

# The Trager® Approach

## Principles for an Ageless Practice

I am standing in front of 100 massage therapists at the AMTA National Convention in Richmond, VA. I have less than 8 hours to introduce them to the breadth and depth of **Trager** and the practice of movement as a way to agelessness.

Although **Trager** is not a form of massage, but rather an approach to Movement Education and Mind/Body Integration, I have been invited to present it here because the work is often an easy fit in a massage therapy context. It allows massage therapists to work successfully with deeply held and often chronic problems without any strain on their own bodies. By approaching their sessions with **Trager** principles and protocols, they can bring more subtlety and potency to their work, and deepen their impact on deeply entrenched patterns.

Massage Therapists also find that the **Trager** Approach serves as a most effective and pleasurable background within which to practice specific treatment techniques. When everything they do becomes infused with and supported by **Trager's** simple, profound principles, they find themselves looking forward to difficult sessions they used to anticipate with dread.

And right now, in front of me are a group of massage therapists who love their work and would like to be doing it 20 years from now, pain free. I have been teaching all kinds of people around the world for many years, and have seen how effectively and efficiently **Trager** work supports that goal. I've seen how paying attention to their own body awareness and comfort as they work actually increases the effectiveness of their relationship with clients.

As I look around at this gathering, I see some folks who are already quite at home in their bodies, but many others are beginning to show signs of mis-use or overwork...tired eyes, tight shoulders, aching wrists and thumbs, braced and compressed lower backs. And a couple of them have come up to me before the class to tell me they are having difficulty with boundaries. Their deep empathy for their clients' pain is leading them to take on the symptoms of their clients.

I want to show this group they don't need to hammer at the tension they find in their clients--that it may even perpetuate the resistant patterns in the long run. I want to help them feel how powerfully penetrating the experience of pleasure can be, how long-lasting the impact when the "mind" of the tissue is reached. I want to tell them how important it is to speak to the body in "language" the body uses to talk to itself, and even more, in a "tone of voice" that will be welcomed by the bodymind. Becoming more eloquent in the body's sensory/motor/neurochemical feeling language is a focus of our day...accessing and practicing tools of feeling rather than tools of doing is at the heart of this work.

And I want to teach all of this through their own experience (rather than by talking at them). It is one of the primary principles of **Trager** to teach new ways of being through repeated felt experience. They must have ready access to the experiences of lightness, freedom, ease, openness, pleasure, and peace in order to share them with clients. As Milton Trager so often reminded us, "You can only give what you have honestly developed in yourself."

But I'm a bit nervous about beginning this class...such a large group, some of whom may have mis-conceptions about **Trager** work from something they heard, or read, or something they received in a session, and not much time to do justice to the open-ended principles of Milton's life work.

### **Preparing**

I start as I would if I were about to give a session, by entering, for myself, a **bodymind state** that Milton Trager dubbed "**Hook-up**". It is a state that arrives without effort, in fact by letting go of effort. It is a state that connects me deeply to the wisdom of the life-giving, life-regulating force that is all in us and all around us. It is a state in which my bodymind is relaxed, easy, and alive with feeling, where the analytical and judgmental thinking is quieted, where my attention is respectful, receptive and ready to investigate feeling information. It is a state in which I am pleasurable attentive to the complex, interplay of emotional and sensory signals that my body-mind uses to talk to itself. It is a state that opens me in preparation for guiding this group in front of me.

I sink into this state by means of a some very simple, soft, fluid movement and mind explorations that Milton called **Mentastics®** (a coined expression combining "mental" and "gymnastics") An observer might think I am doing some sort of free-form, dance-like Tai Chi. But essentially, I'm addressing questions inwardly to my bodymind as I move in natural ways that help to soften my muscle use, free up my structure, calm and focus my nervous system, and increase my receptivity in both mind and body. I begin to converse with my bodymind by simply feeling where it is connected and where it is free, as well as where it is neither of those. I say a soft hello to all my body parts with movement. And through all my various proprioceptive channels, I listen to what my body parts and tissues have to say in return, adjusting the speed, direction and quality of movement to soothe my ever-changing sensory landscape. Just listening to my body's voice (expressed as sensation) calms me down.

As my inner state becomes more unified, I realize that some basic information about the development of the work is needed to set the stage for this day of body-based learning. So this is where I begin.

### **Milton Trager, MD**

Early in his life, Milton Trager was informed that there was a unique power of healing in his hands. He didn't know where it came from, and only reluctantly gave up his other interests to explore it. But eventually he had the curiosity and courage to develop it. His study included general medicine, physical therapy, psychiatry and meditation. And over a lifetime of practice he evolved his work into an extraordinarily potent approach to mind/body integration.

When he retired from private practice in 1975, Milton and his work were "discovered" by the then emerging human potential movement. Since then, his approach has influenced countless other explorers, pioneers and practitioners in the fields of mind/body medicine, bodywork, and somatic movement education. People interested in how the mind could influence the body and visa versa flocked to Milton's classes to learn to have the immediate, dramatic, and long lasting effects he had. What he taught was a system of gentle, playful, hypnotic, naturally graceful movements that release deep seated holding patterns in the bodyminds of our clients. And more importantly, he taught a **manner of working**, a set of **principles**, and especially a **manner of being** that give the contact of a practitioner's hands a powerful healing impact.

It is the principles and manner of working that I focus on for these massage therapists. And I start with weight.

### **Principle: Feeling the Weight**

We live in an environment where everything is acted on by gravity. Our whole body and each of its parts has weight. Our bodies have learned from birth how to function in gravity. And some of what we have learned involves much more effort than it needs. Many of our patterns of moving about in life are not functionally efficient. Instead they are laced with emotionally charged tensions that make the movement less fluid and more stressful, and may eventually lead to a host of painful pathologies.

As I lead this group into walking around the room, I ask them to refine their awareness of how their weight moves (the whole body and its separate parts). We spend some time slowly shifting our weight from foot to foot, comparing notes on how and where the sense of support is experienced, and where it's not. We sense how much of the leg weight is able to dangle free from the pelvis. And how much freer the shoulders feel after swinging and releasing the weight of the arms.

Even as we listen inwardly to the sensations of weight, I ask the students to pay attention to the need for subtle changes in the movement-- smaller, bigger, looser, freer, quieter-- to discover how much more they can let go of.

Then with our own sense of weight still ringing in our awareness, we go to the bodywork tables to explore what happens for a partner when they are "weighed". By tuning in on the sense of weight as we support, cradle, or rock their limbs, neck, head, torso, or even their individual bones or muscles, we give their bodies the pleasurable message of what it would be like if they let go of the responsibility of holding and controlling and moving that weight. Oddly enough, this weighing action almost always creates in the receiver more feeling of lightness, of release from the heavy insistent pull of gravity, and an evaporation of some chronic tension and pain patterns. It's OK if the body can't let go of all of its weight right away (or ever). In this conversation with the bodymind, we're not demanding a particular response, simply offering hundreds of opportunities to let go.

Muscle weight experienced separately from bone weight, and separate from organ weight, yields not only a deeply felt decompression and freedom, but also a sense of inner definition. A rich landscape of inner awareness and sensation emerges. Some of these long time massage therapists are amazed to find dead, numb, or abandoned areas of their bodies beginning to come to life through this short experience of being "weighed" in this way.

And as practitioners, they discover that they don't need to expend effort to lift the weight. Instead, just engaging it, sensing it, tracking the distribution of that weight all the way through their body to the bottoms of their feet is all that is required to communicate to their partner's bodymind the welcome feeling of support.

Before we move on to other principles, we all share a chuckle of commiseration as one student reports how much concentration it took to do something so simple and natural. Yes, to let go of our old habits of pushing hard against resistance isn't always easy...especially when it calls into question our view of ourselves as dedicated "hard working professionals". And we all really laugh when one of them wonders aloud if she could make a living as an "easy working professional".

### **Principle: Feeling for Lightness**

Returning again to exploring our own movement, I have the class begin to notice the moment of weightless suspension at the top of a swing or a bounce. Emphasizing the weightless moments over and over as we swing and toss and flutter our arms, amplifying and/or extending each moment of suspension just a bit, invites even more lightness to the sensation.

A lighter attitude also leads to lightness in the tissue of the body. My being too serious can be quite a heavy experience for my client, conveying the subtle message that there is something inherently wrong with them. So I encourage the group to explore a casual, off-hand, humorous, even sometimes silly attitude toward their own movement as we cultivate this quality.

In one of the pauses we take to tune in to the after effects of our movement games, many discover sensations of expansiveness, warmth and tingling. And when they bring their newly sensitized hands to a neighbor's arms, they feel the change in both density and quality of tissue.

Again taking our learning about lightness to partner work on the tables, I show the group how to fluff the muscle tissue up from the bones (like tossing a salad). Suspending body parts in rollicking, weightless, random loops frees up a number of withheld giggles. And sending bubbly currents through the whole body structure in a hypnotic rhythm encourages the pleasure of lightness to penetrate beneath consciousness and imprint deeply on the body's self image .

Upon returning to vertical again, I overhear from a pair who stroll near me,

"You look very different. How do you feel?."

"I've never felt so relaxed. But wasn't it hard for you to handle someone as big as me?"

"No. It was fun...and easy."

#### **Principle: Feeling for Soft**

Soft has had a bad reputation in our culture recently, at least as it applies to our bodies. We are encouraged by the media and advertizing worlds to work toward a hard body...hard abs, taugth muscles that don't jiggle when we move, tightness even in the skin.

But tissue that cannot soften is not healthy tissue. Tissue that is full of potential, alive, fresh and not hardened into knots, strands, or plates of tension from patterns of use will feel soft to the touch. When asked "how soft?", I don't hesitate before answering, "Soft as a baby's bottom". Soft tissue is available to, and participatory with the ebb and flow of life-giving fluids. Rigid tissue, on the other hand, is trying to hold, brace, protect, prepare, or defend.

In order to elicit this illusive soft, ripe quality in their partner's tissue, I suggest to this group that they inquire and listen with extraordinarily soft hands, and with a soft undemanding mind. And repeatedly let their hands become softer with each new contact. Hard, stiff or straining hands are unable to sense the subtler textures of tissue or qualities of movement. This work involves constantly attending to the softening of arm, shoulder and back muscles so that no push or pull or tension comes through the touch. It involves approaching each of the body tissues with a tenderness and sensitivity that will not override any resistance, at any layer of tissue, even as we facilitate bigger, or faster, or more rhythmically complicated movement.

My eventual goal for my client will be a relaxing of tension patterns that create pain or restriction in movement, and the development of a feeling experience of more effortless and beautiful functioning, and, eventually, a feeling of deep peace. But as I approach my client's inner feeling world through my hand contact, I'm an explorer landing on a new planet. If I land softly, the bodymind may open up and divulge its secrets. If not, it may throw me out, or just lock the doors to all the important operating systems, or put on a show of welcome while locking up the really sensitive and vital information even deeper and tighter inside.

Just my soft presence, my unhurried listening in to what is going on can be an important catalyst for the body to begin to listen more closely and lovingly to itself...a pre-condition for any healing to occur.

And after a short exploration of the effects of soft touch to face and neck, the eyes around the room are glowing with pleasure.

#### **Uniting unconscious and conscious learning**

The group is becoming clearer through this method of hand-to-body conversation, how easy it is to reach our client's bodymind with new, real, feeling possibilities. We have been planting seeds of new possibilities deep in the unconscious that, with any luck, may grow and blossom quite well on their own into new ways of moving and being in the world. The bodymind has felt how it could be, and can use this feeling as a new reference point.

Experience has taught me, however, that the real work of change only starts here. New patterns and possibilities need to be brought into conscious awareness so they can be recalled, practiced and integrated. To become habitual, a new pattern of moving or being must be consciously practiced until it becomes part of the unconscious network of patterns that underlie all our activity.

So we spend time together observing and describing what is new in their upright and self-motivated movement experience. And I invite them to recall specific sensations and feeling states from earlier in the day, just for practice. We review how to let go into gravity in their daily life; how to feel for softness and flow; how to re-access lightness or ease; how to open to possibility again and again; how to return to a deeply peaceful and vibrant pause.

With the day going by so quickly, exploring weight, lightness, softness, and the conscious release of unconscious patterns, we touch only briefly on other principles. **Feeling for and suggesting possibilities** is part of each of our explorations. In **feeling for connection**, we practice sensing further through the body. As we **feel for evenness**, we notice that the whole body becomes equally involved with every action, and no one place feels the strain.

**Feeling for rebound** becomes clearer through rocking motions. By sensing what bounces back into our hands, we read with great precision where there are gaps or blocks in the flow of movement through the body. And we discover that to accurately perceive the information in the backwash of ripples and waves in another, our own bodies must stay receptive to the flow of waves that we have set up, simultaneously initiating movement and riding it-a skill that requires much practice to master.

**Pausing** frequently provides repeated chances for the client's nervous system to catch up with and integrate the new feeling

information our hands are suggesting. Pauses also teach the experience of separation. They help each of us own our own feelings.

Each principle takes its time to emerge...sitting, standing or walking around in the room, as well as at the tables. Each principle develops more ease and effectiveness in the giver, as it adds a dimension, a richness to the experience of the receiving partner.

### **The practice changes me**

With these simple, effective principles, applied skillfully, there is much this delightful approach to somatic movement education can bring to a massage client's experience. There are some characteristic movements that most people associate with **Trager** work (rocking, cradling, elongating, shaking, swinging through wide ranges of motion, etc.) that are what it looks like from the outside. In well trained hands, these movements, and the qualities of attitude and touch that make them a pleasure to receive, have a potent positive effect on a clients' patterns of moving and being.

In my 20 years in this work, I have seen that the repetition of these natural, unhurried movement experiences develop, over a series of sessions, a long lasting experience of deep inner peace.

But what is often even more amazing for me is that by focusing on these principles for my clients on a regular basis, by being in this process day after day, I cannot help but be changed by them myself. Doing this work has developed in me patience, ease, unprejudiced curiosity, deeper understanding and appreciation of the nature of the bodymind, as well as a deep trust in the speed of life.

By the end of the day, as we take one more slow walk of inner inquiry around the large meeting room, I see softer lower backs that now allow a free swing of the pelvic weight, wider shoulders, and arms that swing comfortably past the thighs. Long, elegant necks are sprouting open, inviting faces. There is a warm comradeship in the group. Smiles are shared freely in this atmosphere of trust. We are reaping the benefits of a full day of practice of a lighter way of being.

Is it just a trick of the light, or has this whole group become 10 years younger?

## **Is Trager training for you?**

The **Trager** Certification Training Program is open to those who are wishing to improve the quality of their life, desiring to bring new depth to their existing work, or thinking about pursuing a new and rewarding profession. It consists of three 6-day workshops, each of them followed by individualized self-motivated fieldwork. All classes provide detailed information on application of principles, and practice both on and off the table. In addition there is an Anatomy requirement (waived for most massage therapists), and shorter classes focusing on **Mentastics®**, in which the emphasis is on developing quality and depth of feeling in oneself so that a full range of feeling experiences can be cultivated in others. Intimate class sizes allow for close Instructor/student contact.

For more information, contact the US Trager Association, 216-896-9383, [www.trager-us.org](http://www.trager-us.org).

## **Further reading**

To be drawn into Milton Trager's feeling experience, read his poetic description of the basis of his work in [Mentastics: Movement as a Way to Agelessness](#).

The details of Milton Trager's life can be found in Jack Liskin's book, [Moving Medicine](#). Anatomical and Physiological basis of why and how this work works (along with how other hand's-on therapeutic approaches work) are eloquently discussed in [Job's Body](#) by Trager Instructor Deane Juhan.

## **"BODY reMINDER" Mentastics playing cards**

These cards were created by the author to support clients in the daily process of recalling and integrating new pleasurable feeling experiences. With 48 playful images in each deck, they suggest some of the practices of staying in our bodies as we go about the daily activities of living. There are 3 separate decks, each with a different activity in mind.

...the Walking deck: learn to change habits of movement and posture

...the Driving deck: bring more consciousness to the way you sit at the wheel

...the Sitting deck: discover how to be more present, easy, and peacefully alive in your body

**Roger Tolle** has been a Trager® Practitioner for 20 years and currently teaches all levels of the Training Program for Trager International. He brings to his practice and his teaching a fluidity, playfulness and elegance from 15 years of professional dancing, and a deep knowledge of the body in motion from his extensive study with Milton Trager, MD, and other pioneers in the field of somatic movement education.

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