

Transcript of a talk  
by Walter Carrington  
(via Lizzie Kline)

## Teaching

I want to talk a bit this morning about teaching - about the way we work. Of course, I've said all this sort of thing many times before so they won't really come as a surprise to you or as anything very new. But I find that the things I'm going to say are things that I can't, even now, remind myself of too frequently. I need to tell me about them as well as telling you because it is so very important and it is not easy, because what we attempt to do in our work is so much at variance from the ordinary approach and the ordinary procedures that are accepted as normal and natural in everyday life.

Now it could be argued that first and foremost to be a successful Alexander teacher you've got to be very selfish. Personally you've got to be prepared to give a great deal more thought and consideration to yourself than most people normally would consider to be right and proper. I say "that most people would consider" - I mean that if you discussed it with most people and asked them. I'm not speaking about what people actually do - I'm talking about what people think and what their belief and idea and attitude is about the matter. Most people have a very excellent and laudable idea that you ought not to be selfish and you ought to think of others. And so if you ask them about it they will come up with this and say that that's right and that anything else is wrong. But as Alexander emphasised from the very beginning of his teaching and as I think we have demonstrated and do demonstrate very effectively, you are only as good a teacher as you are able to be by the way you use yourself. It is your own use that is the determining factor in how good a teacher you are.

Now the two ~~basic principles~~ <sup>principal elements</sup> that we deal with in the Technique are so basic and so very important in human life that almost any help in that direction is better than no help at all. So that what you might consider to be very bad and inadequate teaching can, nevertheless, produce what you would consider to be perhaps surprising results. A lot can be achieved by very poor, ineffective means. But because that is so, it does not follow, of course, that we are without interest in improving the means or that we want it to be like that. I only just say that it is so, and indeed it is so, because people are sometimes puzzled - they sometimes say "Well, how does it come about that such spectacular results are achieved by such poor sort of work?" And I am sure that the reason is that the two particular things that our Technique deals with are so fundamental. And of course, on the one hand, from what you might call the mental and psychological aspect the problem that we deal with is the fact that we are all creatures of habit, such terrible creatures of habit, that the given stimulus produces the predictable response - in 99.9 cases. We find all the time that we are doing what we don't mean to do, what we don't intend to do. We react like this, or we do this and that, because the stimulus or the set of stimuli were there. And so it's all magic and we didn't really have any choice in the matter at all; we didn't choose; we didn't think. It doesn't mean to say that all the things that we do on this basis are bad by any means. A lot of the things that we do in response to automatic stimulus are very good, excellent in fact. But we are not entitled to take any credit for them. People are inclined to be terribly pleased when they do things well and terribly depressed when they do things badly. And it's no more rational to be pleased when you do things well or to be depressed when you do things badly. After all, the whole thing is automatic. It's <sup>really</sup> got nothing to do with you; it does itself. You are a mechanism, a creature of habit; the stimulus is presented and, bingo, the response comes up. Now we know this to be very largely true - we have to acknowledge this - and this is one fundamental problem that we are concerned with.

The other fundamental problem that we are concerned with is the fact that we have problems. Now it would perhaps be highly convenient if we didn't have problems -

but in the foreseeable future we are stuck with them. The surgeons may find some way, in due course, of removing our brains and putting them into glass bottles where they are able to function presumably without all the trouble and inconvenience of the body. But this hasn't happened yet and isn't likely to happen in the foreseeable future. So we've got to recognise the fact that we do have bodies. Bodies are designed for movement; bodies must be mobile if they're going to function properly and if they don't function properly they're going to be a terrible drag and particularly, of course, you get into the area where you know perfectly well you can't separate mind from body, you can't separate the mental from the physical, the psychological from the emotional and all the rest of it, then we all get very confused and dark and muddled and there's great trouble. So, in simple terms, we have to deal with securing mobility of the body and on the psychological and mental side, we have to deal with some control of reaction, the exercise of some choice as to what you want to do, what you don't want to do, what you should do and what you shouldn't do, and so on. So basically this is it.

Now when it comes to the actual teaching situation it is always taken for granted that the teacher is there to do something to the student. And in broad terms this is obviously what the situation is about. But in our work there is no question whatsoever that to get effective results the teacher has got to focus the primary thought on him or herself and not on the student. The primary thought has got to be on yourself as a teacher. Now I say "thought" and I'll try and explain to you in a moment - if you don't know - what I mean by thought in that way. Now at the same time as focussing the thought on the self, the feeling is focussed on the pupil. The feeling is focussed on the pupil - that is to say you <sup>want to</sup> feel as much about the pupil as you possibly can - all the sensory channels require to be wide open and focussed on the pupil. Because you need to have just as much information of every sort as is available and you can possibly get hold of. So you are thinking about yourself and feeling about the pupil. It all sounds really rather paradoxical and strange. And people do find it very paradoxical and strange. You see, in the ordinary way the teacher feels "I've got to do something. Here is the student. I've got to take the student's head forward and up". Now I say you haven't got to do anything of the kind. I say that what you've got to do is to think of your own head going forward and up and to feel what is happening to the student's head. You've got to feel what is happening without trying to do anything about it. You're not trying to do anything with it - you're trying to feel, and because you're trying to feel, if you try to do - you know, waggle the head about, or something like that, move it around in that sort of way - trying to do something about it, that makes it impossible for you to feel. You can't do and feel at the same time. Refined feeling and observation are only possible when you're not doing anything. So you are absolutely rigidly paying attention to the feeling - strictly paying attention to the feeling. And of course it is up to you to see that your neck is free, that your head is going forward and up or whatever is required. It's up to you to see to it and, yet, not to feel - not to feel it - not to worry about feeling it, not to concern yourself with feeling it, not to attempt to feel it. Because, you see, if you attempt to feel "Is my neck free? Is my head going forward and up?" If you focus your attention on that and then ask the question and say "Is my neck free? Is my head going forward and up?" the answer is that you don't know - at least you don't know for sure; you can't know with any degree of definiteness. It isn't possible to get a sure answer. <sup>The best</sup> You could possibly say - "well, I think so - it feels like it." But there's always that element of doubt and there's also a very big element of uncertainty and therefore an undercurrent of anxiety - and therefore an undercurrent of stiffening and tension and doing the counter-productive thing. Because if you are in any doubt about yourself, if you are

doubting whether your neck is free, then you are worrying about it. If you are worrying about it, then you are stiffening. So quite clearly it is no good trying to concern yourself with the feeling of whether your neck is free or not. With your pupil's neck it is a totally different matter. With the pupil's neck it is perfectly rational to say "well, now is this neck free?" and to try to determine experimentally, perhaps I should say 'observationally' whether it is free, and if it isn't free then why isn't it free, what's stopping it from being free, and so on. All these questions are then perfectly legitimate and rational and can be asked in such a way that they don't involve any undue anxiety, any stress. So they don't involve tension on your part and strain and counter productive effort. Not at all. You see what I mean. You see the difference between self observation and observation of somebody else. There is a very important difference.

Now with regard to thinking about yourself - what then is this thinking about yourself? Well thinking about yourself is above all sorting out what you really want, what you really wish, what you, if you like, believe in and then reminding yourself about it. Constantly reminding yourself about it. Because our biggest difficulty ~~is~~ all the time as F.M. used to say is that we will and do 'forget to remember'. We are always forgetting to remember and we can't afford to forget to remember. We've simply got to remember. Now, life being as difficult as it is and so much of life being involved with our brains and heads and emotions, thoughts and feelings and all the rest of it and all the problems of life, the fact that we do have a body and that the body needs to be mobile and free, this comes fairly low down on the list of our concerns and anxieties. From a practical point of view, I am talking to you and trying to get you to understand what I am saying. Now my concern to get you to understand what I am saying can easily be very much greater than my concern for what I am doing to myself when I am speaking to you. Because I think, perhaps, well it is so important that they should understand what I am saying. If I have to stiffen and pull myself down a little in order to make the necessary emphasis, to get the expression across, then this is a small price to pay for the achievement in communicating understanding. But you see, unfortunately, it isn't so. It isn't really true, when you come to teaching, this is not right. If it were possible for me to communicate in that sort of way, it might be fine. But the fact of the matter is that it's not so. The idea that one can do it at the small expense of this and that is a delusion. The more you think about it, the more you experiment, the more you observe you will come back to the two basic problems of rigidity, fixation or mobility or whatever you like to call it, the physical aspect of the interference and the psychological aspect of the reflex response to stimulus. They are two fundamental problems that are there all the time and they will not go away. I am not pretending that they are the only problems, there are undoubtedly many others. There may be others that are also fundamental and I wouldn't deny this or dispute it, but I am just saying that these two problems are fundamental they enter into everything, which is what fundamental means. And therefore they have to be taken care of if you are going to be successful. So, what we have to do in teaching, in practical terms is this. We've got to take ourselves, you and me and anybody else who is interested in doing it and we've got to get them first of all to experience lightness, freedom, mobility and taking time over reactions, in other words, what we call 'inhibition'. They've got to experience it first of all, then having experienced it, they've got to start wanting it. They've got to say "yes, I want it to be like that; I'd like it to be like that - that's how I'd like it, that's what I want." And then they've got to understand it and there's a tremendous lot to understand - there's no end to the understanding as far as I have discovered - the more you go into it, the more there is to understand. The understanding as all got to be towards reinforcing the wish and the reason why the understanding's got to be towards reinforcing the wish is because you've got to have a very strong wish if you're going to have any chance of remembering. If you don't have a strong wish you will forget. You may want your neck to be free and your head to go forward and up when everything's nice and calm and peaceful and the sun's shining. But when the house is burning down, then you forget that you want your neck to be free and your head to go forward and up. And that when the sun's shining and it's all nice and calm and peaceful, this is the time when it doesn't really matter if you stiffen your neck a bit. Whereas when the house is burning down if you stiffen your neck, it matters a hell of a lot. So this

is the paradox of these things. This is the difficulty. It is how you manage to remember, how you manage to stoke up, as it were, the power of wish so that it burns with a strong, strong flame of wish, a strong flame of desire, so that you really want to be like that. You want to be like that so much that you're not really interested in feeling or saying "Am I like this?" or like that. You don't have to feel it because you are saying "This is what I want". "I want to be like this. This is the way I want to be." Then if you can remember that, if you can really and truly remember that - your attention is, as I say, on yourself in this matter by saying I want to be up, I want to be free, I want to be mobile, when you put your hands on the pupil you will either find the stimulus. you get through your hands is a going up one or a pulling down one; it will either be a fixing one or a freeing one. If the stimulus is a pulling down one you will say, but I don't want to be pulled down, automatically. The thought that you don't want to be pulled down reinforces your own thought to take yourself up more. Now of course if you put your hands on and you find that it's nice and free and going up, you say - oh this is lovely, this is the way I want it. So either way it's always relative to your own want, and it's your own want that determines the whole thing. Now you see if, on the other hand, what you are saying is - I want the pupil to go up - you forget about yourself and you're so anxious for the pupil to go up that of course you stiffen and you puff and you blow and you make tremendous efforts to take the pupil up and you pull yourself down trying to take the pupil up. That's what happens - literally that happens. And of course, naturally, it's no good because it means that you are then transmitting a strong pulling down stimulus to the pupil, whatever you are doing. Because what is communicated through your hands is what is happening in your own body - fixation and pulling down. And furthermore with all this effort going on, you give yourself no chance to observe. How can you observe when you're making all this effort. But if, as I say, you've got the strong flame of wish there in yourself so that above all, and first and foremost, and regardless of everything else you want to be free in that sort of way, and then you put your hands on the pupil and you say, ah yes, this is how it is, it's like this, like that, you both know how it is and at the same time without great effort of any kind, you automatically know what to do, how to proceed, it does itself. It really and truly does itself - what is necessary to be done, does itself at this basic level. Of course if we are then talking about teaching the pupil to play the guitar or something of that sort, it is perfectly clear that you're not going to teach the pupil to play the guitar just by taking them up and getting them going nicely and freely. But, on the other hand, taking them up and getting them going nicely and freely is going to be an excellent starting point for saying - and now you've got to hold the instrument in this sort of way and the pressure you've got to exert with your fingers is so and so and whatever instructions are necessary and appropriate to give in this specific process. But of course that is beyond Alexander teaching, that's something else.

Question: "Walter, if I as a teacher am fixed or stuck in some way and am not going up and people are coming to see me and of course I want them to have the experience of going up, is it not possible for me to get them going up, albeit it at my own expense.

Walter: "Well what I was saying was that this is so fundamental - this work is so fundamental that it is true, you can get a sort of result, you can get a result in that way. There's no denying that you can get a result in that way - and the result can seem to be quite impressive and spectacular. But if you really and truly evaluate it and go into it, then it's a very very poor procedure and it's a poor result.

Question : "Wouldn't you say, Walter, that one suffers as a teacher if one goes on like that?"

Walter: "Oh yes, of course, you do suffer as a teacher if you go on like that. The whole thing suffers. You see, Alexander believed exactly what I have just told you and this was his experience and his clear vision of things. And therefore he thought that if he was going to train students to teach the Technique, all that was really needed was to get them to use themselves in such a way that they had, as I have described, the strong flame of will really burning and then teaching was nothing. Nothing at all. I mean when anybody is really like that, teaching is just really simple common sense, it's just a simple practical procedure. There's nothing to teach anybody about teaching when they've got that. That was what he thought. But of course, unfortunately, we know from bitter and painful experience that it doesn't quite work out like that in reality or we're not disposed to let it work out like that and students do, in fact, need more help and they need something a little different. And that 's why we work the way that we do in the group classes and so on but, just the same, the underlying thing is and always must be, what I have tried to describe.