

Ortho-Bionomy: Dancing in the Still Point

By Annie Woods Tornick with Lorin Parrish

Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
-T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton”

My body is stiff after a restless night of sleep following a 10-hour drive from Tucson to Santa Fe. Now, lying on a massage table at the New Mexico Academy of Healing Arts, my mind ruminates in overdrive, in that way it does when not surrendering to exhaustion. Ursula Hofer, an Ortho-Bionomy practitioner and instructor, studies me quietly. In her soothing voice, accented with shades of her native Switzerland, she asks me to relax into the process.

I'm not sure I can do this – relax. My spine seems to slump, enmeshed within the arch of my pelvis; a jab of bone and tissue throbs deeply, the painful presence of sciatica. In this quiet room I have an excruciating awareness of how I resist, including my mind's inability to relax the structure that encases it. Hofer applies gentle pressure to my hips, then knees. Something in my body stirs, connecting with her peaceful presence as she gently manipulates my stubborn body.

My body begins to move on its own inspiration, tentatively at first, like a dancer easing into a once-familiar position, remembering itself. My body responds with increasing confidence, listening intently to a distant music, flowing with it. The sciatic pinch is like a sore tooth I cannot will away, but then my left leg pulls up, foot flat on the table, my knee moves itself slowly in and out like a nutcracker, a wave of soft energy washes through my entire body, and suddenly the pain dissolves. Smiling, my body feels relaxed. I'm in the still point, or pause, between the ebb and flow of movement. Ursula senses and responds to the slightest movements; I feel as if we're dancing in the waves of the subtle communication.

This is my personal experience with Ortho-Bionomy, one of the most effective bodywork methodologies to emerge in the past few decades. Ortho-Bionomy has much in common with classic bodywork techniques, yet integrates them in a dynamic new way. Ortho-Bionomy is structured as light and intuitive touch with agreement between client and practitioner to listen for even the most subtle body movements, thereby reaching deeper layers of somatic patterns and the still points from which the client's own self-healing emerges.

A New Approach

Deeply rooted in the 100-year-old health-care system of osteopathy, Ortho-Bionomy was founded and developed by British osteopath Arthur Lincoln Pauls in the 1970's.

“Pauls created the name Ortho-Bionomy by combining the words ortho, meaning ‘correct’; bio, meaning ‘life’ and nomy, meaning ‘laws.’ He intended to express a way of life that is in harmony with natural laws,” explains Lorin Parrish, co-founder and director of the New Mexico Academy of Healing Arts.

Pauls rejected the traditional “crunch and crack” osteopathic approach, stating: “Most manipulative practices are based upon forceful approaches. It has been proven that the body responds better when it is given the corrective motive for change. Change can only come about when the instincts of the body are summoned up in such a way that the body does not resist this change. Anything beyond this is force, which when applied too much, leads only to rebellion of the self instead of a reunification of the harmonic whole.”

“Ortho-Bionomy's approach gently builds trust within each client and his or her body, to ignite an inner intelligence for both client and therapist, which facilitates a healing response and self-correction,” says Parrish. “Ortho-Bionomy as a philosophy and modality can develop a deeper awareness in the lives of both the practitioner and client, becoming a way of life.” Parrish and Ortho-Bionomy Advanced Instructors Ursula Hofer and Christina Montes de Oca created the academy's Ortho-Bionomy program, leading to full certification by the Society of Ortho-Bionomy International.

According to Hofer, “We learn to honor the intelligence in all things – everything and everybody. This kind of understanding allows an authentic relationship to evolve between ourselves and everything around us.”

Ease and alchemy

An Ortho-Bionomy session is relaxing and noninvasive. During a typical 45-to 50-minute session, the client rests on a massage table, clothed but with shoes off. The practitioner uses techniques including gentle, conscious contact with the hands, locating and addressing points of tension and sensitivity; gently positioning the body for release with compression into the joints; and applying isometrics and other relaxing movements.

“Ortho-Bionomy is a gentle, effective approach to somatic re-education that uses comfortable positioning and relaxing movements to unlock tension, relieve pain, promote structural balance, reduce stress and increase personal awareness and well-being. Homeopathic in principle, Ortho-Bionomy incorporates a wide spectrum of techniques ranging from hands-on contact to non-physical contact with the energy field to initiate innate, self-corrective reflexes that remind the body of its own natural ability to find balance,” wrote Luann Overmyer, an advanced Ortho-Bionomy instructor, in a paper presented to the Fifth National Conference on Integrative Medicine and Wellness in Allied Health, in San Francisco, California, in 1997.

Within the still points of an Ortho-Bionomy session, something powerful begins to occur. “The alchemy of Ortho-Bionomy exists within the power of relationship between practitioner and client,” explains Parrish. “The practitioner uses various supportive techniques, and remains present to engage the client’s natural responsiveness and healing awareness. Within this realm of dynamic interconnection is the alchemical moment where change happens.”

An emerging profession

“The practice of Ortho-Bionomy is appropriate for everybody,” says Parrish – for men and women, beginning and seasoned body workers, and people working in completely different career fields. Ortho-Bionomy is also an effective tool for the repertoire of body workers and healthcare providers who are looking for a refreshing gentle approach to healing.

“Imagine a practice that will energize you as you work with the client,” says Parrish. “There are no straining moves, no exhausting physical demands, and a centeredness in life-force and emotions. Ortho-Bionomy is a nonstrenuous interaction of specific, subtle touch with pure, non-demanding awareness.”

Ortho-Bionomy might offer a natural next-step skill set for massage therapists looking to reduce the strain on their own bodies, and to interact with the clients in more subtle, gentle ways. While the techniques can vary widely, massage therapists’ background may be a boon to an Ortho-Bionomy practice.

“From a technique perspective, Ortho-Bionomy can have similarities to massage therapy depending upon the training of the massage therapist. For example, an Ortho-Bionomy practitioner may explore movement patterns by taking a limb through a range of motion similar to joint mobilizations employed by massage therapists,” says Ray Miller, an advanced instructor of the Wellness and Massage Training Institute in Woodridge, Illinois. “Ortho-Bionomy practitioners may use isometric and isotonic contraction exercises as part of their sessions, which may be compared to muscle energy techniques employed by massage therapists.”

“However,” he continues, “tender points or trigger points encountered by an Ortho-Bionomy practitioner are simply softened through skillful positioning rather than [pressed into] in a painful manner.

“Ortho-Bionomy draws upon physical, energetic and spiritual connections with the client and cultivates a mentality of facilitation rather than intervention,” he concludes.

Certification as an Ortho-Bionomy practitioner requires a 500-hour training program, offered through massage schools across the country, or through CEU classes. All programs are sponsored by the Society of Ortho-Bionomy International. There are also training programs in Canada, Europe and Australia.

Message in a modality

What is the message in Ortho-Bionomy – and why should people consider becoming Ortho-Bionomy practitioners? This modality challenges practitioners to drop any assumptions that they must push and pull hard to make things happen, to manipulate our bodies and our lives to achieve results.

The objective of Ortho-Bionomy is this: Conscious awareness and clear technique follow the intuitive wisdom of heart, mind and body. Ortho-Bionomy supports this innate partnership that leads us elegantly and mindfully to wherever we want to go.

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