

EXCHANGE

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A Proven Method to Take Your Piano Playing to a Level You Never Dreamed Possible

(A pre-recital talk given to members of the Boston Piano Amateur Association in November, 2009.)

by Michael T. Serio

I began studying the Alexander Technique seven years ago. After taking a 10-week course at the Boston Conservatory, I realized that this method presented a path that would allow me to overcome the plateau that I had reached after playing piano for 35 years – it gave me hope and inspiration.

Over these past seven years, I have noticed dramatic changes in my playing. I do not see a limit to this work. As I continue my Alexander Technique practice, I believe and know that eventually I will be able to play *Gaspard de la Nuit* with *ease and poise*, something I had **never dreamed possible**.

*I have studied with great teachers
at some of the best conservatories in the world
and do not know of another technique or method
that would make this possible.*



ATI Vision and Mission

Alexander Technique International is a worldwide organization of teachers, students and friends of the Alexander Technique created to promote and advance the work begun by F. Matthias Alexander. ATI embraces the diversity of the international Alexander Technique community and is working to promote international dialogue. Our mission is:

1. To create and sustain open means of global communication for people to discuss, apply, research and experiment with the discoveries of F.M. Alexander.
2. To encourage the use of the F.M. Alexander Technique in both human and environmental relationships.
3. To embody the principles of the F.M. Alexander Technique in ATI's structure and means of operation.
4. To provide a means for recognizing Alexander Technique Teacher competence and providing certification for those teachers who qualify.

So, what is the Alexander Technique and how does it work?

My definition: The Alexander Technique is a proven method of changing habits that interfere with optimal use. You all know what habits are, but what do I mean by optimal use?

One way to define optimal use is through example. Think of someone you know in the performing arts or an athlete who performs in an effortless, fluid, graceful way.

Who comes to mind? ...

For me, Arthur Rubinstein in piano; Mikhail Baryshnikov in dance; Roger Federer in tennis; Michael Jordan in basketball; Tiger Woods in golf – all demonstrate optimal use. They make what they do look easy and effortless.

These artists and athletes do not need to study the Alexander Technique – they are undoubtedly more gifted than most people, but, also, they have learned not to interfere with their kinesthetic awareness or what I call their built-in GPS – Gravity Processing System.

We all have one of these Gravity Processing Systems. It is designed to support us if we can learn how to cooperate with it and not interfere with it. And, while studying the Alexander Technique will not make you play like Arthur Rubenstein, it will show you how it's possible to play at your optimal level.

So, what's unusual about the Alexander Technique is that it does not teach you anything that you do not already know. Rather, it makes you aware of what you are doing that is interfering – *it is an unlearning or non-doing technique.*

EXCHANGE

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In 500BC, the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu says in the Tao Te Ching: *Practice non-doing and everything will fall into place.* F.M. Alexander has a similar saying: *The right thing does itself.*

I invite all of you who are passionate about playing the piano to experience the Alexander Technique and decide for yourself if this is something that will help take your playing to a level you never dreamed possible; **beyond your wildest dreams!**

Biography: Michael T. Serio is a recent graduate of Tommy Thompson's training program. He and Debbie Adams offer workshops for musicians who wish to learn to perform beyond their wildest dreams.

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In this Issue

Piano Playing	1
From the Chair	4
T. Thompson's response to J. Chance	6
Voice is a Verb	17
Emotional and Psychophysical Wholeness	18
Review	26
From the Editor	28

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From the Chair

December 21, 2010

From this Chair,

Greetings Alexander Community

Here I am, coming to you once again from my office chair in what is currently a very steamy Oxford, Mississippi, where it is chilly but dry. I have been reminded that our friends in the Southern Hemisphere are currently celebrating summer weather on the beach. I'm sure the folks down under wouldn't mind a cooling breeze right now, as I am desirous of a blast of warmth!

Why is it that we always want the opposite of what we actually have?

As a single woman I live my life very independently, I work very hard, put in long hours at the studio and office. I have the privilege of not having to account for my whereabouts to anyone, and I come and go as I choose. However, I must admit to the desire or need for someone to say, "What time will you be home?" or "Where are you going?" or even "Where are you?"

On the other hand, I find that my friends with spouses and children are extremely desirous of my situation. They want to come and go from home at will, without having to account for where they are going or when they will be home.

But I truly bet if I had to constantly account for my whereabouts, or if my friends never had to account for theirs, we still wouldn't be satisfied.

What is the old adage? "*Be careful what you wish for!*" Because you just might get it! And then what?

Change! Change is huge. And any slight amount of change in any person's lifestyle or even within an organization is tremendous.

Recently, Alexander Technique International (ATI) has been attempting to change or adapt its decision making process. During the course of the summer, through the use of ATI's members' only pages online, All Together, we went through the beginning steps of Formal Consensus. The hope is that doing this work will make the Proposals stronger before the Annual General Membership Meeting (AGM), and allow us to move through the Formal Consensus Process at the AGM more smoothly and quickly.

Who knows if this experiment will work? As with any change, this has been met with both excitement and skepticism.

As students and teachers of the Alexander Technique, we all know that too much change, too quickly has the ability to overwhelm a pupil and actually cause the pupil to regress. When something is too foreign, it is natural to cling to what is known, because it feels familiar and safe. But when change is gradual, and taken in appropriate steps it becomes a part of one's new process or life.

The same is true for any organization. If change is taken on step by step, it leads to a more integrated and coordinated evolution of the organization.

Often when I am teaching I say to my university students “Everything you need to know is either in *The Wizard of Oz*, or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears!*” And of course they laugh at me: I read the expression on their faces, “What possible wisdom can be found in these texts?”

In this particular situation, *change*, I think Goldilocks is very wise. “Not too much, not too little, but *just right!*”

So perhaps the single person needs just a little bit more family and/or friends around to say, “Hey, where ya’ going?” Or the individuals who are part of a couple need to be able to get out of the house once in a while without being asked where they’ll be going or when they’ll be back. And maybe those experiencing extreme heat need a cold plunge into a beautiful swimming pool, ocean or lake. And those experiencing colder temperatures need to sit in a sunbeam inside the house.

Perhaps it’s all about balance...change that is balanced. I work on changing my patterns behaviorally and physically. As teachers and practitioners of the Alexander Technique, we believe these two are intertwined. When I change my behavior, I change my physical response. When I change my physical response, I change my behavior. But it is important that I change in a way that is sustainable, not radical. Change that balances the old and the new is change that takes root and is not fleeting. Change that has been grounded in what is in familiar, but also allows new choices to emerge and find expression, leads to growth.

Change that is balanced brings poise. Poise leads us to good use of oneself physically and emotionally.

As I face life’s challenges, on all levels, it is my hope that I can allow change to happen; “not too much, not too little, *but just right,*” leading to a dynamic and interesting relationship with the world and all that it has to offer.

From *this* chair...

Jennifer Mizenko

Chair ATI

In “ExChange,” Volume 17, Number 3, and in his blog, Jeremy Chance reflected on a visit by Tommy Thompson to his school in Japan and invited Tommy to respond to his observations. Here is Tommy’s response.

Making Peace with Yourself is the Ultimate Use of Self by Tommy Thompson

I have been asked by ATI’s *ExChange* editor Eric Binnie to respond to Jeremy Chance’s blog article (see below and throughout this article) on my time teaching in Japan. I’m happy to comply, although, when responding to Jeremy’s article, I find it difficult to know where to begin. I’m reminded of the moment in Samuel Beckett’s play, *Waiting for Godot*, when one of his characters claims: “The end is in the beginning and yet we still go on.” So, maybe I should let sleeping dogs lie, if, in their dreams, they approve of my presence in their back yard. In other words I have no objections to anything Jeremy has written. On the contrary, when I first read Jeremy’s assessment of my work while still in Japan and teaching for him, even then I was quite moved by his reflections, I found his perceptions astonishingly comprehensive and insightful, and really quite accurate when assessing what I was attempting to convey.

Of course I especially liked his closing sentence (not included in his “cleaned-up” version of his original blog):

“If he [Tommy] comes to a theatre near you – get some tickets!” And with that said, need I reply? For a teacher, this is as good as it gets! And, for a teacher who was once an actor/director, for what more can I ask?

Nonetheless, I’ll try to respond. I believe the best I can do is to clarify certain choices I made when giving a particular workshop in Tokyo that Jeremy felt were contradictory to previous choices I had made earlier in the workshop. But, let’s keep my reflections about Jeremy’s reflections interwoven with my reply so that you, the reader, might go back and forth with ease and draw your own conclusions.

To do this, it is necessary to clarify specific ways that I view teaching Alexander’s key principles and concepts, which Jeremy, during the first day of teaching, found very much to his liking, but later and well into the second day, felt were contradicted by specific exercises I had introduced, focused on participants putting hands-on while not being involved in any specific activities.

Jeremy began his article with Tommy: Tommy would like to begin with Jeremy.

Jeremy is a highly thoughtful, deeply caring, one-man inspirational show; and he makes that show available to an unbelievable number of aspiring people. When you teach for Jeremy in Japan, you don’t just teach for 12-18 in a group. You teach, during his “Golden Week in Gotimba,” for 65 teachers, trainees and invited members of the public. Where else on the Alexander planet do you find that number of people available for learning all together? Jeremy is about as committed an individual when providing a venue for learning as I’ve ever encountered.

In Japan, during a previous visit, Jeremy and I had taken several walks together towards one destination or another, be it a workshop or dinner. I always found his take on life and the Alexander work compassionate and deeply committed. So, when I read how much what I taught meant to him, I was quite moved. Then, while reading his blog when he got into that little picky bit about my introduction of exercises, still feeling honored, silently, to myself, I immediately agreed with him, as I still do, albeit with a few reservations and clarifications.

“Yes”, I thought, in my first reading of his blog, “that does sound like I was contradicting what I’d previously advocated when teaching the day before.”

But, once upon a time in a galaxy far, far away, my other good friend, David Gorman, also did this to me. Always comfortable in nearly ten years of my teaching for him at his spacious studio in London, he once, in the presence of the workshop/trainee participants, questioned and challenged my present teaching on that particular day. I said, “Well, if you’re not going to let me teach what I want to teach, I’ll go home,” and nearly did so. Happily, I’ve matured since then, and happily David still remains at the top of the list of my trusted inquisitors.

Now, when what I say is called into question, I simply listen, and listen deeply because whatever is challenged, and however I am challenged, might be accurate and I might be slightly, if not altogether, flawed in my reasoning. I’ve found life works best when you don’t take what you say all that seriously: especially when teaching.

So, here is my best shot towards clarifying what I meant and why I chose to say what I said in Japan in May, 2009.

Today, I speak slightly differently from what I did then — for we move on. For me now, the Alexander work, with its particular manner of embodying universal concepts and principles, is at its best when through its practice a person makes peace with him or herself, and subsequently becomes at peace with themselves.

Think about it. This goes way beyond changing habits - which is also fun too.

Oh, by the way, the Rumi quote is actually from me, not Rumi. I used it first in a workshop on “The Beloved in Teaching” in Switzerland years prior. So, although not directly from Rumi, my inspiration was indeed from Rumi.

Here follows Jeremy’s article interspersed with Tommy’s responses.

In May 2009 Tommy Thompson visited Jeremy Chance’s training school in Japan. That visit inspired the following reflections from Jeremy.

**Tommy Thompson’s teaching Visit to Japan
by Jeremy Chance**

*I will never try to know you. I will always long to see you.
Rumi, quoted by Tommy Thompson, Tokyo, 2009.*

JEREMY: I have been trying to get Tommy to come to teach in Japan for many years, and so many reasons held up the process, but finally in May 2009 he made it—and his visit was everything I expected it to be and much more. I think Tommy offers a unique model of Alexander’s discoveries, a way of “languaging” the work that I had not encountered before—and let me tell, I have had a lot of teachers visit Japan over the last 10 years since I have been running a training here. These impressions are mostly taken from my attendance at Tommy’s two-day workshop in Tokyo at the conclusion of his visit, and have been revised from my blog where I first published them.

I trained twice as an Alexander Technique teacher: first in London in the chair work/table work, hands-on, experiencing-before-thinking model; then 16 years later I trained again, this time with Marjorie Barstow in Lincoln, Nebraska, in Sydney, and in London, in the activities, “talk a little/ touch a little,” thinking-before-experiencing model. I have also been a practicing Buddhist of the

Tibetan tradition for longer than I have been in Japan. All these previous experiences definitely inform my reactions to Tommy's work.

Writing now after witnessing the final workshop of Tommy Thompson in Japan, I am hugely impressed with the way Tommy has given a voice to Alexander's discoveries that totally accords with the Buddhist view of "Self" – the lack of anything inherently existing from its own side. In my comments below, I may be misrepresenting Tommy's viewpoint, so please hold the idea that these are my impressions of Tommy's ideas.

Tommy's view is that there is no "number one" as my beloved Marjory Barstow – whom I hope needs no introduction to ATI folk – often cajoled us: "*Who is the most important person here? The student? No. The teacher? Yes.*" For Tommy, there is no "number one" person – there is a relationship, inter-dependency between you and I, which creates us anew from moment to moment in *the "ongoing, forever moving present, which is the only place where change can happen."*

TOMMY: Jeremy has interpreted my view completely accurately, and this view of the interrelatedness and interdependency I have long held to be the cornerstone of teaching this work. My deceased wife, Julie Ince Thompson, would often chide me questioning, "Where is the beginning, when do things begin, – and where do they end?" In other words, who sets things in motion when learning takes place, the teacher or the student?

If the teacher is number one, fine, but in so reflecting, the student is told directly or indirectly what is best for them, rather than guided into the potential of what might be possible for them as an appropriate response, given their true commitment to themselves.

So it is neither about the teacher nor the student. When people come together in assigned and mutually agreed upon roles, the teacher, neither number 1 nor any other number, is hopefully enough of a 'Teacher' that they don't have to insist that what they have to say is hoarded and practiced by their student.

Instead, the teacher while still remaining enough of a student to witness choice emerging simply supports that choice rather than suggest anything, teaches from his or her own constant state of learning. The merit of a teacher in my view is when the teacher is learning proportional to what they have to teach.

Frank Jones told me once, that while giving a lesson to a woman, she remarked to him, "I think you're learning more in this lesson than I am."

"I think so too," Frank replied.

Whatever truth might emerge when the fog of habit is lifted during that new moment of insight transpires between the teacher and the student. It is both seeded and born from their relationship. Neither teacher nor student can claim exclusive sovereignty for the presence of this moment, nor should they.

Just to be grateful for being present for the other's awakening is sufficient. This truth is momentary, ongoing and not to be taken as a better course of action [because inspired by the teacher] than the appropriate course taken by the student just at their moment of realization.

So, “Yes,” Jeremy, I do very much depend upon the nature of relationship as my guide with the student towards that moment of mutual recognition. Hopefully, the two of us arrive at the same time just as the two of us leave that moment and enter the consequence of these new choices with all their possible ramifications. The student leaves the lesson remembering there is more to them than meets their proverbial “eye,” having experienced making a discovery.

Hopefully, the teacher leaves the lesson filled with wonder that they were present with their student when their student left former constraints of their remembered past and entered the amazing world of remembering the present and experienced who they are, apart from who they thought they should have been. In this brief moment of deep relationship both are revealed as they are and not as they think they should be. In the absence of fixed identity, there can be no Number One.

Here, I should probably elaborate a bit about my view of habit and identity.

For years I have tried to find a working definition of identity both for me and for the student to practice; something a bit more tangible than the ‘ego’ which is little more than a concept.

Most of the time identity remains pretty illusive. Few people actually embody who they are, seem to be, or want to be. In other words, I think “That is me.” Or I describe me to myself, claiming, “This is me.” But how often do I actually experience “This is me?”

In the practice of experiencing a more fluid sense of “identity” -- and all habits are “habits of identity,” it is quite useful when teaching to suggest to a given pupil, that to have the full measure of a sense of self they need to be at peace with who they are totally and completely right then and during their practice of letting go of holding onto to who they think they need to be, to be their “Self”: fluidity is the key.

All information received from that which is exterior to a given individual lands somewhere in their body if only for a brief moment; and all information and even raw data is embodied somewhere within them, but is usually ignored in favor of immediate reaction. In other words one seldom responds from where one is most affected or most touched, leaving one disembodied from the experience.

I gave a talk recently at Harvard University in Cambridge Massachusetts on “Embodying Faith.” The talk was prompted by a young minister at Harvard who was chaplain to Harvard Graduate students. On one occasion one of my trainees happened to be having lunch in a cafeteria where this minister was present. He asked what she was doing in her life and she explained that she was teaching music and training to teach the Alexander Technique.

“What was that?” he queried. Part of her explanation was about how one could actually embody their experience of life and themselves a bit more deeply and truthfully. Curious and interested, he asked if when looking around at the church congregation she thought the people were embodied in their faith. My trainee suggested they didn’t necessarily look embodied in their experience.

All the more curious, he visited my training course and we explored how one embodies faith by practicing where one’s response to stimulus lands in one’s body, and then to speak or act from where it lands and where it sits waiting to be acknowledged. As he was a minister, I suggested that he sit and enter prayer, and that I would work with him while he was in prayer, the purpose of which would be to give him a sense of an embodied sense of being in prayer. To offset placing him on the

spot in front of the training group, I invited everyone to join. I had everyone sit in a circle. For those who wanted to pray, I suggested they pray; for those who wanted to meditate: to meditate, for those who wanted to simply sit in silence: they sat.

Then I suggested that they pay attention to wherever the experience they were having showed up in their bodies; and then to pray, meditate or sit in silence from an awareness of that place. Their sense of who they were or how they identified being the person they recognized in prayer, meditation or silence became far more embodied; deeper, more meaningful if you will with more resonance and overtone. Their sense of who they thought they needed to be to be in prayer, meditation or in simply sitting in silence expanded. While I used my hands to disperse the localization of muscular tensional habits associated with who they felt they needed to be in prayer, meditation and sitting in silent observance, their allegiance to any fixed sense of identity dispersed as well.

Jeremy suggested: Tommy uses his hands to “disperse your commitment to who you think you need to be” so that your “Self” truthfully emerges moment to moment, depending on the conditions present. His version of *inhibition* revolves around this idea: we have an “identity” that we are “committed to.” In Buddhist terms, I consider this to be the concept of a fixed, inherently-existing “Self,” that inside me there is a “Jeremy” to which I am committed. This idea of a fixed “Jeremy” (and that is all it is, an idea which is given expression by tensional habits that interfere with the natural function of *primary control*) is merely a habituated summary of the person I think I need to be; or, as Lama Yeshe put it, —a projected hallucination. In Tommy’s terms (as I interpret it) this habituated identity is built on the false notion that I can not be who I am being in any moment, but instead must manufacture a person that I consider “you need me to be.” And the primary “you” of that equation is, of course, my set of parents or primary care-takers, followed by peers, cultural customs, the lure of advertising, and all the other influences that are telling me day and night who I need to be in order to realize happiness.”

I reply, “Yes, this is in fact what I believe I am doing.” When using my hands to disperse tensional patterns which do interfere with controlling head neck reflexes, I believe that I am also helping the person to disperse their commitment to who they think they need to be to be them.

Because in the absence of the known and expected, there is a different sort of knowing that belongs less to one’s allegiance to identity and more to who one can be when in a far more neutral and available state. This opens a window of opportunity to respond in an entirely new and different way free from any self-imposed limitations and expectations.

And, this may or may not have anything to do with a given person pinpointing themselves as who they are, based on what they think or feel they need to be to satisfy the other, as Jeremy implies is often the case.

First, you cannot be whoever you feel you need to be, to be you apart from the other whether the “other” is friend, parent, peer, or the lure of advertising. No one exists out of relationship. This is fundamental. It is just that we usually do behave as though we only exist in relation to our intentions, our goals and desires.

Thirty years ago, when teaching, I often said if you have no desires, then like Buddha you have no problems. You’re at complete peace with who you are so long as you do not allow one blemish to define you for the rest of your life.

Identity is fluid when confronted, measured, weighed and applied. Only in the moment surfacing between stimulus and response, is it possible to meet yourself being yourself; and only then can you decide is this the self I wish to be?

Just by practicing being in relationship consciously and recognizing that you always exist in relationship to something greater than, or at least apart from, your immediate desires while satisfying that one special desire, do you tend to be less fixed and more fluid. You don't have to see that something exists "greater than" "apart from," or "more than" to *know* that it exists. You cannot feel or see gravity, but you know it's there and it surely helps to be reminded of a deeper neuromuscular integrative state of unity when involved in living one's life "with all that flesh is heir to," in the young Prince of Denmark's famous words. Life is simply easier when you experience being supported. In the presence of more universal support (the integrity of our interactive design, a support that belongs to us all based upon millions of years of evolution) the moment of inhibition is extended for a longer time than usual, thereby fostering fluidity of identity.

Then my friend, you will change without effort because at that moment you have left the world of doing and are favoring the world of being, and within this healthy dialogue between the being you and the doing you, there is no conflicting duality, as Jeremy wondered whether or not there might be.

I don't think so.

Why? Because we are hard-wired to be and hard-wired to do. Neither is independent from the other. We just behave as if they were, as if we cannot do something without being or be us without doing. The unifying feeling experienced in an Alexander session gives us back that experience of being fully embodied, and restores our practice of the interdependency of being and doing. But I do understand Jeremy's reasoning below:

JEREMY: DUALITIES

What a wonderful way of giving voice to Alexander's notion of "Self." It neatly sidesteps the whole conversation of "body" and "mind." It is interesting to note that although Alexander himself did talk about "psycho-physical" unity, so imbedding this duality in the creation of a new, hyphenated word; he also insisted that there is only a "critical moment" into which our *use* of our "Self" enters moment by moment (See Alexander's introduction to *Universal Constant of Living*). Tommy morphs this holistic way of considering the work into an alternative language, devised to guide people into a new experience of who they consider themselves to be by "dispensing their commitment to who they think they need to be" which is their habituated "Self."

However, a different kind of duality starts to emerge in that the "Self" is created not only by environmental conditions, but by vows, decisions, promises, intentions, goals, and the like, which abide within our consciousness of "Self." These are not such material things, but they are real in the same way that thoughts are real. Mother Teresa states it: "Love is not a feeling. Love is a decision." So who I am, emerging as I am, moment to moment, is partly shaped by my "others" — other people and environmental conditions — and partly shaped by these "ideas and promises." Are these in the same nature of "belief" as in "I know myself," or do they differ?

I do think there is something different between, say, a vow not to kill any living thing, and a belief that there is no God. Both exist very thinly within my consciousness, but one is based actionally directly in nature, the other is more a basis for making decisions — a premise upon which to build a vow, rather than a promise to behave in a particular way.

Anyway, fascinating as this is to me, I am off the point. The idea I started out exploring concerned another kind of duality that emerges from Tommy's model — which is the distinction between "doing" and "being." Tommy says that "intention dominates our action when we move

in the direction of the focus of our attention,” and in so doing I “leave where I am” or “sacrifice my being.” This is Tommy’s version of Marj’s “I am number one,” and it is still dualistic, albeit in another way. I do not need to leave where I am to follow the focus of my intention, I can preserve a quality of “being” while “doing” whatever I am “doing.” Whenever I do depart from this quality of “being,” I am *end-gaining* as Alexander called it, or “letting the focus of my intention dominate my action,” as Tommy puts it.

TOMMY: In the paper I gave on Frank Pierce Jones in 1986 for presentation at the first Congress for Alexander teachers in Stony Brook, New York, I looked at the presumed duality of being and doing as a false conundrum.

I suggested that the inhibitive state was, in Eugene Herrigel’s words, the *moment of highest tension*, where at the moment you are most likely to hold on to any fixed sense of who you felt you needed to be, to be you, that instead, you let go of doing that which you are most likely to do. Then, neither expressing nor suppressing the “self” you know best and believe in, you are poised for transformation without effort.

Hamlet’s question, “To be or nor to be?” is actually nearly a useless exercise in thinking.

Simply, you are, and I am.

We simply cannot “not be” unless we check out entirely.

But you can still ‘*not do*’ and live happily ever after.

You can’t “*not be*” but you can always “*not do*.” Herein lies the strength of Alexander’s teaching.

You want a glass of water. You sense at that moment how you exist relative to that desire to quench your thirst. You then act to fulfill that desire, ignoring while you act that you existed and exist in relation to something apart or greater than your desire.

With the absence of the familiar world of activity which satisfies your commitment to how you believe you need to behave to feel “you” are you, there is the ever present support of the integrative action of the human nervous system. This integrative action of the human nervous system always seeks homeostasis between familiar responses and those responses to stimuli which will foster the execution of that which is completely new, different and unknown.

To illustrate this marvelous moment of just how much “inhibition” reigns above all else in the life practice of Alexander’s teaching,” I’m going to tell my dog story for the first time in print.

Previously I have always told it to illustrate how I see the role of direction and inhibition and why I favor the latter as a practice for self realization. Today, I’d like to expand.

In 1978, I was an avid runner, running sometimes seven miles a day. On that day in 1978 my wife, Julie, and I were running together near my sister’s home in Greensboro, North Carolina. While running we were discussing whether or not I would continue teaching the Alexander work. I had not trained to teach in the manner others had, and I was receiving a reasonable, if not unreasonable, amount of flack for this transgression. You might say (in Jeremy’s view) that my sense of who I was was being affected by wondering whether I was behaving as others thought I should behave.

These were the issues Julie and I were discussing as we ran along country roads in North Carolina, when suddenly; seemingly out of nowhere, we were attacked by two very large Rottweiler dogs.

The entire incident lasted maybe a few seconds, but within that context of time, all my questions about who to be in order to be me were about to be challenged by inhibition as direct experience. No time to rapidly run through the “directions” in the face of immediate attack. At the point of assault my knowledge of what direction might offer was sufficient.

My initial experience of the event was that of terror, both for myself and for my wife. However, for the first time ever, at the moment I experienced terror, I also sensed kinesthetically my pulling my head backwards and down into my shoulders.

“Far out,” I thought, knee-jerked back into 1960’s jargon. I’m about to be mauled by these dogs, and I’m feeling myself register the neuromuscular pattern associated with the startle reflex. I was astounded that I could consciously register extreme fear while feeling at the same time how I was “using” myself to respond to the attack.

And, my response was appropriate, being part of the ‘fight or flight’ neuromuscular pattern associated with the startle reflex. But as much as this reflex is a fear response, the startle reflex also orients one to new information. To act from the conditions present, including the startle reflex, I would either have to fight two large dogs bent on my destruction, which would be insane, or run from them, which I was doing anyway and it wasn’t doing me any good. So, reason would seem to suggest that if I were to choose the action appropriate to this atavistic reflex I would have to express myself suitable to the reflex: either fight or flight?

Fight: My understanding that I simply did not have the wherewithal to fight two dogs ruled out the first option.

Flight: This would mean I would run a few more steps with both dogs on my back and neck chewing away. Moreover, if I were I to choose neither and suppress this reflex I would have little choice except to curl up and take whatever consequences both dogs should mete out?

However, Alexander’s three part discovery provided another way of viewing response. Having identified the habit, you can keep it; choose something else, or do nothing at all and the integrative effect remains present for your consideration to then be creative and do something unexpected. In other words I could also use my awareness of this reflexive response, re-orient myself to new information and see what/who shows up.

I knew that at the basis for any emotion there was a movement of energy that could be suppressed or expressed. And in the absence of neither expression nor suppression, transformation was possible.

Then I did something I’d never done in the face of supreme danger.

Knowing that if I were to act from the startle pattern -- the neuromuscular pattern that accompanies the reflex that my actions would be partial and incomplete. So, I chose not to respond from *startle*. The kinesthetic recognition of the neuromuscular pattern provided the cue, the reference point, if you will to inhibit. Neither to express nor suppress I believe my nervous system then organized itself around my intention to preserve life and limb and aligned me with all the conditions present.

I let my neck muscles lengthen rather than remain contracted and at that moment I sensed myself moving upwards and downwards at the same time — like Alice having eaten her cookie — then further, an expansion in all directions from within completely “tensegrative” to the onslaught of attack. I was poised,

totally in relation to the circumstance. I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and, in Krishnamurti's words, I acted from choice-less awareness: I truly cannot remember actually making the choice to do what I did.

I raised and extended my arms towards the lead dog that stared me in the face with his large angry mouth and tightly clenched teeth that I can still visualize today, and I uttered a martial arts cry: "HAAA!"

Today I still don't know what provoked me to choose sound over any other response when choosing neither to express nor suppress my response and allow transformation to take place. In other words I lived the moment of inhibition directly in response to being attacked, trusting that the self who would be revealed as me, deeply potential and appropriate to the circumstances might appear.

And it did.

At that moment to my total surprise, both dogs were thrown to the ground by the vibration of my voice. They lay still, and stunned on the ground. I was truly amazed, and gave them another "HAAA" for good measure when Julie said, "What do we do now?" both of us looking down at the dogs. I said "I don't know, keep running," and so we did, while looking back occasionally at the dogs, which lay stunned on the ground.

Inhibition does indeed reign. In its practice there is no duality between doing and being.

JEREMY: From this follows the idea of *attention* – Tommy is primarily interested in observing this, asking the question: how is the person's *attention* interfering with the efficiency of *primary control*? Tommy does not observe *the use of the self* — he remarked that that is only "periphery" to his interest— instead he observes the person's *attention*: what kind of relationship does the person have to their intention/activity? This is of paramount importance, because we always exist in relationship to someone or something else.

TOMMY: For me "use of self" and the way a person is attentive are synonymous, simply one and the same. The use of a person is reflected in the quality of their attention given what they are doing and the interaction they are having with their environment.

Likewise, the quality of one's attention is reflected in their "use of self". When you greet a person, unless something about their body attracts your interest, usually what you are really drawn to see and interact with is the quality of their attention reflected in their body — in movement. That is their "*the use of self*."

So, Jeremy, I never meant that I don't observe use of self; I do. It's just that I do not see *the use of self* strictly as something physical and the misuse of oneself identifiable only in one's body. Undeniably, it is through our bodies that we experience self.

For me it is a matter of emphasis.

Our awareness of habitual "*use*" opens the door to a vast world of possibility. Such awareness signals a point of reference about who we actually are and can be. The recognition that we are prey to habit is a good thing if viewed within the context of change and potential. Again, it affords us the possibility of meeting ourselves being ourselves, so that we can decide who we wish to be.

And, we are our choices, are we not, in the ongoing, *forever moving present, which is the only place where change can happen*.

Isn't it all about choice?

One's life is a composite, a tapestry of never-ending, moment-by-moment, expected and unexpected experiences, whether wanted or not, in response to which we act (or react). Response distinct from reaction involves choice. These choices define us, but only in the moment. If we can welcome the outcome of these new choices we gradually change as a result. However, if we're satisfied with the habitual choices we make, we are likely to stick to who we believe we are and move merrily along fostering who we've been until the next opportunity knocks on our "expanding self" door, when we might then be ready to welcome a different choice.

So, contrary to what I might have mistakenly inferred with regard to my feelings about "use of self", what I've come to understand is: working with this vast "*selfness*" potential that is never exhausted seems far superior, than spending enormous periods of our lives refining our "*use*" thinking we're "wrong." We've just gone astray from who we truly are. We're not 'wrong', we're just a mite bit bewildered. And I believe this with every lesson I give.

And "Yes" I do give exercises that sharpen one's skills and sensitivity while sensing tensional changes interfering with primary control. Always, however I favor introducing any possible new look at oneself in context with what is actually going on in one's life at any given moment. Witness my example of working with the minister in prayer. I'm in your camp entirely. But let our readers read on. Maybe they'll have something they wish to add in the next issue of *ExChange*.

JEREMY: Do we need to explore and know the component elements that make the whole experience possible?

An example of this is in knowing how a person is using themselves. Tommy insists we look first to see the infinite potentiality of our pupil—so we are "being present to being in relation to something that is bigger than our desire"—but my nagging question around this is: how do we see such a thing? Perhaps we don't, perhaps we do – I have no real answer to that. But I do know when it is not there, because I can see how a person's coordination is expressing their fear, ignorance, and attachment within. This is what I see, what I understand is the possibility available beyond that.

Tommy reminds us that we are working with that person's potentiality for becoming other than what they are currently committed to "being" – this is so much more preferable to working with a person's "habit of use" in the negative sense. We don't work with the habit, we work with their potentiality – and I loved being reminded of this so clearly. It is an essential reminder that I was due to hear!

What lets me understand a person has some kind of ignorance, irritation, or obsession operating within them—and that is causing them a harm they do not want—is the detail of my *observation* of their movement. Often a tiny gesture or aberration has been my only clue in uncovering a profoundly deep idea that needs undoing for a person to move into a new idea of the possibility of "Self."

Perhaps my need to do this—which seems to contradict Tommy's disinterest in even seeing habitual *use of the self*—highlights one of the key differences from my own work: rather than give an experience, I seek to introduce an experiment within a person's thinking so that they can give themselves a new experience of who they are "being." But for this, Tommy uses his hands to support a person "dispensing their commitment to being who they think they need to be." Tommy's idea of *inhibition* involves this: withholding definition of "who I am committed to being" to allow in new information that informs the experience I am having of me. It is a truly wonderful approach, and helped me learn another way of communicating to any student in a situation that calls for it.

Another possible source of difference between our approaches is that also I am always curious to find the activity that doesn't let the old habit take place—that is chosen and thought out by both student and

teacher, not constructed by the intervention of my hands. This experiment is set up before my hands touch. My touch is not there to open up choice, or to allow a person to accept information other than the information that their habit is committed to, although that can certainly happen; rather my hands are there to give confidence to their new choices, to support the possibilities that a person is courageously asking of themselves. Student and teacher are not linked in waiting until the confidence or experiential support is there; we are jumping off the cliff together, to a place where this habit is no longer in existence.

Tommy's work has been fabulously stimulating, causing me to question and re-decide about fundamental aspects of my own work: to change some of my long held ideas, to confirm others, and, most importantly, to continue to allow myself to receive new information of any kind in the exciting adventure we call life!

If he comes to a theatre near you – get some tickets!

Life is an exciting adventure or nothing at all.

Helen Keller

TOMMY: In other words I have no objections with anything you have written, Jeremy, because I appreciate the inquiry and the process of learning from each other's personal perspectives and experiences. So, as long as we are still able to question each other, grow and move along, never claiming to have "The" answer, even if we might infer that we do, we are safe. Our safety lies in our recognition that change is desirable no matter what exercise one uses to illustrate it. We all have questions and as long as our answers are evolving and changing we are changed and growing thanks to the experience. There is nothing to lose and everything to gain, when experiencing the absence of who we feel we need to be to be us, in favor of who we might be and probably actually are, given this absence.

Tommy,
Cambridge, Massachusetts.
2010

Biography

Tommy Thompson was co-founder and past-Chair of ATI, a former Assistant Professor of Drama at Tufts University, co-author of *Scientific and Humanistic Contributions of Frank Pierce Jones*, and has for 35 years given over 300 workshops for Alexander teachers and students in the US and throughout the world. Since 1983 he has directed a Teacher Training School for Alexander teachers in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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ATI teaching member, Janet Madelle Feindel's recent book, The Thought Propels the Sound, has received very favorable reviews on both sides of the Atlantic. With Janet's permission, and the kind consent of the respective writers and publishers, we re-print excerpts from the journals American Theatre and StatNEWS.

Voice is a Verb — not a Noun

In the *American Theatre* review Pat Angelin writes of Feindel's "crafted synthesis of Kristin Linklater, Catherine Fitzmaurice and F.M. Alexander,"

When the best actors are on stage, on screen or in the voice-over booth, we relax in the audience and go with them as storytellers wherever they take us, secure in a deeply felt way that we are safe; we needn't hold ourselves apart, and thus we are moved more deeply in our own core as persons. Many young actors are extremely results-oriented, and Feindel states that she has found it to be a 'challenge to get them to take psycho-physical work seriously.'

Feindel gives good homework...a chapter is devoted to ...wonderful etudes suitable for individual or group use. Another full chapter takes us more deeply into text through her 'Resonex' method... developed by Feinder to use the principles of Linklater's work...to interpret theatrical literary texts , chosen so that appropriate use of a specific vocal sound resonator will illuminate each text.

Feindel both clarifies and bridges the distinction between speech and voice training, and she argues persuasively for the addition of nine months of vocal training to the schooling of directors, whose current training is primarily visual (*American Theatre*, Vol. 27, No.1).

Penny O' Connor, whom many of us know from her work at various Congresses and for her summer workshops on the Greek island of Alonnisos, reviewed the book for *StatNEWS*, stating that Feinder

peppers her writing with references to the Work [Alexander Technique]. How refreshing this is as so many books on the voice barely mention it... Janet is very generous in her writing, referring to others in her field and her mentors, including Kristin [Linklater], Cicely Berry and Andrew Wade ...deference is paid to the English system, which suggests that there is more importance placed on voice in UK theatre than in the US. This book is written from the US perspective... [But] will be equally useful for directors and trainee directors here in the UK.

The tone of the book is feisty. Janet clearly is passionate about her work...it's a joy as she shares with us exercises and experiences ... It is written in a combative style with a lot of 'shoulds.' For trainees this is fine, but I ...found the style off-putting.

At the end of the book is an appendix on 'Anatomy and Physiology of the Voice,' which was very useful, with clear explanations and diagrams...including a section on Alexander texts and three Alexander organizations; Alexander Alliance, ATI, and STAT (*STATNews*, Jan.2010).

Janet Madelle Feindel, *The Thought Propels the Sound*. San Diego, CA: Plural Publishing, 2009.

Maria Vahervuo submitted this article while she was still in her second year of Alexander Technique teacher-training in The Netherlands, though her native home is in Finland.

The Emotions and Psychophysical Wholeness

by Maria Vahervuo

(Alexander Techniek Opleiding, Netherlands)



An anonymous wood engraving from Camille Flammarion's "L'atmosphère: météorologie populaire," 1888.

To start this article in my second year of teacher-training in the Alexander Technique, I'd like to share the reason I am so interested in this topic. When I started Alexander Technique lessons, I soon experienced a whole range of changes, physical as well as mental. I remember the wonderful feeling of going up, of space and lightness, as well as the easy, calm and relaxing atmosphere during the lessons. On the other hand, the changes, some of them perhaps different from what I had been expecting, made me feel quite puzzled. I had always been active, doing a lot of sports and physical exercise, my body felt strong, and I didn't have any complaints. Soon after I started the Technique, one body-part after another started to ache: I thought the Alexander work was making me weak. But what it was doing, it was making me aware of and able to feel my body, and how the way I was using my body was actually causing strain and even pain. The physical part was easy to understand, and it eased rather quickly. What was more difficult to accept was why I was feeling emotional pain as well?

I couldn't understand if the uneasy feeling really was connected to the Alexander Technique lessons I was having, and if so, was there any rational reason to go on with them? Somehow, I trusted that the changes and sensations were good, even if not always comfortable, and I did continue with my lessons. Years later, when starting the AT

teacher-training, the same process started again and was even more intense this time. I noticed that all of us on the training course were going through similar things, and it obviously wasn't always easy for any of us. Quite often, we would hear the teachers telling us "It's part of your process." What is the "process" and why is it so difficult sometimes, does it have to be so difficult? These were my guiding questions and a reason to start finding out what, why, and how?

I will not be able to give all the answers in this second year article, and my references are limited, as I'm only in the beginning of my research. The whole area of the study of emotions is rather new in the scientific world. New research is being done all the time, and a lot about the emotions remains unexplained. I will map some of the psychophysical events I've found to be in connection with the emotions and give some ideas generally, why changing is not always easy, not forgetting that every one of us is unique, with a one-of-a-kind experience and nervous system; every process is unique, special, and different.

A young girl asks a wise old woman, "How does one become a butterfly?"
With a twinkle in her eye, the old woman replies, "You must be willing to give up being a caterpillar."

I think F.M Alexander was well ahead of his time in the western world, inventing a principle which nowadays goes into the vast category of body-mind techniques. One of his main principles is that the Self is a whole, a unity of body and mind, and that these two cannot be separated:

I must admit that when I began my investigation, I, in common with most people, conceived of "body" and "mind" as separate parts of the same organism, and consequently believed that human ills, difficulties and shortcomings could be classified as either "mental" or "physical" and dealt with on specifically "mental" or specifically "physical" lines. My practical experiences, however, led me to abandon this point of view and readers of my books will be aware that the technique described in them is based on the opposite conception, namely, that it is *impossible* to separate "mental" and "physical" processes in any form of human activity (Alexander 1932, 1985:21).

The division between body and mind originates from René Descartes time two centuries ago. From there on, the division between the psyche and soma has been common, where medical science dealt with the physical body and the matters of soul were left to the church. This agreement with the Pope made it possible for Descartes to obtain bodies for dissection. Currently, a change is happening in the scientific world and the relationship between the mental and physical is increasingly acknowledged as more detailed neuroscientific information is becoming available. Dr Candace Pert's biomolecular research and discoveries have led to a theory that the emotions can be seen as a bridge between the mind and body, linking these two (Pert, 1997:19).

To explain the emotions depends on the approach. The age-old division of emotions into "basic five passions of gladness, sadness, love, hatred and desire" (Descartes) no longer shares consensus, but invites critical examination (Kagan 2007: xi). The traditional scientific theory of emotions is the James Lange theory from the 19th century, which argues that emotions are caused by changes in the bodily state, i.e. a baby cries because of a change in the bodily state which the baby feels as pain or dis-ease and cries. According to Dr. Pert's and other

research in the fields of psychoneuroimmunology and psychobiology, there is now evidence that the mind also affects the body and that information is possibly carried both ways (Pert 1997:137, 2000, Hartley 2004:33-34).

There is a constant flow of information in the body and constant changes in the bodily state. The amount of information that flows is enormous, of which only a small fraction will reach our consciousness. We are conscious of only about 5% of our cognitive activity (Lipton 2005). The unconscious mind is a powerful processor processing information with a speed of 40 million bits/sec¹ whereas the consciousness is operating with 40 bits/sec. There are different mechanisms as to how the information is traveling, and from the point of view of the emotions, the chemical information flow is the most interesting one, as it provides understanding about the physiology behind the emotions.

There are three groups of molecules in what Pert calls the chemical nervous system: neurotransmitters, steroids, and neuropeptides, which she has named the ‘molecules of emotion.’ We have receptors on the surface of each cell for these information carriers to attach to. Places where a high density of receptors are located, are along both sides of the spine, in various parts of the brain, heart, and the digestive system (Pert 1998:141). The chemical information is transported not only to different parts of our brain and nervous system, but all over the body, possibly through the central and autonomic nervous systems, the endocrine system, the immune system, the blood, lymph, cerebrospinal and interstitial fluids (Pert 1997:27, 130, Rossi, 1986:182-3). This enables a chemical communication between the autonomic and central nervous system “It is (these) peptides and their receptors that make the dialogue between conscious and unconscious processes possible” (Pert 1997:188).

Looking into the brain, the emotional centre is the limbic system. The limbic system is located above the brain stem under the cortex, in the middle of the so-called mammalian brain (LeDoux 2004:98). So physiologically, the emotional centre is located in between the old and new parts of the brain. Roughly speaking, the older parts of the brain are in control of the life maintaining activity and survival, whereas our consciousness and intellect are located on the higher parts of the cortex and within the newest part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex.

The large human brain can be seen as a mechanism that allows us to process the huge amount of information we need to be able to perceive the world, respond to it, move through, and act on it. All this sensory information from inside and outside the body is flowing through our sensory mechanisms and being filtered through our emotional brain. Only a fraction of the total information will reach our consciousness after being filtered through our emotions, beliefs, and perceptions.

How much can we trust our senses? Alexander talks about the “untrustworthy sensory appreciation.”² The reality is different to what we interpret it to be. Real is only as real as we believe it to be. A fear or sensation is *real to us*. The information that reaches our consciousness has gone through many filters by the time it becomes a sensation or a thought. The sensory mechanisms are so influenced by personal perceptions that we largely experience what we want to experience, or remember from the past (Wilkinson 2003:27). The habitual way of using ourselves has accommodated our sensory mechanism to such an extent that it is difficult for us to tell what is *real*. Alexander’s famous sentence: “Don’t trust your feelings” applies here too, what appears *real* to us might be very far away from reality.

From the point of view of fear, when a signal of threat gets to the brain, a whole lot of subconscious physiological events happen, triggered by the amygdale, being the ‘alarm centre’ of the brain that prepares the body to fight, flight or freeze (Hartley, 2004:32, LeDoux, 1998:202). I find it fascinating that these fear reactions are for neurological reasons, difficult to control or be over-ruled by our conscious thoughts. “Conscious control is not always an option.”³ To give a practical example from the Alexander world, at a moment of a fear of falling, it might be impossible to “let your knees go” no matter how clear the conscious wish is! There is naturally a whole variety of other reasons too for not letting the knees go other than a possible fear reaction.

Starting Alexander Technique lessons is a process whereby we need to evaluate and possibly change some of our perceptions and beliefs about ourselves, and therefore also our psychophysical use. To make a change in a life-long habit, a perception formed in early childhood, to alter a nervous system and reflexes that have been reinforced in a certain way on a daily basis, to make a change in any one of these, inevitably affects all of them. Luckily, this doesn’t come too easily! It is a healthy mechanism of the body to maintain its balance in the changing environment without changing too much and to not allowing us to “lose ourselves.” Our system has its habits, and, therefore, a healthy resistance against change.

I have often come across a belief that the Alexander Technique doesn’t deal with emotions. Since no activity can be separated from the emotions, except for some rare cases of injury or illness, not dealing with emotions can create a dilemma. Every AT teacher and training course surely has come across the question of how to deal with emotions and has possibly had to find a way of dealing with them to their best (personal) abilities. During F.M’s time, early 20th century, emotions were dealt with differently than nowadays, and were generally left for individuals to deal with in private. The knowledge that we have about the importance of emotions, is different nowadays. Emotions play a major role in decision-making and learning, and they can even be seen as the bridge between the mind and the body. It is known that suppressing, denying, or ignoring emotions is not dealing with them, and therefore not good for personal well-being. Clearly, we have to find ways of working with the emotions in the psychophysical learning process of the Alexander Technique.

In a learning context, pleasure and play are important factors. What makes the human brain unique is the large prefrontal cortex. This is the place for activities of higher consciousness like learning. In the human prefrontal cortex is the largest density of endorphin receptors, even higher than in the limbic system which is the emotional centre (Pert 1997:134). Endorphin is the body’s own morphine giving us the feeling of bliss and pleasure. Without a doubt, pleasure, play, positive thinking, and learning go hand-in-hand! I could well imagine that the endorphin receptors along the spine and connected to the breathing centre are also involved with the wonderful, sometimes blissful, feelings experienced during an Alexander lesson.

On the other hand, we know that sometimes the Alexander work can “bring up” emotions we associate easily as negative emotions, like sadness, hurt, anger, even rage. These and other “negative” emotions are the ones that we so easily leave unexpressed, don’t feel or don’t want to feel for various personal and cultural reasons. In the long term, a healthier approach would be to acknowledge that “*every honest emotion is a positive emotion*” (Pert 1997:193). Sometimes the real emotions are different than what they first appear to be. For example, what comes out as anger, might actually be the upper layer of hurt or fear. There is a place and need for a good variety of emotions in keeping in touch with oneself, as well as, for example, maintaining healthy boundaries.

Emotions and traumatic experiences that have not been dealt with, remain stored in the body and can be stimulated for example by focused attention, touch, breathing, postural changes and movement. Touch itself is a powerful tool and very closely related to emotions and early experiences. I have a feeling that there are many levels of “letting go” in Alexander terms, from letting go of undue muscular tension in the body to discharging of traumatic experience and held energy. The discharge may come out as memories, movement, trembling, temperature changes, nausea, crying, laughter, change in breathing to name some. I hope that we, as Alexander Technique teachers, would have some basic knowledge about these possible events when dealing with such a sensitive area as the body-mind connection.

One of my initial questions was, “What happens in the process?” At the moment, I see it is as a process of becoming whole, like the word ‘health’ originates from the word ‘whole.’ It is like defragmenting the system, making the flow possible and allowing the physical and mental to have the space to be in motion.

I am a person for whom it is helpful to know the reasons why, and in my process, it has been extremely helpful to understand some of the mechanisms behind the events that are happening. For example, when feeling resistance in my system, and thoughts coming up supporting that resistance, I can now calm myself down and be aware that I might be entering something new, something I, in the first place, experience as unfamiliar and threatening.

I have some great teachers, friends and colleagues who have taught me a lot and who have patiently spent hours answering my questions. Thank you. If you look at the Bibliography you will see that almost all the books I’ve used to research and write this article are written close to the new millennium, before or after. The new neuroscientific information is radically changing the field of emotions, and new theories, knowledge and literature are coming out all the time. This too brings a new challenge for the 21st century AT teacher.

We don’t need to become psychotherapists, but I feel there is a need to be aware of the mechanism of healing and the power of touch. Inevitably, the whole will start to heal when given a chance and emotional healing is part of it. To make changes alters the person’s habits, even life-style. How people react to these changes varies. Personally, I felt that radical renewals in my life were necessary. Maybe they were not all that necessary, but first reaction was my attempt to maintain homeostasis by controlling the outer world. It would be helpful for an AT teacher to recognize and inform my client as to what is happening in the process and during the lessons, even suggesting other help if it is needed. In any case, it is not right to start a process and then leave people alone and confused.

Inhibition, direction and conscious control, these are the key ideas that separate Alexander Technique from many other body-mind techniques. This is why I think the Alexander Technique has great potential, because it is a thinking technique.⁴ We are combining the body-work to the mind- work through increase of awareness, inhibition, direction and conscious control. The aspect of learning, personal development and the possibility of making a change is there. As F.M says, “Change is the Ultimate Reality.”⁵

To finish this article for now, I would like to give an answer to a question given to me from teachers in my training course; “How am I practicing the Technique in my process concerning emotions?”

I’m tempted to say *I am not* using the Technique directly as such to work with the emotions. For me, personally, I feel that the “work is working.” To draw a line as to when and how am I working with an emotion or psychological issue is nearly impossible. People react differently and the issues vary as well.

Some people may get clear images, insight or memories of an event, for example, with an accident “Oh, I remember I broke this leg in two places!” or to a childhood memory. It is also possible that there are other issues, preverbal, prenatal or for some other reason memories without a clear cognitive picture or story attached to it but for example, an overwhelming emotion. When a breakthrough from the unconscious to consciousness happens, people may choose different ways of reacting. Here the line between inhibition and suppressing is a valuable and really tricky one, as it asks for a lot of understanding of the psychophysical whole and it’s functioning.

For my own process, I can’t give a clear example of what is happening, exactly when, and how. The system has a tendency towards balance and healing in itself, and when given a chance, this process is happening, largely unconsciously. It seems that practicing the Alexander Technique has been enough of a change for my system to start the balancing and healing process, that when I’m stepping out of the way, the “right thing happens by itself.”⁶ The things familiar and habitual to me have actually created blockages on many levels and when I give myself time, space and freedom, a lot of release and psychophysical “cleaning up” can happen naturally, inevitably and at it’s own speed.

This might be a reason why Alexander Technique teachers have been able to safely and successfully use a therapeutic technique without receiving much training in the field of psychology. Because the work is not, when used well, a manipulation or direct working on psychological issues. The process may happen naturally in it’s own time, at a tempo, in which the student/client’s system is able to process things. The teacher is “doing nothing” but directing and giving direction by using his or her hands. This is, of course, an activity itself and has a great influence. The changes should, however, happen as a response in the system, not manipulated or forced by the teacher.

This article strives to look behind the curtain and see what the mechanisms are, how and why is the “Work working.” It is also an attempt to raise our awareness about the emotions being in the middle of the psyche and soma, affected by everything happening in the body and mind and definitely by the AT work as well. I am hoping that in the future, any person starting the Alexander Technique and entering a “process” wouldn’t have to feel so left alone with their changes as I was when I started “doing nothing,” thinking my neck free, and sending my head forward and up. I do feel and strongly believe that the process is worthwhile and is not only just a struggle, but a wonderful journey.

How much more there is now to living! Instead of our drab slogging forth and back to the fishing boats, there’s reason to life! We can lift ourselves out of ignorance, we can find ourselves as creatures of excellence and intelligence and skill. We can be free! We can learn to fly!

-Richard Bach: *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*

(Footnotes)

- 1 bits/sec. Nerve impulses per second. (in Lipton 2005, Norretranders T (1998) *The User Illusion: Cutting Consciousness Down to Size*)
- 2 “I came to realize that my reaction to a particular stimulus was constantly the opposite of that which I desired, and that in my search for the cause of this, I discovered that my sensory appreciation (feeling) of the use of my mechanism was so untrustworthy that it led me to react by means of a use of myself which *felt* right, but was, in fact, too often wrong for my purpose.” (Alexander, 1932, 1985:49)
- 3 “When our functioning is controlled by the oldest parts of our brain - the reptilian and limbic parts, which are the parts that are concerned with mere survival, the newer and more sophisticated parts of the brain - the neocortex and esp. the pre-frontal cortex cannot function properly if at all. – This rules out the possibility of a ‘conscious choice’ in a given situation and thus in those cases the letting go of a compensatory tension in an Alexander-way may be at best a *very difficult* task.” (Dollerup Fjordbo, www.more-dimensions.dk)
- 4 “You think that the Alexander Technique is physical; I tell you that it is the most mental thing that has been discovered.” F.M Alexander (Carrington 1994:19)
- 5 Carrington, W. 1994 *Thinking Aloud*, Author’s Preface
- 6 “Stop doing the wrong thing and the right thing will happen” F.M. Alexander

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Biography

Maria Vahervuo was born in Helsinki, Finland. She has a Masters degree in music from the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki. In 1999 she moved to The Netherlands to specialize in early music at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague from which she graduated with her Bachelor's diploma in baroque double bass in 2002. She started Alexander Technique lessons in 1999 and has been actively studying the Alexander Technique and related subjects since then. She will soon be finishing her teacher training with Arie Jan Hoorweg in the Alexander Techniek Opleiding Nederland (ATON) in Amsterdam.

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Review

Barbara Conable and Amy Likar, *Move Well, Avoid Injury*. DVD by Charles Wallace

Last semester, when the Editor returned to work from a Sabbatical Leave, he found that, while he had been away (because of a clerical error in the Registrar's Office) he was in the happy, but daunting, position of having no limits set on his courses. Therefore he had 47 students legitimately enrolled in his Stage Movement and the Alexander Technique course. Splitting the students into three groups seemed the best solution, but left the problem of creating a variety of assignments by which to evaluate this large number of students with a rigor sufficient to satisfy not only the students, but also the college Administration, which tends to be conservative in terms of final examinations. He had enough evidence to allocate grades from earlier assignments, but needed one last tool to reach the final grades. Fortunately, at this point, Barbara Conable's new DVD had just been published, and it contained an overview of much of the work that had been covered in the course. So, putting aside enough copies on reserve for the students in the college library, the final assignment was to write a critical evaluation of the new DVD. A summary of the students' views is published below. The summary is compiled by another student who was taking an Independent Study course that paralleled the work of the other sections. The views expressed are those of the students, and are published with their collective consent.

Barbara Conable, *Move Well, Avoid Injury: What Everyone Needs to Know about the Body*. DVD, edited and narrated by Amy Likar. Andover Publications, 2009.

Review compiled by Charles Wallace

This two-hour DVD is based firmly in Conable's principle of body-mapping and its relationship to our general kinesthesia. It was a straight-forward review of much of the work of our course, though Alexander was mentioned much more in class than in the DVD, even though Conable's ideas are derived from those of F.M. Alexander. While everything is well explained, it is also interactive; viewers are encouraged to stand up and participate in the activities being described. The goal of the work is to perfect the body-map to move more comfortably and happily all your life. Once a viewer has realized the size and function of a particular body part it becomes easier to make full use of that part as integral to the whole body. Visual image and narration are well integrated with one another. The use of questions allows the viewer to reflect on what has just been seen and heard in the DVD. The final few sections tie all the earlier parts together and reiterate the importance of good body-mapping for balance and good body use.

Considering which of the sections of the DVD were the most helpful to them, students naturally concentrated on those areas that concerned them most in their daily activities — be it athletics, music, acting, or dance. Most agreed that the section on breathing was particularly clear and could be applied to each of their respective concerns. From that developed a fuller understanding of the nature of balance. One student in particular wrote, "Having suffered from a snow-boarding accident, and, ever the skeptic, I was always reluctant to accept the basic AT principles. This DVD made me realize that I had, in fact, taken on more of the basic information of the course than I had thought. It confirmed my slow acceptance of AT ideas over the semester, especially the emphasis on the spine as central core and axis of balance." Most students found the idea of poor body-mapping instructive and hoped that the DVD had helped prevent a lifetime of misuse. One student

wrote, “As a theatre and dance student I already knew how to move freely but did not fully comprehend what was going on at a muscular, skeletal, or respiratory level. I now see that, in dance, the turnout occurs at the hip and not at the knee. Knowing this has already prevented pain from repeated misuse.”

Students were asked to ends their reviews with recommendations about any future editions of the DVD. Most viewers felt that, although the box cover suggested viewing the DVD all at once and then, later, watching individual sections again, the two-hour stretch was too long. Various solutions were suggested such as publishing in two separate parts, but there was little agreement on where to make the split. Because the course had emphasized the movements of toddlers and young children some students felt that there was not enough coverage of such activities in the DVD. Of course, it is hardly fair to expect Barbara Conable to know exactly what had been covered in the thirteen-week course. Several students found Amy Likar’s voice very peasant but a little too relaxed. They suggested less narrative in one voice and more live footage of actual people rather than animated anatomical models — though most agreed that these models were accurate and clear.

Students introduced to any set of new ideas have a tendency either to be skeptical or to become instant converts. Along these lines, several viewers felt that, because their course had been so heavily dependent on Alexander principles, the DVD ought to have given more credit to F. M. Alexander’s discoveries. Almost every student found much to admire in the DVD and found it a fitting conclusion to the course, which, though it required more than two hours of viewing and about the same amount of time in writing and revising their perceptions, they found infinitely preferable to any traditional three-hour written exam with multiple-choice questions and anatomical drawings to be labeled and described. Because young people live in a world where information can be found readily at the press of a computer button or screen, it seems likely that examinations of the type described here, where students are asked to evaluate readily-available resources such as DVDs created by prominent teachers in any specialty, are increasingly likely to replace more traditional systems of evaluation. Most of the students enjoyed this test because it solicited their own reflections on the whole course, with the DVD simply acting as a means of organizing their thoughts. One student in particular could not wait to buy several individual copies to present as gifts to older relatives with severe bodily ailments.

Biography

Charles Wallace is a Junior Theatre Arts and Film Studies student at Hendrix College, who had studied movement at L’Academia dell’Arte on Arezzo, Italy, and intends to make a career in theatre or film. He enrolled in the same course as the students whose ideas are summarized above, but as an Independent Study, so that he could partner a blind student in the same course, without risk of injury to that student from other over-active participants.

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From the Editor

It seems very appropriate to my present situation that in her *From the Chair* comments the Chair, Jennifer Mizenko, places so much emphasis on change. I have now reached that point in my life where, at 72 years of age, I am about to retire from a lifetime of academic teaching. I am still physically fit and mentally alert, but, as we are told in Ecclesiastes, 3, 1, “to everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.” Now, these are the times for me to put my energies to older projects that have been pushed aside for far too long. For various reasons, when I stop teaching school, I shall also relinquish my editorship of *ExChange*.

I took on this position at a time when no other volunteer stepped forward. It was always understood that mine would be a temporary position while younger heads than mine thought of ways to make the position more attractive to the newer generation of Alexander Technique writers. But, of course, as we are all volunteers in this endeavor, once gaps are plugged, on-going concerns tend to recede into the background. Last year at the AGM in Cape Cod I reminded the Nomination Committee of this temporary arrangement and asked them to start a serious search for a new editor. Among others I approached my old colleague, Robin Gilmore, who promised to give the matter her serious consideration. Within a few weeks she brought me the happy news that two of the students in her training program would be willing jointly to take up the task as soon as they had graduated from their training course. I am delighted to report that the new editors will be MJ Allen (Mary Jean) and Kathy Privatt. I have every confidence in their skills.

Although I shall continue to take on an occasional AT student on a private basis, I am happy to turn the editorship over to MJ and Kathy. We live in a time of ever-increasing complexity in computerized design programs, some of which I shall probably never master completely. When I watch younger friends and students click their fingers over lap-top keyboards to achieve amazing results at break-neck speeds I experience nothing but awe and humility. Those issues of *ExChange* that I have edited over the past two years have been greatly facilitated by my able student interns, Derek Cash and Jared King, to whom I owe a great debt of gratitude. Here I express my sincere thanks to both of them and to the IT Department of Hendrix College that has made their internships possible. I should also note that, in a few months after I retire from college teaching, I should no longer have access to the services and facilities of my college’s Office of Information Technology, which has facilitated the publication of the journal ever since I took up the Editorship.

I have enjoyed editing *ExChange* and relinquish the position with some sadness, since it has brought me into contact with so many fine writers from all corners of the globe. Yet I step down with absolute confidence in the abilities of my joint successors in that post. Already they have shared with me some of their ideas for new directions in the publication. Having recently graduated, they are in touch with many fellow-graduates from various training programs, and that network of younger practitioners of AT is bound to keep new ideas flowing through the journal. I shall follow their work with great interest and excitement.

I cannot think of a better way to conclude my work than to quote from the Chair's opening comments in this issue, "Change that balances the old and the new is change that takes root and is not fleeting. Change that has been grounded in what is familiar, but also allows for new choices to emerge and find expression, leads to growth."

With my best wishes for the year ahead, and for the new editorship of *Exchange*, I wish all my gentle readers a fond *adieu*.

Eric Binnie (editor *ExChange*, 2008-2010)
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Editor's Enquiry

The Editor subscribes to a clipping service that sends him snippets of information from newspapers all over the world, with information about the many subjects that are of special interest to him, including the Alexander Technique. Recently, he received one that was already several years old, which claimed that, when F.M. Alexander first moved to London, over a hundred years ago, his private lessons in A.T. were not for the financially-strapped. Members of the working or middle classes would not have been able to afford his fees. As a result, most of his early clients were wealthy actors, writers, and musicians or members of the aristocracy and landed gentry.

From a business perspective this would have been a bold move, and one that paid off handsomely in the short term. Once his name and methods were the talk around posh dinner parties he could then afford to take on many more clients, start his training-courses, and, presumably, introduce some type of sliding fee scale that would have brought lessons within the range of possibility for the less well-heeled.

Unfortunately, the number of those members of the first generation of F.M.'s students is dwindling with the passing years. There may be little in the way of hard artifacts: old bills or receipts, advertisements, even letters, that bear evidence of the original fee scale. The Editor should greatly appreciate hearing from anyone who still has access to any such financial records or accounts, or even just memories of how much the older generation paid for lessons during those early years of the twentieth century.

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Alexander Technique International (ATI) is a worldwide organization of teachers, students, and friends of the Alexander Technique created to promote and advance the work begun by F. Matthias Alexander.

ATI embraces the diversity of the international Alexander community and is working to promote international dialogue.

Our mission is:

1. To create and sustain open means of global communication for people to discuss, apply, research and experiment with the discoveries of F.M. Alexander.
2. To encourage the use of the F.M. Alexander Technique in both human and environmental relationships.
3. To embody the principles of the F.M. Alexander Technique in ATI's structure and means of operation.
4. To provide a means for recognizing Alexander Technique Teacher competence and providing certification for those teachers who qualify.

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About the Alexander Technique

Experience of the Technique has led to praise from George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Prof. John Dewey, Sir Charles Sherrington, Julian Bream, John Cleese, Kevin Kline, Roald Dahl, Robertson Davies, and many others. It is taught at the Juilliard School of Performing Arts in New York, the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, the Stratford Shakespeare Festival and the Shaw Festivals in Canada, Boston University, Brandeis University, and many other centers.

The common factor in all aspects of life is that how we are using ourselves—the way we do things—affects the result we get. The Alexander Technique is a means of improving that use. It has been called a “pre-technique” that people can apply to furthering their own special skills and activities. It is also essentially a preventive technique with which we can learn to improve and maintain our health.

The individual is the focus of the Alexander Technique. We are all unique, with different bodies, different experiences, and different problems. We go about the process of change in different ways and at different rates. For these reasons, what happens in an Alexander Technique lesson depends very much on the needs of the student at the time. In the basic sense, though, you will learn an attitude of not trying to gain your ends at any cost, and, at the same time, how to prevent your harmful habits that cause unnecessary stress and restrict your capabilities. Obviously, since what you are changing are patterns built up over many years, a permanent change will not be brought about overnight. However, the person who learns to stop and take time, to think constructively about how he or she uses him- or herself in everyday life, will find that this simple procedure can have far-reaching results.

Further information about the Alexander Technique can best be gained from a teacher near you (see the list on the next page for the nearest ATI office, or visit www.ati-net.com for teacher listings), as your changing experiences through lessons are the only real way to understand the nature of the work and what change is possible.

Alexander Technique International Offices around the World

ATI has offices in 13 countries. If you have questions about ATI, or wish to contact a member, or if you would like to request a printed *ATI Teachers List*, please contact the office nearest you, or send a large stamped addressed envelope (at least 9"x 6" or C5 size) to the office nearest you.

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