

The Alexander Technique As a Way of Centering

by Barbara L. Grant

At first the Alexander Technique offered me the only effective tools I could find for dealing with performance anxiety in music and elsewhere in my life; in the long run, I am beginning to understand it as a physically grounded spiritual discipline. Shortly before I began taking Alexander lessons, and fully two years before I entered the training, I began translating the poetry and visions of a 12th-century Benedictine abbess, Hildegard von Bingen. I had an M.A. in theology and had read various mystical and spiritual works, as well as theory about them, always feeling that something real and physical about these traditions had been lost to us, something that could address the whole person. As the tools of Alexander have taken root within me, some of the practices of medieval monasticism and Zen Buddhism, as well as remnants of primitive Christian liturgical practice, have become much more meaningful and even palpable to me.

The Alexander Technique is a way of centering and allowing the whole self to emerge and so transforming the world, which, as Castaneda recently illustrated in a whole series of books, is what spirituality is primarily about. Based on sound physiologic principles, the results of the Alexander work can be seen visually, sensed kinesthetically, heard in a person's voice and breathing, and measured scientifically with sophisticated modern equipment; the process itself is governed entirely by thought which must be continually renewed. I am going to suggest in broad outline how certain of the concepts that inform the thought process relate to those of several spiritual disciplines widely separated in time and space. Wherever possible I will try for a radical (Latin *radix*, root) use and understanding of language in order to get closer to the real experience that lies behind these practices.

Discipline, or Where the Technique Operates

F. M. Alexander addressed the issue directly when he said:

The essence of the religious outlook is that religion should not be kept in a compartment by itself, but that it should be the ever-present guiding principle underlying the "daily round," the "common task." So also it is possible to apply this principle of life in the daily round of one's activities without involving a loss of attention in these activities.¹

When teaching the Alexander Technique we insist that a student work with her or his eyes open, unlike yoga, meditation or other "relaxation" practices. We teach the Alexander technique in the context of the student's everyday life, starting with the necessities of brushing teeth and combing hair and including the realities of earning a living. We teach our students to redirect their attention in the activities of typing, playing an instrument, or driving a car. We insist that they leave their eyes open and encourage them to see more, to expand their concentration with their field of vision, not "tunnel" it.

The point is that a spiritual discipline to be effective and transformative, must be practical, must operate in a person's real, waking life. So the Rule of St. Benedict (who lived from 480-547), a monastic discipline which has guided the lives of women and men since the 6th century and produced the bulk of medieval art and scholarship, is an eminently practical plan. Its intention is a lifelong turning of one's whole path (Latin, *conversor*, and *converso*, which means to live and

(continued on p. 3, col. 1)

Making a Living As an Alexander Teacher

by Robert M. Rickover

In a 1980 survey conducted by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique, only 14 of 60 teachers interviewed claimed they made an adequate income from teaching. The situation is considerably brighter in North America but, from what I have heard and seen, there remains room for improvement there, too.

The inability of some qualified teachers to attract a sufficient number of pupils is puzzling, given the Technique's generally excellent reputation and the ever increasing interest in fitness and self-improvement. We know we have been well-trained in a Technique with obvious benefits; why then don't pupils come flocking to our door?

I suspect that a lot has to do with many teachers' failure to address themselves to the question: "How is a potential pupil going to learn about the Technique in the first place and then, how is he going to find me?" Basically, then, a classic problem in marketing. Unfortunately, many of us simply do not seem to be inclined to think in those terms.

I should like therefore to offer a few suggestions, based on my own experience over the past year and a half here in Toronto. None of these ideas are particularly novel. Some may not work well in other areas. But I believe they do represent a useful starting point. My hope is that this article will prompt others to contribute ideas which have worked for them and that these can be compiled in a short pamphlet to be made available to all teachers.*

In considering the suggestions presented below, it is worth bearing in mind the fact that every teacher faces two potential markets: First, those who have already had some exposure to the Technique, perhaps through reading or hearing about it from friends, and would like to find a teacher. Second, those who *would* be interested if they knew what the Technique was. Reaching the first group is relatively easy—the phrase "Alexander Technique" alone is sufficient to attract attention so that, for example, a short classified advertisement may be highly effective. For the second (and, of course, potentially far larger) group, more information must be conveyed as in articles and talks.

Needless to say, devices used to attract new pupils can never be a long-run substitute for referrals from those who have already benefited from your teaching. Promotional techniques are helpful therefore only as a transitional measure; ultimately your success or failure depends on your reputation.

Here then are a number of ideas to consider:

Magazine and newspaper articles

I must confess to a personal bias in favor of this approach. You can reach a lot of people at no cost (indeed, you might even get paid!) and perhaps equally important, there is nothing like writing an article on the Technique to clarify your own thoughts. After all, you have to be able to explain your work to friends, relations and (most important) pupils all the time. Why not put it in writing and get it published? If you really do not think you can write an article yourself, find someone who can, give them a few lessons and have them write about their experience.

There are plenty of local publications looking for precisely that kind of material—remember health and fitness are all the rage these days—so finding an outlet should not be difficult.

(continued on p. 2, col. 1)

(continued from p. 1, col. 2)

Promotional flyers, bulletin board notices, etc.

An added bonus of publishing an article is its potential re-use in advertising material. A reprinted article is more persuasive to the average reader than the same words would be on their own. Another approach is to assemble convincing quotations by well-known individuals about the Technique. Some obvious choices are Dewey, Huxley and Tinbergen.

My own experience has been that material on bulletin boards has been most effective in book stores and special interest locations (e.g. the music department of a university), least effective in health food shops.

Talks and demonstrations

This can be a good way to increase your exposure, but beware of groups which exist solely for the purpose of hearing such talks. You are most likely to be successful with groups who have an interest in a specific activity—dance, music, horsemanship, for example—and who can be shown a clear link between the way they use themselves and the quality of their performance.

Bookstores and libraries

The availability during the past few years of several good books about the Technique has greatly increased the number of people who know about it. Make sure at least one local bookstore carries three or four titles. I have found it well worthwhile to establish personal contact with bookstore owners themselves—they are often asked how to find a teacher.

Most public libraries will purchase books if requested to do so. When the books arrive, make sure they are catalogued and shelved in the appropriate section of the library; many librarians are unfamiliar with the Technique and apt to file it under "religion" or "meditation."

Magazine and newspaper advertisements

I have found these to be either highly effective or completely useless, with very little in between. The only way to find what works is to experiment. A surprising number of local papers (in Toronto, at least) offer free classified ads and, of course, you might as well take advantage of those.

Unorthodox methods

I heard about a teacher who distributed promotional material at her wedding ceremony. I do not know how well that worked, but I have had good luck discreetly slipping reprints of one of my articles in the pages of books about health and self-improvement (including those about the Technique) in the local public library. Public lectures or conferences can also present a useful opportunity to leave copies of your printed material where it can easily be picked up.

No amount of public interest will produce additional pupils if you cannot be reached. Unless there is always someone at home to answer the phone, an answering service or machine is a must. My preference is for the latter: it is cheaper and, in my experience, less offputting and far more reliable. Of course some people feel awkward about leaving messages on a machine, but at least they know you are still there. I have heard of several cases where prospective pupils have given up after repeatedly calling a teacher and getting no answer.

Finally, I would like to make a plea to all teachers to maintain up-to-date ACAT and STAT lists so they can provide names of teachers in other cities. As individual teachers, we have all benefited enormously from others' contributions to the Technique's good reputation; it therefore behooves us to do everything we can to help our profession grow and prosper.

*Please send your suggestions and comments to me at: Apt. 604, 190 St. George St., Toronto, Ontario M5R 2N4, Canada. All contributors will, of course, be acknowledged.

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Communications

A Commitment to Actuality

First let us acknowledge the enormous difference between the desire/intention to be honest and truthful, and the objective disclosure of truth. Please take your time with that thought.

Despite all the rhetoric and nonsense nowadays evident concerning what reality may or may not REALLY be, and whether, in what manner, and to what extent such a being as human has access to that reality, still it need be the firm conviction of those believing to be involved with cosmos (and philosophical leanings aside, if you study Alexander Technique you believe at least in terms of your physical organism) that temporospatial knowledge of certain actualities underlying a reasonable existence is something seekable and to be sought. Experience with Alexander's Work shows us that it is with/from a central harmonizing principle that we can most efficiently and fruitfully approach our options; and we must have options, and be intelligent choosers, if we are to seek.

While we do not always see that which blocks us from the truth, nor accurately gauge its distance, still we CAN, in any moment, honor and befriend the centrality, the primary control if you will, the sacred swirling lust which reaches (through devotion) from unity to understanding, and (through adventure) from unity to wisdom.

Manifestation—the physical plane—is for many the most easily observable and holiest aspect of actuality. Certainly it is the "grounding point" of expression, as well as the womb of aspiration. It is the realm of touch, that divine chemistry whereby each created thing connects with every other. So it is here that we have a wonderful opportunity for witnessing and exercising such actuality as may present itself via the physical and sensory. It is in our own best and most Selfish interest that our body and movement be a consciously sought, reflective expression of our acquaintance with intention.

edward john mattutat

september 1982 - january 1983

woodside, n.y.

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Thoughts About The Work

During the period of learning how to stop, "feeling" must be put aside as it is untrustworthy. Obviously, the pupil will be betwixt and between and need support and reinforcement to encourage sole dependence on the means whereby. New experiences may be accompanied by new sensations and new relationships that may be difficult to accept and relate to use that is in an improved direction, when compared to old relationships, sensations and experiences.

Our measurement of improvement or progress in most life styles present day is hedonistic, and so acceptance of change should have some tangible measure if this is at all possible. The difficulty is, as one only partially experiences "knowing" along the way, none of this is a promise for contentment or the acquisition of ends one associates with achievement. Now all alone and different, devoted to the concept of misuse and good use, a new danger and problem may arise in living. If a thief can only hope to be a better thief—does that mean that a womanizer becomes Don Juan, the manipulator becomes the master mover and the "recognition cow" develops a phrenetic need for applause? It is essential to recognize the social responsibility that increases as use of the self improves. Perhaps rethinking patterns that were established at a young age would be beneficial. If one could apply inhibition and means whereby to their own personal history and possibly create a new use for the old self, change in many directions would be realized.

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(continued from p. 1, col. 1)

direct towards, to turn completely)—the transformation of fear into love. Benedict was concerned with the conditions in which this process would flourish best, so the Rule concerns the daily life activities—the best hours for gardening or work in the fields, summer work as opposed to that of winter, the advantage of a glass of wine with the meal, the readings and prayers that are sung for each of the eight Divine Offices each day and how these are arranged in relation to the everchanging liturgical feasts and seasons of the year.

Similarly in the tradition of Zen, transformation is rooted in the real life:

He who truly attains awakening knows that deliverance is to be found right where he is. There is no need to retire to the mountain cave. If he is a fisherman he becomes a real fisherman. If he is a butcher he becomes a real butcher. The farmer becomes a real farmer and the merchant a real merchant. He lives his daily life in awakened awareness. His every act from morning to evening is his religion.²

Jacob Needleman, a Jew who is vitally interested in unearthing an authentic mystical tradition in Christianity comes to an analogous understanding of the process. He says:

But the power to alter the structure of human life, inwardly as well as outwardly, does not reside in a partial function of the psyche. Only that function which can be in actual relationship, actual contact, with all the other parts of the self has the possibility of altering the self, or of serving as the channel for the force that can alter the whole of the self. That function Fr. Sylvan identifies as the power of gathered attention, the power of the soul.³

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), an abbess, composer, and visionary who lived her whole life according to the Rule of St. Benedict, tells us a little about her process as a vessel, about how she receives her visions and liturgical songs. She says very explicitly that they do not come to her in a state of ecstasy, which is what we expect of the mystical experience. She says in the Preface to her first book of visions, *Scivias*:

Truly I saw these visions not in dreams, neither in sleep nor in ecstatic trance, neither with the human bodily eyes or external ears, nor did I sense them by withdrawing myself to hidden places; rather did I willingly receive them—vigilantly, considering them carefully, in clear thought according to the will of God, in open, accessible places with my human interior eyes and ears.⁴

I think the reason that Hildegard's description is so different from any other visionary I've read is that she is careful to stay with the process in this passage, whereas most descriptions of mystical experience really describe only what are its "results," which leads to the next broad category.

Confusion of Ends and Means

We can speak of this confusion with various terms—ends and means, the results of the process as opposed to the process itself, doing as opposed to non-doing. In the Alexander process, the classic example of this confusion is "getting a student out of the chair." As soon as, and just as long as, either student or teacher focus on getting out of the chair, it becomes a goal and the process cannot continue; it will be "stuck" in the end-gaining of the desired result. As soon as the two people give up this "doing" and commit themselves to continuous fanning and revitalizing the thought process, which guide the directions in the body, it is possible and most likely that the process of the directions will take the student out of the chair.

Hubert Benoit speaks to this point in his discussion of Zen thought:

Where the natural man is concerned the action required resolves itself dualistically, into conception and action, and it is to the action, to the execution of his conception that the man applies the word "do." In the sense Zen is right, there is nothing for us to "do"; everything will settle itself spontaneously and harmoniously as regards our "doing" precisely when we cease to set ourselves to modify it in any manner and when we strive only to awaken our sleeping faith, that is to say when we strive to conceive the primordial idea that we have to conceive.⁵

In the Alexander Technique, the confusion between ends and means manifests itself in more subtle ways as well. As trainee and teacher, we are constantly seduced by delight in the results of the technique: so we point out to our students or to each other the physical changes,

"improvements" in our students, the "corrections" of posture, voice quality, lightness of movement after a good lesson. Just as soon as these results become the actual goal and proof of "good teaching," the work loses its power, its real possibility and openness.

In a discussion of the nature of mystical experience, even Aldous Huxley, one of F.M.'s most insightful and articulate pupils, confused ends and means or results and process in a statement which Michael Gelb quotes (and in so doing apparently falls in with the confusion) in his recent *Body Learning*. Gelb quotes Huxley as saying:

In all that concerns life, it is only through the indirect approach that the most substantial goods are achieved. Thus religion is valueless when it seeks the immediate advantage of the devotee. To the mystic it is axiomatic that he must first seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness.⁶ (italics mine)

In his first sentence, Huxley has carefully made a distinction; he then proceeds to fall right into the usual platitudinizing that religion and "mysticism" invoke in most people. In this way its power is immediately misunderstood and lost; religion becomes a piety. Mysticism has not a thing to do with ethical concepts of "righteousness" as Huxley has stated, nor can the real "goal" of spirituality be the "kingdom of God," though it is possibly a result. In *Lost Christianity*, Needleman quotes from a journal kept by Fr. Sylvan which says:

Modern people do not understand that the Christian ideals to which half the world attempts to conform comprise a description of the results of a specific inner act and inner inquiry. Mysticism is a result, a great result perhaps, of the inner inquiry; but everything is corrupted when I confuse inner work with the results of inner work. . . . To experience love for God or my neighbor, even for an instant, is no less a result than mystical experience. To be virtuous is a result. To have faith is a result. Similarly, wisdom and compassion are results. All corruption of tradition begins with the confusion of mixing inner work with the results of inner work. Jesus saw that the Judaism of his time had fallen into this confusion and that no one was practicing the inner discipline free from expectation or assumption of results. . . .⁷

The Physical Nature of Directed Thought

The kind of thinking we use in the Alexander Technique is particularly physical; as we direct this thought it issues in movement. It is thought which is qualitatively capable of creating form. This is remarkably similar to the medieval sense of *contemplation* (which is not at all the same as meditation). Even today, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines contemplation in very physical terms as "the action of beholding, or looking at with thought," or "the action of thinking about a thing continuously; attentive consideration."

In medieval monasticism, this very physical sense of contemplation was still very clear. When nuns and monks prayed, they sang their prayers, they moved their lips, they listened, they involved their whole bodies in the process. And we know from the much more ancient Didache prayers that in the early liturgy of primitive Christianity, the affirmations to prayers and response to gospel readings often resulted in those assembled rising up on their toes. In other words, the action of their prayer issued in a literal movement upward in space. This *intention*, so important to keep alive and moving in prayer, is similar to directing in activity which F.M. talked about in a lecture in 1934:

But if we are going to do, not a mechanical exercise, but something real that matters, you have to think out beforehand the means whereby you have to do it, and give the directions or orders for these means whereby, in the form of a wish, as it were, and keep that wish going all through the activity.⁸

Inhibition and the Concept of Time

For a Zen Buddhist, whose metaphysics rest on time as a cyclic, rather than linear phenomenon, and for whom the world of cause and effect is finally an illusion, chaos and flux are perhaps less threatening. As Westerners, a cultural heritage predicated on the laws of causality, the linear nature of time, the belief in the historicity of God's action in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the duality behind most Greek philosophy, all tend to make us more goal oriented, more "doing" than "non-doing," more resistant to staying with process rather than defining ends and identifying points in time.

(continued on p. 4, col. 1)

(continued from p. 3, col. 2)

And yet in some sexual experiences, artistic performances (particularly non-visual, preverbal ones, as in music), altered states of consciousness, and good Alexander work, we have all experienced some alteration in our sense of time to a degree that is more or less disorienting and expansive. In the Technique we speak of "staying in the moment" and the most effective tool for achieving this is Inhibition. Through Inhibition we can dare to stay in that place of non-doing, not-knowing, just long enough to allow the possibility of creating a new path for energy, a little more air, a clearer neuromuscular message which is capable of defining previously unimagined form. (Castaneda speaks of what must be a similar phenomenon as "stopping the world.")

In my present understanding, there are two, graduated aspects to the concept of Inhibition. One is becoming aware through the diligent use of a mirror and through a good teacher's hands and feedback of particular sets of physical habits attendant on the mere *idea* of doing the activities of daily life such as getting out of a chair or picking up a box. These activities are relatively neutral in terms of a spectrum of emotional possibilities, and we gradually learn to replace them with directed movement; but as we move further along the spectrum we fairly quickly reach the point where certain activities evoke negative, destructive, or fearful emotions, and that is where the real power of Inhibition lies.

This "conscious control" which allows us the possibility to inhibit the "feeling" as it comes and replace it with directed thought may be what the real meaning of "free will" is and why it has been so elusive and difficult to define. Again, it is something that other people in other disciplines have known about intuitively as a concept (without understanding or exploring the important physiologic activity that accompanies or carries it). The fourth-century spiritual master Evagrius Ponticus (a pupil of Clement of Alexandria) wrote about eight kinds of "evil" or "passionate thoughts" (not "sins," but "thoughts"). Commenting on the importance of Evagrius' use of the word "thoughts," Jacob Needleman says:

By calling them "thought" Evagrius is referring to an exceedingly important element in early Christian teaching about the emotions. This element—which has been completely forgotten or only crudely guessed at in modern times—reveals why emotions have such negative power over us; "It is not in our power," Evagrius writes, "to determine whether we are disturbed by these thoughts, but it is up to us to decide if they are to linger within us or not and whether or not they are to stir up our passions." In short, thoughts, impulses, associations appear within the psyche, but as such they are not yet emotions. It is only when these "thoughts" are given something by ourselves, some energy, some specific psychic force, that they take on the nature of emotion—passion—and assume their overwhelming power in our inner and outer lives. The struggle . . . is thus precisely located at that exact interval or "space" before a thought, impulse or association becomes an emotion. But this is immensely difficult and supremely subtle work.⁹

Indeed.

¹The Resurrection of the Body, p. 8.

²Sokei-An, "The Three Types of Religious Method," in *The World of Zen*, Nancy Wilson Ross, ed. (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 35.

³Jacob Needleman, *Lost Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), p. 177.

⁴J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, S. Hildegardis, opera omnis, vol. 197, col. 384B, translation mine from the Latin.

⁵Hubert Benoit, "On the General Sense of Zen Thought," in N. W. Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁶Huxley, "Endgaining and Means Whereby," in *The Alexander Journal* (4, Spring 1965), quoted in Gelb, *Body Learning*, p. 85.

⁷Needleman, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

⁸F. M. Alexander, "Report of a Lecture by F. M. Alexander, Esq.," p. 9.

⁹Needleman, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-139.

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There is so much to be seen when one reaches the point of being able to see, and the experience makes the meat it feeds on.

—F. M. Alexander

(continued from p. 2, col. 2)

Letter to the Editor

Thank you for your most interesting article, "A Modern Theory of Coordination."

The following remark I write as a violinist who gave training courses for violin teachers for more than 20 years at the Israel Academy for Music (Tel-Aviv University). I also took lessons in Alexander Technique for a couple of years.

When in my training courses I spoke about teaching intonation, I gave my students a diagram which was similar to Bernstein's reflexing system though somewhat simpler. In the feedback mechanism of playing in tune, our ears must guide our arm, hand, and fingers to make necessary adjustments of pitch. The ear training requires the comparing of each tone with the previous tone and/or with open strings, etc.

However, in order to correct pitches immediately and very quickly, the player must develop a feeling of *disgust* for any out-of-tune note. Characteristically such notes are called "unclean" in German, Czech and some other languages.

In other words: an *emotional* factor is involved in the otherwise rational innervation process which speeds up the correction considerably.

I think this could be true in other instances as well, as, for example, the fear of falling down when we stabilize our equilibrium, etc.

Wolfgang A. Schocken
Cambridge, MA

Editorial Note

This issue's feature articles illustrate a wide range of creativity inspired by the Alexander Technique. Barbara Grant and Robert Rickover have both written about "challenging" aspects of the work, and both have made a genuine and gracious contribution.

The "Communications" column introduces a new concept in *The Alexandrian's* format. This is a place for shorter pieces of various types—editorial, speculative, informational, descriptive, etc.—that are significant though brief. Of course, regular "Letters to the Editor" are always welcome.

This issue, Vol. II No. 3, concludes *The Alexandrian's* second full year of publication. Thanks to all readers, subscribers, contributors, authors, and especially to the publisher, the American Center for the Alexander Technique, New York.

The Alexandrian needs your continued, and hopefully, increased support to maintain its present publishing standards. Please send your manuscripts and please consider beginning or renewing your subscription by becoming a Friend of ACAT-NY, as provided on this issue's mailing wrapper.

It is necessary to take particular care to begin, if only for a moment, your exterior actions with this interior gaze and that you do the same while you are doing them and when you have finished them. Since it is necessary to devote much time and effort to acquiring this habit you must not be discouraged when you fail since the habit is formed only with difficulty; but once you have acquired it, you will experience great joy.

—Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection (d. 1691)
The Practice of the Presence of God