

How the Body Responds to Touch:

Exploring The Essence of The Trager® Approach as Applied to Safe and Effective Yoga Adjustments

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As a yoga instructor, you have become part of the health care system. Welcome! The world needs you.

With increasing research into the broad range of health benefits a consistent and safe yoga practice provides, more and more doctors and physical therapists are prescribing yoga as a means for self and preventive care for a myriad of conditions and for rehabilitation of injuries or corrective surgeries.

High blood pressure, low back pain, joint stiffness, insomnia, depression, carpal tunnel syndrome, rotator cuff and meniscus tears, pre-natal support, scoliosis, cancer, sports conditioning, glaucoma, unresolved trauma and the list goes on. Anyone of these conditions could be present in your yoga class at the recommendation of a medical professional. Even the military has found that yoga and meditation prepare operatives better for stressful conditions than their traditional training practices. No longer fringe or a quack practice, yoga IS good for you. The word is on the street and there's no looking back.

While this is wonderful news, it now places a new and challenging demand on yoga instructors- to become a "line of best fit" rehabilitative movement specialist in the shala. Guiding students, regardless of their condition, through sensible, rehabilitative, and renewing self-exploration of their bodies rather than providing a new context for injury or exacerbating their present condition, requires some unique mastery. Having a general awareness of some of these conditions and specific postural contra-indications will certainly help.

The purpose of this article is to introduce concepts of touch and movement exploration that form the efficacious underpinnings of the The Trager® Approach to psychophysical integration or movement re-education. The Trager® Approach is an insightful and innovative approach to hands-on manipulations and self-exploration through movement. Central components to the work are the practitioner's self-care, and meditative state, which inform both their touch and the guidance they offer their clients/ students. The fundamental principles of the Trager® Approach, when applied to making hands-on adjustments in yoga, can enhance adjustment safety, effectiveness, and invite students into a more self-aware and constructive internal dialogue with themselves as they practice.

The Trager® Approach

Developed over 70 years ago by Dr. Milton Trager for the treatment of polio and sciatica, The Trager® Approach remains an innovative approach to movement education and self care which facilitates lasting neuromuscular change without setting up burnout or injury for the therapist.

The Trager® Approach utilizes gentle touch and rhythmic movements to cultivate a state of deep relaxation to release muscle holding patterns residing in the unconscious mind that often manifest as functional limitation, or pain. The rhythmic movements also introduce a new feeling state (think state dependent learning) from which the patient can recall and experience the associated

muscular changes. Self-Care movement exercises are provided so clients may develop their own capacity to elicit similar relaxation responses experienced during their session.

The effects of this work are cumulative and through a series of sessions over time, can lead to increased self-reliance, which may reduce the frequency of visits over time depending on the severity of the condition being addressed.

Clients often report:

- Increased mobility, vitality, clarity, capacity to relax and sense of overall peace.
- Improved sports performance without injury, quickened recover from surgery or injury,
- Relief from stress, sciatica and chronic back pain, neck pain and headaches, TMJ, fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue
- Improved function for neuromuscular disorders such as Parkinson's Disease, Cerebral Palsy, MS, and conditions such as Ankylosing Spondylitis, Post-Stroke Paralysis
- A great adjunct to Ashtanga Yoga for integrating musculo-skeletal changes

Based upon listening and a dialogue model utilizing touch which engages the nervous system and mechanisms for neuromuscular change, this meditative or "ego-less" approach has been successful with a wide range of conditions such as stress related conditions to more severe congenital conditions

How does this translate to the Yoga Studio Class room?

The underpinnings of Trager are based on fundamental principles, which like the Yamas and Niyamas apply to how we engage with the world around us while leveraging our understanding of the world within us. Guided by peaceful sense of self or internal dialogue with ourselves (wise elder or ego), whether instructor or student, one can be either supporting greater self-awareness, physical opening and proper and appropriate change or overriding important signals of possible self-harm. Often the whispers of our inner wisdom are silenced by the loud clamoring of our ego and this may and often does, result in injury, re-injury, development of chronic conditions or even behavioral looping.

As instructors, it 's natural that we would like to see ourselves as having the a student's answer or knowing exactly what to do in every situation. While this is certainly a necessary component to our confidence as a teacher, it is only one part of the puzzle. Adaptability to the unknown may be our greatest tool or skill.

What if acknowledging that we don't know what to do or may not have the answer is the window of opportunity we're looking for? Trusting that the student at some level knows everything that needs to happen (ie. what's in the way, to what degree, the keys to unlocking it and rebalancing the affects of the change), offers us the opportunity to work on our trust in the partnership between teacher and student, on our intuitive knowing and our sense to ask what is working optimally for them this moment.

If you've every been in a partner yoga class you may have experienced self-referencing support. - This occurs when where you feel as though you're providing the best support for your partner yet they continue to ask you to change what you're doing to feel supported. When you do arrive at the point at which they feel most supported, you may find this quite disorienting or not balanced within yourself. You may wonder - How could I have been so off base? The same holds true for

adjustments. It quickly becomes partner yoga and communication is important. Creating a space of trust and respect facilitates and open and authentic dialogue between teacher/student - adjuster/adjustee.

Some Considerations In a Yoga Context:

In a yoga class, the client/student is actively participating in their experience and there is weight bearing to consider. This is much different than a bodywork session where a client is passively experiencing touch and movement, and there is much less conscious resistance. In each case however, tactilely listening or feeling into the tissue is necessary. Advanced postures in particular, like those second series or Advanced A work even deeper structures/tissues and require further skill but, establishing trust from the outset in fundamental postures forms the foundation of what's to come. To safely initiate change at this level, a higher degree listening/feeling on the part of both student and teacher is warranted.

In this context, adjustments become a dialogue through touch - feeling the responses of the body, changes in a student's breath reflecting shifts in the mindset of the student, expansion or contraction of the tissue, etc.

How do you enter the pose to "add to the experience," keep them in balance and take them deeper, convey peace, relaxation, say what is necessary and exercise adjustment brevity, etc.

Primary point Theory - What could you impact that would cascade to correct many other things, rather than correct all the little things - How to assess what their next step is in the various posture.

Let's take a look at how the principles of The Trager® Approach may help you when adjusting your students.

Guiding Questions:

Who are you when you approach your client?

What impact does this have on the "energetic dialogue" and what are you're able to facilitate for them

What Learning Possibilities Exist for both you and your client during the session?

Self Care: Energetic Resonance within the Therapist as a Primary Tool for Healing

- Physical Integration, Balanced and Peaceful State, and Vitality
- Self Care Strategies for Improving Personal Health and Well Being
 - Mentastics®, Yoga and Meditation
 - Nutritional Considerations
 - Social Considerations, etc.

Touch As A Language: Achieving muscular consensus as a goal for effective lasting rehabilitation.

What are we doing with our hands?

Jacque Lusserian

Trager Principles:

Presence: Hook-up

Feeling Weight

Exploring Waves

Feeling Rhythm

Taking out Slack

Pausing

Sculpting

Compression

Inquiry

Recall - think savasana - empower student to remember what they've done for themselves.

And all of these return us to our center, to a state of what Milton Trager called "Hookup."

Exploring the Principles:

The skills needed to use these tools are asking and listening. As in any developed skill set, practice over time is needed to deepen and refine.

Technique vs. Moves vs. Movement – What are the associated experiences?

Presence: Hook-Up: What Does the Healing?

"We can't take anyone anywhere we haven't already been. Nor can we impart that which we ourselves don't have. "Be there with them. You stay out of it." MT

Would it be alright if we went to the table and did nothing?

- Genie In Your Genes - Dawson M. Church
- Dr. James Oschman – Dr. Robert Beck
- Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself - Joe Dispenza

- Carved by Experience - Michal Barnea-Astrog
- Gregg Braden – Human DNA orders Photons – Non Local non Temporal
- Heart Math Institute – Heart Brain Coherence
- Bruce Lipton – Epigenetics – Perceptions gives rise to genetic expression
- Lynn McTaggart – The Intention Experiment

Eckhart Tolle from: Stillness Speaks

True listening goes far beyond auditory perceptions. It is the arising of alert attention, a space of presence in which the words are being received. The words now become secondary. They may be meaningful or they may not make sense. Far more important than what you are listening to is the act of listening itself, the space of conscious presence that arises as you listen. That space is a unifying field of awareness in which you meet the other person without the separative barriers created by conceptual thinking. And now the other person is no longer “other.” In that space, you are joined together as one, (collective) awareness, one (collective) consciousness.

Feeling Weight

- What can weight tell you? Tension, Relaxation. What is the shape and movement of weight?
- Perceptually experiencing the feeling of weight is an art, which offers the possibility of shifting awareness from old patterns of holding tension within ones own system into something much more open, much more free and easy.
- It is always a matter of degree.
 - How to keep your adjustments relative to the reality of this person today?
 - What you feel under your hands on this person is unique to that person?
 - What are the similarities between bodies?
- It is most easily experienced if there is a willingness to explore one’s own curiosity.
 - Questions arise such as whose weight?
- What is the difference between weighing and feeling weight?
- How much effort is needed? What is half that much effort? What is ten percent of that effort?
- All of this takes us into a deepening sense of our own proprioception.
- It allows us to find ways to use our own bodies more effectively in space as we interact with another. This lets the experience deepen.

Exploring Waves - Rocking

- During the course of a Trager session, there might be two or three thousand individual interventions or movements initiated by the practitioner, which establish a hypnogogic state.
- Each of these movements sets a wave in motion or responds to the wave that has been previously set in motion.
- Each wave moves through the system of the body and stops at or moves past a place of restriction.
- The practitioner may or may not feel these areas of restriction, but the wave does its work nonetheless.

- It is possible to feel the places that are holding as well as the releases that take place as the areas of tension soften and let go.

In Yoga:

- Rocking hips before forward folding
- Shifting the extended arms left to right in Prasarita Padottanasana C before taking to the floor
- Finding the shape of the movement of the underlying structure. Recognizing that we're not linear with straight lines and angles - but rather that there are spirals inherent in our structure - this is how water moves most efficiently and how our structure has been developed....

Feeling Rhythm

The client will move in his or her own rhythm, which is different in every part of the body. It may be different in the same body part on opposite sides of the body. Some factors involved in the setting of this rhythm include length and weight, size, and tension of the whole body, or of the area of the body being contacted. As the body begins to relax or integrate, the rhythm may change in small or profound ways. Breathing may change, amplitude of the rock may change, and joints may soften and/or gain a more complete connection. The tissue itself may respond in dramatic ways. It is up to the practitioner to be aware of these changes in rhythm and to adjust the intervention to meet the new parameters.

In Yoga:

Where are you feeling your movement? Often as one transitions from one posture to the next there is a feeling or body part or area that is the headline. If you notice someone moving with attention to something within themselves it may be helpful to ask what it is that they're feeling and where/. The quality of the feeling may also provide additional information - dull achey is different from sharp stinging or electric - Is there anticipatory restriction - ie. expecting to feel pain or a sensation. etc. is the sensation broad or localized - general or specific. When in doubt, ask! You may also ask how it changes when you place your hands on or adjust or to ask them where they are feeling the adjustment most - ie. Marichyasana D - could be shoulders, hips, spine knee, etc.

Feeling Connections (taking out slack)

- In order to feel weight, explore waves and feel rhythm, it is useful to feel the connections between the part of the body being touched and the rest of the system.
- Made possible by taking out the slack, both within the structure under ones hands and within the tissue through the entire system.
 - Sinking into the tissue under ones hands
 - Creating an extension that gives a small stretch within the tissue,
 - Moving up or down the body within the soft tissue or the joints themselves
 - Feeling the three-dimensional qualities within the area of the body being addressed and moved.

In Yoga:

Often we discover how connected or not our body really is - that this movement affects something in a different area - or we perhaps have blind spots. Both are important to acknowledge and often will provide essential clues for a student to further the opening of their body and connection to it - You may want to ask - Do you feel this anywhere else (rather than the obvious physical sensation or headline limitation) - Or just where your hands may be. Bony folks may have less core integrity making headstand, pincha mayurasana challenging, or perhaps collapsing into back bends occurs. Helping students find length through directions of energy and oppositions of force (in addition to engaging bandhas) may be helpful. Lifting up and Jumping forward will also help develop kinetic chains that integrate beneficial core strength.

Grounding the student into their foundation often helps them to lift, extend or lengthen to take out slack on their own. Parivrtta Trikonasa, Triangmukaikapada paschimottonasana, Marichyasana C,
Pausing

Pausing can be both the simplest and the most difficult skill to develop. To pause means to remove one's hands from the tissue of the client and to take care of oneself in the moment. Pausing allows the client to feel his own tissue and nervous system and to integrate what has just occurred during the session. We must remember to pause, to know when to pause and to know that in the moment of pausing we are teaching the client to feel and to take responsibility for his own process. Given our desire to do, pausing is counterintuitive. It requires trust in the work itself. This requires enough practice to know that pausing works, and it also requires letting the work do its job on us as practitioners. When we can feel in our own bodies what the work can do, we can trust the pause. Also, much like a period in diction or rests in music, its the spaces that give meaning to the content, sometimes they contain more meaning than the content itself. To much information to quickly and the body/mind shuts down until what has been received is assimilated and integrated.

In Yoga:

To adjust or to let the student find it? To suggest or to not suggest?
How to honor the process of somatic learning without proprioceptive overload via intellectual stimulation or tactile input.
Rest in between adjustments to feel what you're needing

Sculpting

Sculpting can bring awareness, softness and tone to the tissue. Dr. Trager would often say that feeling originates in the mind, and that to give a feeling experience to the client, we must access the mind. Sculpting is most powerful when it comes from a place of deep meditative awareness and done without intention to do anything other than to bring feeling experience to the mind of the client. Sculpting can add to the recovery of lost sensory impressions, to deepened proprioception. (Touch as a language)

In Yoga:

Touching with a deep presence rather than doing something draws the students attention to that area and invites them to notice what parts they are aware of or not. Over adjusting (taking them too far to quickly) may for just that instance, inform the student of their potential, but at the same time may blind them to what's necessary to engage to take themselves there on their own. We can achieve a good balance by varying our interaction: sometimes adjusting and sometimes highlighting a foundation point - from which they can extend or expand into or away from.

Presence

Milton Trager often spoke of his a state of presence as hook-up or being connected to source energy. This is now measurable - (see Joe Dispenza's work) His descriptions are throughout his written words and a part of every video we have of him working and speaking about his work. Hook-up is the meditative state in which a Trager practitioner's work flows. It can be practiced and deepened, and is a place of centered calm connection. Working from this state allows a deepened connection to oneself as the practitioner and to the client. By the practitioner simply being here, the client is invited to enter this place of peacefulness. (Early Kirlian photography)

In Yoga:

Who you are when you are teaching, and what you are intending for yourself or your students are the central themes here. Approaching each class as your own practice - showing up, not having to have it be a particular way or and achieve a particular outcome - staying relaxed, present and equanimous will optimize the possibility of providing just what is needed - allow yourself to be informed by the group dynamic and subtle energy in the room.

Asking and Listening

Asking and listening through touch are faculties used to move our awareness beneath the surface of what may be apparent. As we ask and listen, an interconnected dance takes place between the teacher and student. Our curiosity brings a quality of alive awareness to the process. Who are they today? Do I have any preconceived notions about what they need? How does their skin feel? What is the quality of their breath? Can I feel it in the expansion and contraction of the tissue - Is it rushed

In Yoga:

This holds true when adjusting students - its a joint effort to arrive at what best suit their needs in the moment- Of course it is your responsibility to maintain your own comfort, safety etc. and participate from there. When in doubt, ask? Hey is this reaching you or not. Too much, not enough

Compression/ Transferring Weight

Compression at first glance, is a simple sinking in to tissue, using your own weight rather than strength to push as the main component of information transfer. It offers a much deeper and more sophisticated possibility. Compression activates parasympathetic response and therefore may

bring calming and a feeling of wellbeing to the body/mind of the client. Compression is available with almost all contact. If the practitioner's hands are curious, then it is possible to feel through layers of tissue, reaching deeply to the core without any effort. The quality of pushing may feel like a demand, like telling the body to do something. It may also activate resistance or a defense response as in the case of someone with a history of abuse trauma.

Proprioception (a useful term)

Proprioception is defined as the awareness of the orientation of the body in space and the direction, extent and route of movement of the joints. Information from certain proprioceptors, particularly in muscles and tendons, need not reach consciousness but can be used by the motor system as feedback to guide postural adjustments and control of well-practiced movements such as those involved in walking. The proprioceptive sense is often unnoticed because humans adapt to a continuously present stimulus such as pain or poor posture. This is called habituation or desensitization. The effect is that sensory impressions can disappear. The Trager Approach, a form of movement education, addresses such issues.

In Yoga:

When giving an adjustment, it is important transfer weight slowly - to allow the body to receive the weight at a rate it can process. Sinking into our knees and feet or leaning into the body slowly can and effectively accomplish this. Following the shape of the body allows the transmission to inform and suggest rather than create resistance or push back. There are no straight lines. Always have a direction to the compression - lengthening off center, taking out slack and leaning in. Compressing straight down can feel restrictive.

Table Work Principles

Inquiry: what is softer, freer, lighter, how could it be? What here is soft...? What could be softer than that? Explore the ease that exists. Asking client...what could be more supportive, how is this rhythm? Emphasize the positive.

Weight: What can weight tell you?

Rocking (jiggling water balloon)

Movement from feet and core, with soft, slightly bent knees

establishing a soothing rhythm induces a hypnogogic state of mind for patient

Compression (integrity of the balloon) - allow weight to sink into your client rather than using your strength or arms

Elongation – shirt or rope example...use of own weight, not pulling with arm strength but taking out slack and leaning with weight

Sculpting – dry hands – With genuine interest, really connect with the part you are working on.

See the whole person not just a disembodied arm or leg. Allow your touch to convey peace, softness, lightness, ease

Recall – It felt like hmmm.....Invite your clients to recall their experience of the session and the feeling of relaxation, ease and peace.

Listening to the tissue, intuiting and softening vs. efforting and trying to force change

Presence - would it be all right if I were just present with the client/patient/student?

The Movement Protocol: Presence in the Studio

- Feedback contract: have your patient let you know when something is uncomfortable.
- Let them know that their subjective experience is valued.
- Provide the most pleasurable movement experience possible. Set your intention. Keep it neutral.
- Centering - Don't use your client to get centered or focused - Don't start until you are ready.
- Self awareness...my body part their body part - you may feel what they are feeling.
- Adjusting while doing Ujjayi breathing, with Bandhas on, breath in rhythm with them
- Observe their peaks and valleys - allow for visual information to flow in
- Reverence for all of them - remember that your attitude effects their experience
- Make every adjustment mean something - a message of peace, relaxation, acceptance, possibility.
- Remember to pause for yourself and your patient/ student to check in with yourself and provide time for them to integrate the movement and new feelings. Remember the idea of a dialogue.
- Don't "talk" too much with your hands without a pause. Give the body an opportunity to respond. This will feed your next moment.
- Most importantly, have fun. - see reverence.