

TRAGER MENTASTICS: Coming at life from a question.
Roger Tolle, 1995

Ever wonder why you can recognize your friend from way down the street, long before you can see his face? And why you don't have to think about how to brush your teeth, you just do it?

Your friend's way of walking and your way of brushing your teeth are habitual movement patterns controlled by a part of your mind called the functional mind. These patterns once required conscious attention. But as you did them over and over they became ingrained, habitual, requiring no conscious attention.

Some of your habit patterns may not be as comfortable as the way you brush your teeth. The way you hold the phone, for instance, may carry with it the memory of all the tense conversations you've had. So that, by now, every time you pick up the phone your body prepares for attack. And then when you put the phone back down you feel tension or aching in your shoulders or neck.

If you wanted to break this old pattern, or any of the other patterns that make up your characteristic way of interacting with the world, how would you do it? There many ways, many approaches. The one I'm in love with was developed over the last 60 years by Milton Trager, M.D.

After exploring with his own body, he developed a system of movement reeducation. For this system he coined the word, "Mentastics", a contraction of "mental" and "gymnastics", to describe his process of mentally directing questions to the body in order to elicit from the body a different response, primarily one that is freer and more resilient.

But how do questions change our body's responses? Lets take a simple example. In a place where there is some open space so you won't worry about bumping into anything, begin to swing your arm. Just an easy toss of the weight of the arm forward letting it drop and swing on its own is all you need to do for this exploration. While your arm is swinging, begin to ask yourself "what would feel freer?" As you continue gentle movement, continue to ask "and freer than that?" Allow the movement to change in range, speed, frequency, weight, effort. Notice how your inherently creative body discovers ways of sending back to the mind the requested freer sensations.

These freer sensations begin to educate the mind about the perhaps long forgotten carefree attitudes that went along with this way of moving. We may be reminded of childhood days and find ourselves enjoying the simple pleasure of exploring the movement. As we move with more playfulness, our view from inside this more childlike physical experience can't help but begin to feel more optimistic.

If this process is allowed to gradually unfold with more and more specific questions it will begin to work more deeply into your web of habit patterns. So, for instance, you might take that simple little toss of your arm, and as you're tossing it forward and letting it drop, over and over again, you might ask, "Well, could I toss it with half as much effort?" or "How much effort does it really require for me to toss the weight of my arm forward?"

"How much more specifically can I sense its weight? And what is the weight of my arm, anyway? And when I toss it and let it fall in response to the pull of gravity, how much can I enjoy the feeling of the free fall?"

"And how does the rest of my body need to follow along in order to get that wonderful rush that a child feels on the down slope of a roller coaster?"

And then, what is the feeling of after-swing -- that leftover movement that requires absolutely no muscular involvement? You might muse on the after-swing for a while, just hanging out with the delicious effortlessness.

As you allow feeling to register deeper in your mind with each repetition, (repetition being a key ingredient here) you may also begin to notice a distinct new sensation in your arm and shoulder. Even when your arm is outwardly at rest your inner sensation of continued movement (the flow of circulation and life energy) may become very apparent to you.

As you keep coming back to these questions over and over again, they bring you deeper and deeper into your inner feeling state. And its this inner sensing, this connecting to physical sensations in a deeper, quieter, freer, lighter, more playful way that Dr. Trager calls "hook-up".

The questions as we play with movement are the questions that bring us deeper into ourselves, deeper into a state of alive relaxation, dynamic balance, easy self esteem and self awareness. Accomplishing and integrating these feeling states into

everyday action is the ultimate goal in this work. The ultimate question then is what movement, what action, what attitude, what exploration will bring me deeper into "hook-up", deeper into my own center, deeper into my own sense of home.

What we are doing by asking questions of the body while the body is in motion is sending messages of a different qualitative nature to the functional mind. That part of the mind organizes the billions of nerve impulses received from the proprioceptive system and sends out the complex series of commands needed to coordinate all the non-conscious movement patterns such as breathing, digestion, and upright posture. This body operating system (BOS), permits the conscious mind to direct our conscious actions. For those of you into computers our functional mind (BOS) works sort of like the disk operating system (DOS) which organizes and carries out the commands you type on your computer keyboard.

We access this part of our minds during movement. Movement is the medium which carries the message to the mind. And when the contents of the message are a question, one like "what could be lighter?", the mind answers with a subtle shift in commands to the neuromuscular and neurochemical systems, and we find ourselves quickly with a new feeling in the total body.

Our "BOS" has developed its particular habit patterns, both efficient and inefficient, from the prerecorded bits of information it gets from its environmental probe -- the body. The body sends its reports to the mind through repeated nerve stimulation. The nerves in the joints -- the joint receptors -- are responsible for reading all our movement patterns, the unique quality and quantity of every nuance of movement. It is these neurological impulses which give the mind its readings on the body's location, direction, and quality of movement. And this system of self perception gives us a basis for all further actions and communications with the outside world. We know from experience that the world looks a lot nicer from a body that feels good.

Dr. Trager believed that none of our experiences are erased from the mind, only over-laid with a more recent set of messages. The only way to change our perception of ourselves, therefore, will be to cover over the old patterns with layers of messages of a different qualitative nature till the old feeling patterns are essentially buried. These newer responses will then become the basis for our improved interaction with the world.

In the Mentastics® process we intercept the messages as they go through the feedback loop from body to mind and from mind to body, and cleverly redirect them with our questions. Questions are gentle challenges to the non-conscious patterns that are already entrenched in the body/mind. More direct interventions often meet direct resistance from long established habits.

The kind of questions we choose, and the manner in which we direct these questions to the body are very important. They need to be comparative questions, not yes or no questions. "What could feel better?" is a question rich in possibilities for change, where as "Does this feel good?" leads no place in particular.

And there is no room for shifts in sensation to occur if we have decided in advance how the movement must look or what it must accomplish. We must ask with no preconceived answer filling up the space allotted in the mind for information to be received. We must cultivate our ability to remain in this sense empty. To get the most out of the questioning process, we must develop a truly receptive attitude. How else can we listen to our body's natural intelligence.

Trager Mentastics® is built around this simple process of questioning in combination with very easy movements. The movements themselves, no matter how valuable they might be for developing flexibility and strength in the musculoskeletal system, are not, ultimately, what we're interested in, however. The exercise we're interested in is the stretching of the functional mind. We're interested in developing its ability to recall and manifest a different feeling state.

As we practice over and over this questioning process, and the feeling state it leads us to, we are retraining our mind's way of approaching all life's challenges. We can begin to approach situations with the same articulate receptivity we've applied to our movement patterns. And this receptivity makes us more mentally and emotionally available to our friends, family and lovers.

What we learn through this process, in addition, is a depth of communication that is facilitated by truly listening, rather than reacting from the limited perceptions of our habitual patterning. As our movement and thought patterns become less limited and constricted, so do our perceptions. We see and interact with the world through a very different filter.

For myself, more than anything I am still tempted to have answers about my life direction, but it is a feeling of such power to let the creative energy of the universe guide as I live in the questions, as I keep asking: Is this what I most want to be doing now? What would be a more fluid transition into my next growing experience? What would be an easier response to this difficult situation? How could I perceive this situation as less difficult? How could I state my feelings more clearly? How could I listen more receptively?

How glorious it is to let my personality and my life purpose be an empty vessel ready to be filled with the life-giving, life-regulating force that is everywhere around me waiting to seep into any cracks in the little eggshell I call my ego.

The movement of my body in response to carefully chosen questions, "Mentastics®", has become for me not only a delightful physical experience, improving communication in both quality and quantity between my mind and my body, but also has developed my ability to respond with more undefended presence emotionally as well. And more importantly, the process of questioning with no preconceived answer in mind, and with full attention to the response, is a skill which has deepened my communication and become a metaphor for meeting all of life's challenges.