

5.

History of the Alexander Technique - F.M. Alexander 1869 - 1955.

"I consider that Alexander's work is probably one of the most underrated achievements of the 20th century. I think that it is surprising how relatively unknown and unrecognised it is, because I am convinced that it will prove to be as important to humanity as the work of Newton, of Einstein and particularly of Darwin". Walter Carrington, pupil and later assistant to F.M. Alexander (1934 - 1955), now Director of the Constructive Teaching Centre, London.

A Tasmanian born actor, Alexander's promising career was interrupted by serious vocal problems.

Careful observation showed that certain patterns of muscle tension were always present when he spoke and it was as a result of his efforts to modify these patterns - Tinbergen's "epic of medical research" - that he made the discovery of the primary importance of the head/neck/back relation in human co-ordination. In his book *The Use of the Self* he describes this lengthy process in detail.

Having at length solved his vocal problems (and along with this his breathing problem) Alexander felt able to return to the stage. The change in him was so marked that other actors asked him to teach them his methods and soon medical men were bringing him patients with respiratory complaints. (At this time he became known as the 'breathing man'.) He found to his surprise that the same faulty patterns of tension were present to some degree in everyone who came to him, and he learned to use his hands to help maintain the desirable head/neck/back co-ordination as he put his pupils through certain movements.

Realising the importance of his discovery and the technique he had developed he trained his brother A. R. Alexander to teach it, and in 1904 he was persuaded to take his technique to London. His brother soon followed, and their work rapidly spread in England and America.

Australia remained without a teacher of the Alexander Technique until in 1950 Alan Murray, trained in London by Alexander himself, came to Melbourne and Sydney. Fifteen years later he was joined by Graham Pearl who is still teaching in Melbourne. Since the early 1980's the number of Alexander teachers in Australia has grown rapidly as

- i) Australians who have studied abroad return home, and
- ii) Australian trainees graduate from the recently established Sydney and Melbourne Schools. The present Melbourne School closes in 1989 as the Director will be returning home to London.

By the end of 1989 there will be almost 100 Alexander teachers in Australia, mainly teaching privately (though employment increasingly is available in performing arts, education and community establishments). The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts in Perth has a full-time lecturer in the Alexander Technique and two part-time teachers. All undergraduate students there in the Dance, Drama and Music Schools have the Alexander Technique as a core part of their course.

Following the death of F. M. Alexander in London in 1955 the "Times" of 27th October, 1955 published an article written by rheumatologist Dr. Wilfred Barlow, who said - "among the many varied accounts of his work and his personality, we must remember him as a painstaking scientist, a pioneer in scientific method in the elusive field of human behaviour."

There are now Alexander Technique teachers in 25 countries and teacher training courses in 11 of these. Two international conferences have been held, the most recent in August, 1988 at the University of Sussex, England, with an attendance of almost 500 Alexander teachers.

Following are quotations about the Alexander Technique from a variety of sources beginning with one by F.M. Alexander himself about his work.

"Every man, woman and child holds the possibility of physical perfection; it rests with each of us to attain it by personal understanding and effort."

Professor Nikolas Tinbergen, Nobel Prize for Medicine, 1973.

"This story of perceptiveness, of intelligence and of persistence shown by a man without medical training is one of the true epics of medical research and practice".

Professor John Dewey, educator and philosopher

"Alexander's Technique contains ... the promise and potentiality of the new direction that is needed in all education".

Professor George E. Coghill, anatomist and physiologist

"Mr. Alexander's method lays hold of the individual as a whole, as a self-vitalizing agent. He reconditions and re-educates the reflex mechanisms and brings their habits into normal relation with the functioning of the organism as a whole. I regard this method as thoroughly scientific and educationally sound".

George Bernard Shaw, playwright

"Alexander established not only the beginnings of a far reaching science of the apparently involuntary movements we call reflexes, but a technique of correction and self-control which forms a substantial addition to our very slender resources in personal education".

British Medical Journal

"Alexander's work is of first class importance and investigation by the medical profession is imperative".

Dr. Bent Ostergaard, Consultant Cardiologist, Aarhus University Hospital, Denmark.

"The Alexander Technique is a realistic alternative to beta blockers in the control of stress-induced high blood pressure".

Percy Cerutti, athletics coach.

"Alexander is a 'must' for all competing athletes. You (his teacher, Alan Murray) have taught me a lot of interesting material about the correct use of the body which I have handed on in my training with marked results eliminating bad use".

Michael McCallion, voice teacher RADA, London.

"Alexander's discovery that 'use determines function' and his evolution of a technique which enables the use of the body to be re-educated and freed from unhelpful or damaging habitual patterns of response remains, in my view, one of the potentially most important innovations which our culture has produced".