

FROM DANCING CLOUD TO EMBRACE TIGER, RETURN TO THE MOUNTAIN

It was the late 1970's. Milton Trager introduced his profound work of movement re-education at Esalen Institute on the California Big Sur coast. That would lead to the meeting of Betty Fuller and others, the founding of the Trager Institute in the spring of 1980 and, subsequently, the teaching and practice of Trager Psycho-Physical Integration. It was at Esalen that Dr. Trager first met Chungliang Al Huang.

An important part of our Trager story is Milton's meeting with Chungliang Al Huang, a well known Taiji Master, who regularly taught at Esalen and recognized a kindred spirit in the Trager way of moving. Milton and Chungliang became long time friends with great respect and admiration for each other. Many of you know that our most beautiful and expressive logo, the Chinese calligraphy for "Dancing Cloud", was a gift to Milton and the newly formed Trager Institute from Chungliang Al Huang.

The relationship between Trager and Taiji is deeper than I had imagined during my long time career as a Trager Practitioner and Tutor. For the past 8 years, I have been studying, practicing and teaching Qigong with the benefit of having 25 years of Trager in my body! (Just to clarify, Taiji is a form of Qigong, so that all that Chungliang says about Taiji resonates with the practice of Qigong.)

Long time Trager Practitioners may remember the International Trager Conference in the mid 1980's that was held in Indianapolis. Chungliang Al Huang came as a surprise to Dr. Trager! For an hour, the two masters taught us together, Mentastics and Taiji, ultimately moving in our bodies with great delight and awareness. Chungliang's book, "Embrace Tiger, Return to the Mountain" was introduced to us. Re-reading it yet again, I see so many connections between Milton's profound teachings and the ancient Chinese wisdom of moving with awareness in relationship to the earth, the heavens, and each other. Over the years, as a result of that inspiring meeting at that Indianapolis Conference, I have studied with Chungliang a number of times.

My practice of Trager has deeply influenced how I move in my life as well as how I teach Qigong. I hope that each of you will give yourselves a gift and read or re-read these incredible books that will inform and deepen your practice: "Movement as a Way to Agelessness, Trager Mentastics", "Moving Medicine, The Life and Work of Milton Trager, M.D." by Jack Liskin, and "Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain, The Essence of Taiji" by Chungliang Al Huang. Let me show you some of the ways in which the practices of Trager and Taiji are connected.

Ah Ha! Google the name Chungliang Al Huang and watch some of the Youtube videos. You will feel delight and you will also see how the practice elongates the body from "sky hook" at the crown of the head through feet connecting to the earth. You will also notice how the movements, done with intention, open us out from the mid-line. Ah Ha! This is your practice of Trager on or off the table with Mentastics!

Milton and Chungliang spoke seemingly different languages, one Trager, the other Taiji, but they resonated through mind focus, awareness and movement to the energy force within us and surrounding all living things. We can call this force Qi (Chi). Here are a few things imparted to us by Milton that are also expressed by Chungliang through the practice of Taiji/Qigong:

- use empty space to listen and deepen awareness (the pause)

- move from places of balance, connecting through the earth (shifting weight) and heaven (sky hook)
- get out of the way

Enjoy the following quotes from these two masters, Dr. Milton Trager and Chungliang Al Huang, taken from “Movement as a Way to Agelessness, Trager Mentastics” and “Embrace Tiger, Return to the Mountain.” Their words express the essence of The Trager Approach and Taiji/Qigong. You may not realize where one leaves off and the other begins!

C We will have to practice emptying our cups to allow us to receive. (*How do we become a ‘container’ to receive our clients?*)

M Every moment of every movement is a chance to develop the mind as well as the body.

C The essence of Taiji (*and of Trager!*) is based on the sense of meditation and movement, flow and awareness. Important to all the practice is a sense of balance, and the feeling of knowing where you are.

M In the natural and harmonious state of being, like in meditation, we connect with the energy (*Qi*) that surrounds all living things. We are surrounded by a force, a life giving, life-regulating force. It might be electro-chemical or electro-magnetic. Whatever. We know that this force exists. We don’t have to go a fraction of an inch away from our body to get it. You are enveloped by this force. ALLOW this force to enter. You are surrounded by all this help.

C Taiji helps you find a moving center. It’s a movement meditation; you move your center with you. Although you are constantly in motion, you retain that quietness and stillness.

M Mentastics is an APPROACH of mind and motion perfectly synchronized. Do not try to accomplish anything. Become a part of the feeling.

M Moving too fast will also bring one out of ... that state of alert meditative awareness .If you feel pain, discomfort or fatigue while doing MENTASTICS then allow the movement to become lighter, decrease the range or amount of movement, slow down the tempo of the movement or stop the movement and rest.

C If you think of a gentle uplift from the top of your head, then your spine will be quite straight without rigid holding. (*Sounds like engaging the “sky hook”!*) The lower abdomen just below the navel is called the Tan’ien and is considered to be both a reservoir for the Chi (*Qi*), and the center from which our movement originates. Movement extends from this place up through your chest and shoulders and arms down through your legs and feet.

C In Taiji I would say here’s a space being moved by your hands, or here are hands being moved by space. Taiji energy is in inaction, by not doing. (*Remember Milton standing with hands on a body, deeply pausing and asking in the space ~ “W e l l ?” and waiting for the answer to come!*) In Taiji, there’s an outside and inside awareness together.

M A sense of freedom in the entire body, especially in the chest and upper back, can be felt by doing the arm swings. The complete, effortless swinging of the arms can bring you into a oneness with the weight of your arms.

C Arm swings and shifting weight – This swing really helps you to sense how the movement of the upper body is connected through the spine and down into the pelvis. Let your body settle into your base. Then sway a little and discover where you are. You must feel the movement underneath your feet, as if you are walking on the ocean. Keep that torso as a reference point.

M Whenever you are on your feet, you are constantly losing and recovering balance. Even when you think you are standing “still”, fine balance is employed. Developing and improving balance can increase your sense of body awareness and coordination. Shifting the weight on the feet stimulates receptors on the bottom of your feet. That heightens body awareness and balance.

C Every time you begin, you have to recapture that center all over again. You always begin right here, where you are with your sense of yourself and your surroundings.

C When we find that our bodies are not moving as naturally as they could, then we have to take time to re-learn the natural way, the easy way of moving functionally. This kind of practice should happen all the time. All kinds of connections will happen easily if you let them – if your body is free of your dictating mind.

M Tension originates in the mind. The body reflects the degree of tension that exists in the mind. Movement is basic to awareness. When the tension and blocks are released, one experiences more energy and a greater sense of aliveness. (*Trager Practitioners see this in their clients. I now see it in my Qigong students!*)

M Mentastics are not exercises. They are mentally directed movements . Mentastics (*as well as Taiji/Qigong*) are a way of celebrating the aliveness that exists and can be developed in the body/mind.

C The concept of Taiji only means a way of learning how to regain balance again. It is a way to come back to yourself from all the conflicts and confusions that we feel every day in our lives.

C Do a small kick, as if you are shaking off a loose shoe. Notice that the recoil, the bouncing back, is something that happens by itself. You don't have to do it, you just allow it.

C If you set up goals ahead of time, they will blind you to what is happening at the moment, and the strain of trying to achieve your goal tends to make you tense and rigid and closed. Your focusing on goals separates you from true learning, which is simply your awareness of the day to day doing. As you open up to your own body, you also open up to the world around you.

M By experiencing more joy through movement, one can experience more joy in life.

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February 2011