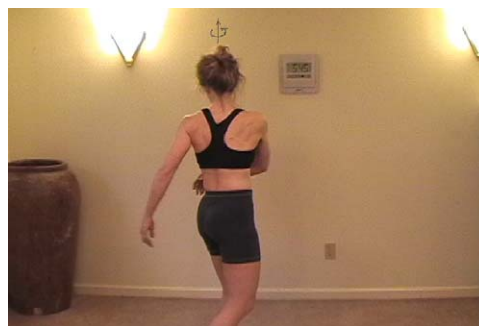


Figure 7 Playing with rotation. Author photo.

frequency remains constant, as the top is accelerated, the rotational momentum, centripetal and centrifugal forces increase as do the pitch of the musical notes.

If the torso is rotated with the arms outstretched, the connective tissue and joints experience lengthening due to centrifugal force, while the torso experiences the rotational momentum of the outstretched arms resulting in a torquing along the vertical axis of the spine. Changing the elevation of the arms moves the resulting torque up and down the vertebrae from lower lumbar to mid-thoracic (Fig. 7).

The nuts and bolts—*Mentastics* in practice

Beginning of session—*Mentastics* as assessment

The practitioner may choose to do some evaluative movements with the client in the beginning of the session. Walking is a good first movement because we all walk in habitual ways. Practitioners may observe movement criteria like: symmetry and alignment, the position of the head and neck, the direction of the eyes, pelvic movement, the amount of pendular movement of the arms and shoulders, turn-out or turn-in of the legs and feet, and types of strides. While moving the client is encouraged to feel and describe his/her sensations.

This is important for three reasons: this is the first time in the session that the client becomes aware of the sensory information accompanying movements; the client is being introduced to hook-up or *mindfulness* (see second article in this series); it also establishes a basis for later comparison. During the rest of the session, the practitioner can remind the client to pay attention to internal changes. If the client is clearly enjoying the self-initiated movements, the practitioner may decide to use *Mentastics* for the whole session.

Tells: Among confidence men and card players, *tells* are unconscious non-verbal patterned reactions that give the observer clues to something the conscious mind does not want to reveal. Verbal *tells* in psychology are called Freudian slips. Therapists like Arnold Mindell and Ron Kurtz have developed systems: *Dream Body Work* and *Hakomi* respectively, that use a close observation of *tells* in order to work with these unconscious revelations. (Mindell, 1985; Kurtz, 1990) Trager himself was quite adept at picking up non-verbal cues from a person's movements and then suggesting *Mentastics* to open out new possibilities of mobility and expressiveness. In classes he would often have everyone walk for him and then he would give feedback and suggestions based on the patterns he saw.

He now told the students to simply walk in a continuous circle as he stood in the center feeling [in himself] the quality of their movements, nodding with approval at some, speaking softly to others: 'not so strong... let it go... more indifferent (Liskin).

Often it is possible to figure out a complimentary movement for a client by just watching his/her posturing. It's as if the body *wants* to reveal it's

owner's secrets to the practitioner. For instance the client may be holding a body part where there is pain, or rocking a part of the body while sitting or standing in a way that mechanically shortens contracted muscles or painful joints.

During tablework: Clients and outside observers of *Trager* often assume that the tablework, when the practitioner has his/her hands on the client, is the most significant part of the session. What is actually happening during the tablework portion is that the practitioner is giving the client a set of experiences that maintain the continuity of active and passive movement and presence from beginning to end of the session. Trager would often keep getting the client off the table so that he/she could translate the new feelings into movement. Also practitioners will often bring the client's attention to the changes in the different body parts, to make a comparison with what he/she felt in the assessment movements.

End of session: At the end of the session the practitioner has another chance to offer *Mentastics* to the client and to find some movements for the client to practice between sessions. Just like other parts of the session, these movements are generated out of a give-and-take interaction between both persons. The practitioner checks in with the client and into his/her own body to find out how the movements feel. Since the main intent of the work is to increase the client's state of awareness, freedom of movement and *jus de vie*, these movements must be enjoyable for the client so that he/she will consciously choose to practice them and continue to reap the benefits.

Between sessions: In general, clients who are attracted to *Trager* tablework are also attracted to *Mentastics*. Doing a few of these uncomplicated movements per day seems to continue the release of restrictions and generate feelings of effortlessness. There is a paradoxical relationship between *efforting* and *effectiveness*—the less the client "tries," the more effective the movements. This is entirely consistent with the practitioner's work at the table. And thus the client's relationship with his/her body can change dramatically. The person who has severe movement restrictions can find a range and a frequency where the movements feel free and easy. Just like the baby that is learning to trust the feeling of free fall when tossed and caught by his/her parents (see Article 3 of this series JBMT 8(3):178-188),¹⁷ the client is learning how to trust letting go within his/her own comfort zone.

¹⁷Blackburn. Trager: At the Table, Trager Series Part 3 JBMT 8(3):178-188 (Blackburn 2004b).

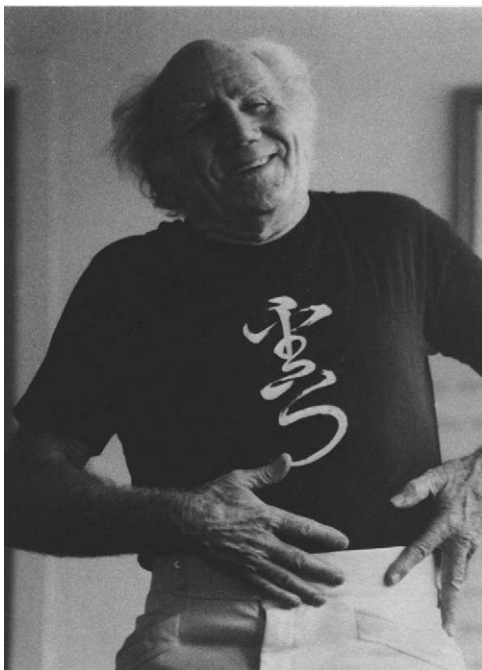


Figure 8 Trager Laughing—reprinted with permission from author (Trager and Guadagno, 1987).

In Summary: Milton Trager's *Mentastics*

Implications of Mentastics for the field of manual therapy: Perhaps the most significant contribution of *Mentastics* to bodywork and movement therapies is the emphasis upon listening to and not leading the client's somatic experience. The practitioner models the movements, using words and touch to take the client into a feeling state. The goals of the movements are not fixed because the client's somatic awareness is not fixed. As stated in the earlier articles in this series, Trager had confidence in the power of hook-up or presence to guide the client and the practitioner. The use of *Mentastics* as well as the tablework is directed at changing the mind of the client; what Hanna calls a growth in somatic awareness or consciousness (Hanna, 1995).

The movement principles Trager taught came out of a sense of joy and playfulness (Fig. 8). Letting go for Trager was about experiencing full body awareness and lightness of being. Letting go for Trager was not about generating pain relief or the disappearance of symptoms. It was about releasing control-filled inhibitions to movement and expression. Once control is released, whether mental or physical, there is more room for breath, more room for expansiveness, more room for self-awareness. The movements of *Mentastics* open the client up to new kinds of sensations, which are very pleasurable. These effervescent sensations once discovered, can be re-experienced over and over by the

client. The client learns how to recreate the feelings he/she has tasted. And there is strong and effective congruence between the principles of the tablework, the *Mentastics* movements, and the levels of awareness that develop through presence. (See Table 1)

Remedial play: Mentastics take advantage of all the above features so that they are performed for pleasure rather than physical strengthening and endurance. They are just the opposite of calisthenics. Imagine a client going to a physical therapist and receiving remedial movements that are so joyous that the client wants to do them more and more. Imagine the difference if manual therapists, such as PTs and OTs, were to include *Mentastics* in the homework they give their clients. How many more clients would do the movements and benefit from the changes?

Appreciation of the body: The body is the learning device through which the benefits of *Mentastics* are communicated. All signals from the body only occur in the present moment. One can only perceive shifts in awareness *through* the body.¹⁸ Without the somatic awareness transmitted through bodily signals, the mind can only conjecture what might be the direction of healing. When the mind senses a felt-shift or a release of holding, the subject becomes more comfortable and at ease.

Over the centuries there has been an over-emphasis put upon, mental knowledge. We have created numerous abstractions as ways to organize thought, bodily systems, and psychological understandings. Like Descartes, we have favored thought over feeling. But the growth of body therapies is clearly dispelling many of our mental conjectures. One of the beauties of *Mentastics* is that it is a totally body—referenced system of knowing. Trager was a kinesthetic learner and teacher. He would feel the tissue, “put on the patterns” of his subjects and express himself with broad gesticulations and dancer's movements until he felt understood. Much of the paradox and riddles of his words were trickster's ways to tie the thinking mind in knots until the client and students could feel into what the body was communicating.

Apprehension of felt experiences: Perhaps the greatest contribution that Trager made to the fields of manual therapy comes from his new and different apprehension of feeling states. He was not just interested in reducing physical limitations and pain. He was interested in finding ways to communicate what he had discovered in himself: That the body is capable of expressing sensations of pleasure that are independent of endorphins, that

¹⁸See Gendlin's discussion of *body-sense*. “The body-sense is not subjective, not just internal, not private; it is the implicit situation.” (Gendlin, 1991).

arise directly from feeling into patterns of movement that are intrinsic to the design of the body. These newfound sensations can lead directly into expanded states of consciousness.

In his simple and straightforward way, Trager has replicated aspects of the comic teachings of Zen Buddhism. Staying present does not require all the rigor and pain of sitting on the meditation cushion. It merely requires the apprehension of simple but constant phenomena, like feeling weight or measuring effort. These are some ways that the mind learns to focus on the signals of proprioception, which continually occur in our internal environment. The Zen comic teachers are often portrayed sweeping floors or wandering through the countryside. And almost always they are smiling or laughing uproariously at our seriousness. Perhaps this is Trager's final contribution to our efforts, laughter.

Trager and *Mentastics* are registered trademarks of Trager International.

References

- Blackburn, J., 2004a. Trager[®]—2: Hooking up: the power of presence in bodywork. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies* 8 (2), 114–121.
- Blackburn, J., 2004b. Trager—3. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies* 8 (3), 178–188.
- Buber, M., 1986. *I and Thou* 2nd Edition. Macmillan Publishing, New York.
- Calais-Germain, B., 1993. *Anatomy of Movement*. Eastland Press Inc, Seattle.
- Gendlin, E., 1996. *Focusing Oriented Psychotherapy*. Guilford Press, New York.
- Gendlin, E., 1991. Thinking beyond patterns: body, language, and situations. In: denOuden, B., Moen, M. (Eds.), *The Presence of Feeling in Thought*. Peter Lange, New York.
- Hanna, T., 1993. *The Body of Life*. Healing Arts Press, Rochester, VT.
- Hanna, T., 1995. What is Somatics? In: Johnson, D. (Ed.), *Bone Breath and Gesture*. North Atlantic Books, Berkeley CA.
- Kurtz, R., 1990. *Body-Centered Psychotherapy: the Hakomi Method*. Life Rhythm, Mendocino.
- Liskin, J., 1996. *Moving Medicine: the life and work of Milton Trager*. Stanton Hill Press, Barrytown, New York.
- Mindell, A., 1985. *Working with the Dreambody*. Routledge & Kegan, New York.
- Savage, F., 1990. *Osteoarthritis: a step by step success story to show others they can help themselves*. Stanton Hill Press, Barrytown, New York.
- Sweigard, L., 1974. *Human Movement Potential: Its ideokinetic facilitation*. Dodd, Mead, New York.
- Trager, M., Guadagno, C., 1987. *Trager Mentastics: movement as a way to agelessness*. Stanton Hill Press, New York.

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

