Beyond Relaxation
The Work of Milton Trager
by Carol Cavanaugh

"How should it be? What is softer? What is freer?" Milton Trager asks these questions as his hands manipulate a region of my body he says is blocked. A fortunate series of circumstances has given me the opportunity to experience a session of Trager Psychophysical Integration directly from its originator and I am now under the treatment of his experienced and observant hands. *Trager* work involves rocking and shaking movements ranging from gentle to vigorous which loosen restrictions in the joints and promote relaxation. I have heard that this method has been used to successfully treat problems ranging from serious back trouble to polio to psychiatric difficulties. While my curiosity has been aroused, so has my skepticism, exposed as I am to the whole spectrum of trendy holistic disciplines that parade in and out of California consciousness.

Trager Psychophysical Integration is basically the invention of one man, Milton Trager, who began to develop this method when he was only 18. Trager later became a doctor but continued his innovative therapy as a sideline to his regular medical practice. He persisted in giving a treatment a day for some 50 years until in the mid-1970s his work was brought to the attention of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur. Because he lived in Hawaii, Dr. Trager was unaware of the burgeoning California movement in holistic health and new age consciousness. He must have been surprised when he gave treatments at Esalen and was given a welcome befitting a conquering hero. His first trainee, Betty Fuller, suggested he train others to do the work, and in 1977 he retired from his medical practice and devoted himself full time to Psychophysical Integration. Since then some 1200 people in 15 countries have been trained in *Trager* work.

I watched Dr. Trager work on another person before I myself was "*Trager*ed". Watching him give a demonstration of his work is at least as entertaining as going to the movies. He may be white haired and 79 years old but he is physically spry and intellectually so alert that he would pick up a single quizzical eyebrow in his audience, intuit the question and answer it before it could be asked. His demonstrations were accompanied by much conversation -he gave information, answered questions, and punctuated it all with dry, understated humor that kept his audience on its toes. (Bodyworker in audience: "Do you encourage emotional release?" Trager: "No, if it happens, I take care of it". Bodyworker, seriously, notebook and pen poised for the response: "How do you take care of it?" Trager: "I console them.")

Meanwhile Trager's hands were doing fantastic things. The subject lay on a massage table

while he carried her passive joints through a series of large movements which seemed designed to explore and maximize her range of motion. As the session progressed and the woman's joints became freer the treatment was almost humorous to observe; at times a disembodied arm or leg seemed to be flying through space while the body to which it belonged rested serenely on the table. Nor did Dr. Trager appear to be exerting much effort as he made these huge movements with the limb; both parties seemed to have moved beyond the realities imposed by gravity. However the picture changed as Dr. Trager reached an area which he announced that something was "stuck". He would concentrate on such an area performing the desired movement many times while he repeated, mantra -like, "What is lighter? What is freer?" As he succeeded in releasing the problem, the movement would take on the light, effortless quality seen earlier.

After such an impressive demonstration, I received the chance to have a session with Dr. Trager myself. As an observer, I was most aware of the activity generated as the subject's body was rolled back and forth. As a participant I was more aware of silence--the calming effect on the mind of this rhythmic movement of the limbs. There is something profoundly reassuring about lying passively while one is taken through repetitive motions by caring hands--witness the universal reaction of the baby who stops crying when he is rocked by an adult. Of course *Trager* work involves more than simple rocking the client to and fro. Dr. Trager's hands quickly sensed which areas of mv bodv stored tension or had some long standing problem. When he found a blocked area he mentioned it to me and began to work on it, usually with some semi-hypnotic comment such as "You have some tension right here. But you don't need that, and you can just let it go right now."

To me the most controversial aspect of Dr. Trager's work had been his assertion that tension released in a *Trager* session would not reappear later. My doubts about the permanent effects of *Trager* work receded greatly after my own session in which he focused particularly on an area of chronic tension in my abdomen. After he made various rocking and kneading motions in this area for approximately 20 minutes, I experienced some softening there and a corresponding realignment of my lower back. I have been surprised and impressed to find that after several months the tension has not returned. Dr. Trager talked about why he feels his clients can maintain the freedom they achieve within the session. "Tight muscles could be caused by many things but the pattern of the tightness is all in the mind. I was doing an internship at St. Francis Hospital in Honolulu in 1955. An indigent patient, a man about 75 was brought in for abdominal surgery. I watched him walk and he was so stiff that if you called him he'd have to turn his whole body to look at you. He couldn't just turn his head. But under a general anesthetic it took about eight people to keep his joints from dislocating, he was so limp. Then I saw him coming out of the anesthesia. He became his old rigid self again. This was not tissue. This was mind... so every move I make, every touch, every thought is directed toward the unconscious mind. the body is quite dumb. Fred Astaire's feet are dumb. But boy, what he's got up here. He can just think what he wants to do and his feet go. So (in *Trager*

work) you are imparting to the mind how the tissues should feel. That is not a temporary thing. Whatever I have done will remain in the client's mind. In massage, she has a good treatment, she goes home, her husband yells at her, and it all goes out the window."

In the *Trager* system, these new patterns are reinforced by a series of movements called *Mentastics* ® which the client practices between sessions. *Mentastics* involves shaking the joints and promotes progressively greater relaxation and freedom of movement, but the client creates the movement instead of being carried through it by another person. Like the table work, *Mentastics* has its humorous aspects. I can still remember seeing a roomful of about 150 bodyworkers at a demonstration, their apparently disembodied left arms flapping in the breeze as Trager led a *Mentastics* sequence to loosen the shoulder joint.

How is this feeling of effortless movement conveyed from therapist to client? Central to the *Trager* system is the concept of "hook up". Hook-up is said to be a connection which one makes with the larger field of energy, the universe outside of oneself. Instead of being created by the practitioner *Trager* work flows through the practitioner; the hands become tools for the intuition. Since the work is indeed effortless for the practitioner, effortlessness is conveyed to the client on the table.

Hook-up is a concept that has been described and experienced by people from many disciplines. Patanjali wrote about hook-up in the Yoga Sutras 4000 years ago. Hook-up is a union, union is yoga; yoga is not a new idea. Dr. Trager himself says hook-up is not something that can be learned through training; it has to be experienced.

What elements of *Trager* work can be taught? So much of the work arises from intuition that it would seem that one either has the knack for it or one doesn't. And even if one has the knack, it might be necessary to experience tens of thousands of bodies beneath one's hands before one could, as Trager allegedly does, elicit feeling from paralyzed limbs. When I observed an intermediate training session, it seemed to me that Dr. Trager's methods could be used to train yoga teachers as well. When he is training someone Dr. Trager makes the movements on a client with the trainee's hands resting on top of his: then he places his hands over the trainee's

so that the movement is made properly. Finally when he is satisfied that the trainee is working well he removes his hands and lets the trainee continue the movement independently. Importance is placed throughout on "staying loose", not allowing tension to accumulate, and shaking it out of hands and arms if it does.

An interview with Milton Trager gave me the opportunity to further pursue my questions about his work. Betty Fuller, Trager's first trainee and co-founder of the Trager Institute, joined us for the talk.

CAROL CAVANAUGH: How did you begin to do this work?

MILTON TRAGER: I never touched a body until I was about 18. I was a fighter then and after each workout my manager would get me on the table and work me over to get the kinks out. One day he looked very tired and I said, "Hey Mickey, lay down here for a second." I started to work on him not knowing what I was doing. He was almost frightened; He said, "Hey kid, how'd you learn to do that?" I said, "What do you mean? You taught me Mickey." And he said, "I didn't teach you that kid, you've got hands. You know what you're doing." It took him 30 minutes to convince me that I had hands, then I went home and cured my father of his sciatica. It was one of those things. "Lay down, Pa, I think I can fix your legs up." That's how it started.

CC: According to what you say, you reach people on a level where they break through something and don't revert to their original pattern. People who have experienced massage find that they loosen up quite a lot, but then the tension comes back. What's the difference between massage and your work?

MT: When I work and my hands hit something, I say to myself, "Hey, that shouldn't be like that: it should be open or soft or whatever." I am sensitive enough to pick up restrictions in the body. I work with the restrictions, and my work brings new experience of how that particular area of the body should be. You can't erase the old pattern, but it doesn't seem to come through again strongly enough to take over. I can give you one treatment and not see you for two years and you will have retained all the openness that was there when I finished your treatment.

CC: As you have worked on thousands of bodies over the years, have you found that specific holding patterns in the body relate to specific holding patterns in the mind?

MT: Definitely. Recently I became very conscious of holding patterns in the body, especially the abdomen and chest. When I work with emphysema, I am definitely breaking up holding patterns. You don't teach people how to breathe. You don't teach people how to let go. The direct method fails. I bypass the conscious; they can keep that and they can keep the body. I am only interested in reaching the unconscious. It isn't like analysis, where you have to delve deep down to find out what happened when the child was three. I'm interested in the physiological basis of it all. We are on the verge of getting some scientific help in our work. Research experiments with monkeys show that being touched and rocked by the mother is the important thing (in development).

BETTY FULLER: All the rocking we do stimulates the cerebellum. What they discovered with monkeys was that in babies raised without a lot of rocking, the cerebellum is deprived of stimulation and those monkeys tend to have very violent, anti-social behavior. A couple of our people have worked with autistic teenagers. One young girl was very leery of being touched or rocked the first time, and the second session she still held back, but in the third session she ran in the room and just jumped on the table. But we don't have enough hard evidence of these things.

CC: I'd like to talk about some of the specific physical limitations with which you have worked.

MT: I've done 5000 backs . . . severe problems, including backs up for surgery.

BF: Recently Milton has had wonderful breakthroughs with emphysema and asthma and a lot of good work with people diagnosed as having multiple sclerosis and muscular dystrophy.

MT: I don't think that I am a healer. It isn't the laying on of hands.

CC: You've worked with people who had polio...

MT: Yes my first polio walked when he was 19 after being paralyzed for four years. He's still walking with the help of a brace. He's a CPA in Dallas.

BF: Tell about the clinic in Mexico.

MT: I got there in April; I was to attend medical school there starting in September. I didn't know Spanish, so I played poker with the interns, threw coins into a crack in the sidewalk• anything to learn the language. They wanted to know what I did since I was 42, and I said I worked with infantile paralysis. So I was called in one afternoon about June, and they had this four year old girl on the table. They said "This girl has been paralyzed for two years and has no function in the lower limbs; what can you do?" I approached the table and started playing with her foot. After a while I said, "Hey, I think I feel something. And then again, I think it was a little stronger. First thing you know I had the toes moving. The Madre Superior and the nuns dropped to their knees and were crossing themselves. And I thought how could this Jewish boy fail in this Catholic university? The feeling in that room was so great, it would be impossible to fail. The priest of the school walked out with his arm around my shoulder, and he spun around and said, "Milton, remember, first comes God, then comes you." They opened up a clinic for the poor; they came from all over and I worked with them with a lot of good results. I had that all through my six years of medical school.

CC: What led you to go to medical school?

MT: Oh, that's easy. I had some GI Bill benefits coming after the war and I wanted to get my M.D. degree, so I would he able to talk to M.D.s and such. My big aim was to teach registered physical therapists my work because of the results I was getting in comparison with the results they were getting. I wrote to 70 medical schools back in 1946 and was turned down by all of them because of my age. So I finally took off for Mexico and was accepted by the medical school in Guadalajara.

CC: What was the most important thing you learned in medical school?

MT: Besides Spanish? Not that much.

CC: Do you feel that traditional medical training has anything to offer the holistic practitioner?

MT: Definitely. I feel we need orthodox medicine. Although there will be a demand for doctors to be more holistic in their approach to health and life and preventive medicine, I think we still need them very much. This is what's wrong with the holistic thing. One gets locked into thinking, "They're no damn good, this medical profession." But they have done great things. The missionaries go out to Africa and get rid of typhoid, malaria, real big things. The every day thing in medicine is what is wrong. They are treating symptoms and not curing people. Medicine as we all know does not cure anybody. The healing process is within ourselves.

CC: How much do you use your formal knowledge of anatomy in your work and how much do you impart to your trainees?

MT: I impart very little to my students. You don't think, "I am now doing the quadriceps." You just do it. Physiology the same thing.

CC: But when you were in these classes and got the picture of how the human body fits together, did you get any information which was valuable in consolidating your intuitive understanding?

MT: I would say no. I was doing this with a lot of success long before I cracked a book. This is what prompted me to go to school. And now I see my students getting results without all the anatomy, physiology, pathology or anything else.

CC: What do you think is the unique thing offered by your work which is not offered by any other bodywork discipline?

MT: The reaching of the mind. That's all I could say on that. I don't know anything about the other disciplines. I don't even bother reading about them. That may sound kind of funny. But I have this thing and it works. There doesn't seem to be any need for me to read what others are doing. I have the assurance that I'm on the right track.

CC: Would you talk some about hook-up?

MT: That's easy. You are surrounded by a Force, and you don't have to go that far away from your skin to get it. But people are blocked within themselves, so negative, so tense, that this force cannot enter. Once this force comes into them they are changed people and will function much differently and better than they have ever done before. I am in hook up all the time I am working, even though I may be talking or joking.

CC: Would you say that someone could use your techniques but not be in hook-up and not get good results--but someone in hook-up who didn't have the technique would do much better?

MT: Definitely.

CC: So this is the key to your work. Do you try to teach hook-up to people you are training to do the work?

MT: Scratch the word "try". Trying is effort; effort is tension. I bring them into hook up at the beginning of each session. I go into hook-up and bring them along with me. The whole room is permeated with this feeling.

CC: What do you get out of doing this work?

MT: Besides money? (laughter) What I really get out of it is to feel the response of tissue in the person. To feel it actually come up into your hands, feel the change in the body, sense the change in the individual, see the change in the face. The patient becomes part of you. Anyone I have ever done is still part of me. I watched a TV show about Arthur Rubinstein at 80... he is very much like I am in that he has to go to his piano every day. I have to get somebody on the table or it's hard on my life. It's got to the point where I think, "Oh goody, I'm going to give a treatment; somebody's going to bring a body for me to work with."

CC: If you have a person with very blocked, negative energy on the table, what's that like for you?

MT: They aren't negative very long. You don't try to change negativity. You just stand there and hook up with this force that you are surrounded by. You start working, and this feeling comes to their unconscious mind, and they let go.

CC: Do you feel that people in many walks of life reach hook-up even if they're not conscious of it, for example, a pianist?

MT: Definitely. I also feel that even in the worst criminal, there is still the soul of the individual. Many times after a real good session with a patient, I get so moved by their face that I must take them by the hand, take them to a mirror and say "I want you to meet this person." Sometimes they say, "I haven't seen her in 25 years." What I feel is that this is actually the soul of the individual uncovered. I've just started to bring the word "soul" into it, and this is only because I've felt it, I've seen it, and I value it. This is the kernel of the individual.

(At the time of this writing, Carol Cavanaugh was the Director of the Institute for Yoga Teacher Education in San Francisco, and a student of B.K.S. Iyengar. She was a Yoga Journal contributing editor and an editor of The IYTE Review.)

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