

## A Happy Song

# Esalen Massage

by Deborah Anne Medow

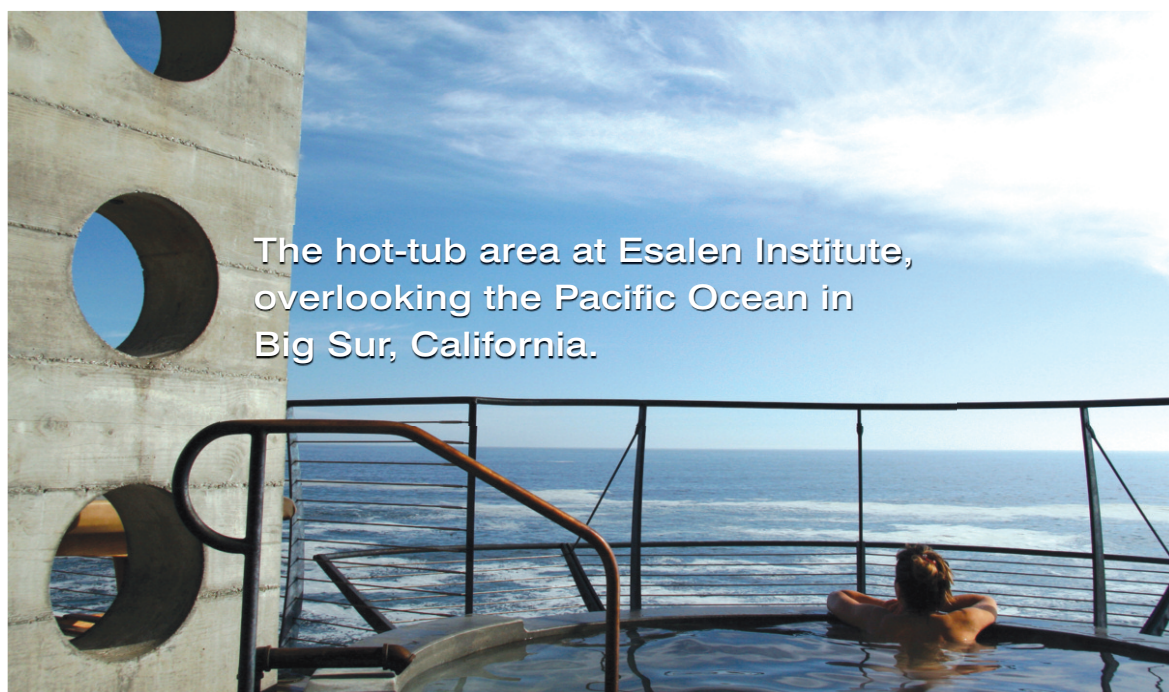
In the early 1960s, before anyone had heard the term human potential, two young visionaries, Dick Price and Michael Murphy, decided to open an alternative educational center on the beautiful Big Sur coast. They dedicated their center to exploring the world “of unrealized human capacities that lie beyond the imagination,” as author and humanist Aldous Huxley termed human potential.

Their intention was to create an experimental think tank by drawing together some of the leading philosophers, psychologists, artists, authors and somatic pioneers, and then both participate in and observe what transpired when these great minds gathered together in the same place.

To that end, Price and Murphy brought some of the most innovative and inspiring thinkers and doers of the time to Esalen Institute, including Abraham Maslow, Huxley, Alan Watts, Fritz Perls, Charlotte Selver, Moshe Feldenkrais, Ida Rolf, Gregory Bateson and Milton Trager.

These pioneering people, with their unique personalities, met, melded and shared their varied perspectives, including in their conversations the original (to the Western mind) idea of viewing the individual as a whole integrated being, not the artificial division of the mind from the body.

Using Swedish massage, Western psychology, Eastern philosophy and Selver’s practices of sensory awareness, Bernie Gunther and Molly Day Shackman worked



The hot-tub area at Esalen Institute, overlooking the Pacific Ocean in Big Sur, California.

DANIEL BIANCHETTA



## Sensory-awareness practices help practitioners develop the ability to feel the natural rhythms of their own bodies.

together to develop a new approach to a full-body massage.

Joined by Storm Accioli, Seymour Carter and others, they explored how healing touch

could be used for personal—and eventually social—transformation.

And so it was in this rich environment, stimulated by the fascinating discussions and explorations taking place and surrounded by the powerful natural beauty of the Big Sur Coast, Esalen® Massage—a massage practice that acknowledged the wholeness of the body-mind connection—was born.

### The session

Taking a few minutes to create a grounded and centered inner space, the practitioner approaches the table with a quiet and sensitive, yet strong, quality of presence, opening a space for intuition to influence the massage session. Instead of looking at the individual parts as separate from each other, the wholeness of the integrated being is emphasized, incorporating long, integrating strokes to give a sense of this wholeness and connection.

Sensory-awareness practices continue to help practitioners in developing this ability to sense and listen, to be able to feel the natural rhythms of their own bodies and translate that knowledge into sensing the rhythms of a client's body. The practitioner follows the flow, attuning, relaxing and connecting long, integrating strokes to the natural rhythms of the client.

When meeting a tight place, an area of held tension, instead of working the tissue and forcing it to let go—and perhaps creating more stress—the Esalen massage practitioner explores, or plays with, the tissue, coaxing it to soften, let go and eventually relax.

This noninvasive touch allows practitioners to vary the pressure from light to deep and back again, depending on the area of the body being touched and the quality of the tissue under their hands. An attitude of exploration, instead of a programmed technique, prevails throughout

the entire massage session.

Frequently, the practitioner returns to the slow, flowing, long stroke, integrating deeper contact, encouraging the client to feel wholly connected and allowing the body systems to move into balance.

### What makes Esalen Massage unique

In an Esalen massage, four basic principles are operating:

1. The practitioner is working with, instead of on, the client.
2. The massage is a moving meditation; the practitioner is committed to being as fully present as possible for the entire massage session, bringing a full-hearted, meditative presence to the table.
3. The practitioner is aware that a client may be affected on physical, mental, emotional or even spiritual levels.
4. Long, flowing strokes, integrated throughout the massage give a sense of relaxation, connection and wholeness.

When looking at these principles more deeply, it is apparent how interrelated they are: When a practitioner is working with, instead of on, a client, the practitioner learns to listen and respond to what he/she is feeling both in the actual tissue and on an intuitive level.

Consequently, the Esalen practitioner responds to the unique issues presented by the individual client, instead of imposing a particular protocol, form or set way of working, as in some other forms of massage. In order to successfully feel and know what is appropriate for a particular client, the practitioner needs to develop a full-hearted presence, the ability to be truly present and focused with the client, and to listen with the whole being.

Often, bringing this full-hearted presence to the table enables a client to feel safe enough internally to relax and let go on very deep levels. Formerly unexpressed emotions, the holding of tissue that often follows with trapped emotions, or even held pain due to physical or emotional trauma—all have the opportunity to rise to the surface and clear from the bodymind, frequently affecting the client on more than a physical level.

The responsibility of the Esalen practitioner is to stay fully present and provide a safe space, thus supporting the release of the pain or emotion that was originally trapped in the tissue in the body.

The fourth principle, the long, flowing strokes in an Esalen massage, not only relax and prepare clients for a deeper touch, they also easily move the practitioner from one area to another area of the body, supporting the feelings of connection, integration and wholeness. The effectiveness of the long, integrating strokes is becoming more apparent as evidenced by the number of other massage modalities that have begun incorporating signature Esalen strokes.

### An integrated technique

Esalen massage easily lends itself to both enhancing and integrating aspects of other massage modalities. Over the years, Esalen practitioners have been fortunate in having the opportunity to experience and work with the creators

benefits common to other massage practices.

Esalen massage also uses passive joint mobilization to help relax muscles and increase a client's range of motion, in addition to reaching muscles that are frequently more difficult to contact. Gentle stretching, often incorporated into an Esalen massage, also increases the range of motion of a limb or the mobility of the neck and in addition, helps the client realize where a muscle is held and the possibility of letting go. One client commented, "When she (the massage practitioner) gently lifted and rolled my head to the side, I suddenly realized how much I was holding my neck, and then, I was amazed at how easily I could let go."

Probably the most beneficial aspect of an Esalen massage is the ability of the practitioner's focused, flowing massage touch to slow the body systems down, moving from the sympathetic to the parasympathetic nervous system, allowing the client to calm down, let go of stress and drop into a deeply relaxed state.

Endorphins are released, the immune system activated,

## Long, flowing strokes support feelings of connection, integration and wholeness.

and disseminators of now well-established bodywork systems and martial art disciplines.

Al Huang and his wonderful way with tai chi contributed to the fluid movements of Esalen practitioners as they move around the table when giving a massage. A student of Ida Rolf, Ph.D., developer of Rolfing® Structural Integration, Al Drucker, brought deep-tissue massage to Esalen, which various practitioners integrated into their Esalen massage sessions. A number of Esalen practitioners studied with Milton Trager, M.D., developer of Trager Work, on his numerous visits to Esalen. Trager's gentle, rocking motions coaxed tight places to relax and let go and were easily assimilated into Esalen bodywork. Pierre Pannetier, protégé of Randolph Stone, M.D., who developed polarity therapy, helped practitioners to more consciously work with energy and electromagnetic fields during their sessions. Fritz Smith brought Zero Balancing to the table; Patricia Caldwell taught shiatsu; and many practitioners added in the gentle sensing and balancing moves of craniosacral work.

### Benefits of Esalen Massage

As in most massage modalities, Esalen massage increases the blood supply and nutrition to muscles, reduces blood pressure, slows the heart rate, relaxes muscle spasms, increases lymph flow and effects a host of other

and the body's natural healing systems move towards balance, integrating the body, mind, emotions and spirit into a natural, harmonious place.

In this day and age, where 43 percent of adults suffer adverse stress-related health effects and stress is linked to the six leading causes of death, the benefits of stress reduction are more important than ever before. Another happy Esalen massage client remarked, "I have never felt so deeply relaxed. I feel as if I dropped a ton of stress! I can almost feel my tissue singing its happy song."



Visit [www.massagemag.com/esalentraining](http://www.massagemag.com/esalentraining) to read "How to Become an Esalen Massage Practitioner," by Deborah Anne Medow.

Deborah Anne Medow is manager of Esalen Healing Arts Department. Esalen Institute is a leading center for exploring and realizing human potential through experience, education and research. The Big Sur-based organization works toward the realization of a more humane and all-embracing world through personal and social transformation. For more information, visit <http://Esalen.org>. 