

# Learning to Teach

by Helen Higa

One of the most frustrating things about training to be an Alexander teacher is that although Alexander painstakingly recorded the account of his discovery and technique, he did not equally document the pedagogical means whereby one can teach this technique to others. Many of us are in training because we want to learn how to do what he did. As popular interest in the Technique grows, the diversity of teachers and how they choose to teach it also increases. It is the same for any educational method or tool.

The Suzuki violin approach is one good example of this tendency. Fifty years ago Shinichi Suzuki made the deceptively simple discovery that all Japanese children spoke Japanese. In fact, children all over the world spoke their native language with utmost fluency. This fact struck him with amazement as it suggested a "startling talent." He studied just how man learns his native language and came up with what he called the *Mother Tongue Approach* to learning. Since he played the violin, he decided to use this approach in teaching very young children to play the violin. Most people thought he was wasting his time, but it worked. Today there are hundreds of Suzuki violin teachers all over the world. Some are more successful at teaching the "whole" child than others. Oftentimes the approach is blamed for poor results when the fault really lies with the individual teacher. The opposite is also true, sometimes the approach is credited for good results and individual teachers do not receive the praise they so richly deserve.

No matter what the subject, teaching is a challenging profession and a profound responsibility. Many times I heard Suzuki being asked by visiting teachers just how long his teacher training course lasted. He used to tell them that he could tell if a teacher trainee was ready to graduate when they brought him an ashtray before he had to ask for one. Everyone got a laugh out of that one, especially Suzuki. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to train with him in Japan, for Suzuki is very involved with teaching teachers. He has a genius for simplicity and a very big heart. One of his favorite sayings is that, "When love is deep, much can be accomplished." As teacher trainees we learned so much more than just how to teach violin to young children. Suzuki often reminds teachers to "forget the violin. It really isn't so important. Don't forget that we are educating children via the violin. If a child hears good music from the day of his birth, and learns to play it himself, he develops sensitivity, discipline and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart."

For the moment then I would like to "forget" the violin (which I now teach), and the Alexander Technique (which I hope to teach) and focus on some of the qualities of a good teacher (which I someday hope to become) that are exemplified in teachers such as Suzuki. When asked, Suzuki will tell you that it is very simple to be a good teacher, "You must know what, when and how." I now think that it's equally important for a teacher to know what not to teach, when not to teach, and how not to teach.

According to *Zen in the Art of Archery*, the fundamental relationship of instructor to pupil is that of "demonstration, example, intuition, imitation." By his example, we learned about Suzuki's philosophy which (In Nurtured by Love) he explains in this way:

Love can be had only by loving. Our life is worth living only if we love one another and comfort one another. I searched for the meaning of art in music and it was through music that I found my work and my purpose in life. Once art to me was something far off, unfathomable and unattainable. But I discovered it was a tangible thing . . . . The real essence of art turned out not to be something high up and far off. It was right inside my ordinary daily self. The very way one greets people and expresses oneself is an art. If a musician wants to become a fine artist, he must first become a finer person. If he does this, his worth will appear. It will appear in everything he does, even in what he writes. Art is not in some far-off place. A work of art is the expression of a man's whole personality, sensibility and ability.

Mrs. Suzuki once told me that the one thing which amazes her the most about her husband is his ability to treat everyone with the same respect, whether they are the princess of Japan or the janitor at his school. I remember when I first arrived in Matsumoto I was kindly met at the train station by two teacher trainees and whisked off to school. I had lived all my life in Hawaii and was not used to the cold winters. I dressed as warmly as I could for the train ride which at that point meant that I looked pretty weird upon my arrival at school. Immediately they told me that Suzuki wanted to meet me right away and to go upstairs to his office. I didn't feel ready for this and tried to stall saying that I wasn't dressed right and wouldn't it be better if we waited a day. Little did I know that Suzuki lives by the motto: "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today." They assured me that I was fine and not to worry. About the time they made me coffee and I was seated across from Suzuki being treated like an honored guest, I was sure that some terrible mistake had been made and that I wasn't who they thought I was. Before matters got out of hand, I decided to tell Suzuki the truth—that I was an awful violinist who had heard

five-year-olds play better and that I wanted to start at the very beginning again. I thought that he wouldn't want to waste his time with me and that I'd be perfectly happy to study with whoever he recommended if he was too busy. He just kept smiling, nodding and smoking and I thought, "Oh no. He doesn't understand English." Well to make a long story short, he did understand me and I became a teacher trainee under him. During the two and a half years of my training there, I learned that there was more to teaching the violin than I could ever have imagined.

Like the program here at the Alexander Center, much of our work as Suzuki teacher trainees was to focus on ourselves. The old adage that if you can't do then teach is no more applicable to the Suzuki violin teacher than it is for the Alexander teacher. To help us develop new skills, Suzuki stressed the importance of self-examination and self-correction in order to make changes:

Action cannot be separated from thought. People with fine judgment are people of ability. Reflective thought is part of judgment. Naturally, the finer the person, the greater his ability to think constructively. In training oneself, the road to improvement is closed if thoughtful self-examination is lacking. They say, "Happy are the thinkers." Why? Because thought is often just idle thought, and does not include self-correction. What is the use of pouring repentance on repentance? Too much thought makes thought meaningless, and finally we get so we reject thought altogether. Self-examination not accompanied by change is the same as not putting into action what we think of doing. Self-training is extremely difficult. If the ability is not developed, the power of self-examination, which should be a light to our feet, goes out altogether. We must cultivate thought, or rather self-correction. But how is it done?

All I can say is that I am very grateful to have learned about the Alexander Technique in regard to Suzuki's question (and my own): "But how is it done?" Personally, I needed the Technique to help me find answers to that question. Suzuki, however, managed to get some people around us and to attend to their needs rather than think only of ourselves. His experience and intuitive ability enabled him to individualize his approach to suit each student's personality, temperament and educational needs. In effect, during our lessons, he brought us all ashtrays before we even knew to ask for them.

Suzuki is very big on tone production and every graduating teacher receives a painting with his calligraphy saying, "Tone has a living soul without form." Suzuki could tell a lot about a person just by listening to the quality of his tone. Where Alexander talks of a man's individuality and character as being the way he uses himself, so might Suzuki

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How far the pupil will go is not the concern of the teacher

*How far the pupil will go is not the concern of the teacher and master. Hardly has he shown him the right way when he must let him go on alone. There is only one thing more he can do to help*

*him endure his loneliness: he turns him away from himself, from the Master, by exhorting him to go further than he himself has done, and to "climb on the shoulders of his teacher."*

Wherever his way may take him, the pupil, though he may lose sight of his teacher, can never forget him. With a gratitude as great as the uncritical veneration of the beginner, as strong as the saving faith of the artist, he now takes his Master's place, ready for any sacrifice. Countless examples down to the recent past testify that this gratitude far exceeds the measure of what is customary among mankind.

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When he worked on our tone, Suzuki was very skilled at indirectly working on our "use" as well as emphasizing the importance of developing our characters during the process. Although his teaching formula was, "One point, one lesson," he consciously worked on many levels to develop the whole person. It was both reinforcing and inspiring to see trainees' personalities and use transform as I heard their tone become fuller, more beautiful, and resonant. In addition to private and group violin lessons with Suzuki, teacher trainees also studied flower arranging and calligraphy every week. I learned a lot one depressing day when Suzuki got so fed up with our heaviness that he bought a ping pong table to lighten things up. We had a little tournament and I couldn't believe how this seventy-five-year-old man could play. None of us could even touch him and we all had a lot of fun. He would often tell us that in the Suzuki method, "The student must always be better than the teacher." I hope that doesn't include ping pong.

As the end of my second teacher training course looms ever closer, I think I can honestly say that learning to teach is very difficult. I will probably continue learning to teach for the rest of my life. This paper, in a way, is my thank-you note not only to Suzuki but to all of my teachers and fellow trainees as well. I would like to end this paper with a quote from *Zen in the Art of Archery*:

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