

The Development of F.M. Alexander's Use of the Hands

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Let us begin this discussion from a student's question dealing with a central paradox in our practice in the course: "You said that our application of the technique is still in a very experimental stage, and that you thought more procedures would and should be gradually evolved. Doesn't this stress the production of hard-and-fast procedures, as idea contrary to what you've said frequently about avoiding such restrictions in practice?"

The first consideration, of course, is the history of how methods of teaching developed from the beginning, and how they've gone through to the present time. The other equally important consideration comes from Alexander's statement that when you give any one a lesson, you should always do so as though you were giving him a first lesson. He said, in other words, that it's a great mistake to take into conscious consideration that you have taught this person before and to allow yourself to keep in mind what happened in the last lesson. You'll get the best results if you start out as though it's an absolutely new situation: you see what's there and how things are, and take it from there. I've always found this advice sound and true, although it's hard to live up to completely, particularly when working with somebody a lot and getting to know their hang-ups and difficulties. You do, after all, know where you got to last time. But even in such a case, it's a very good thing to remember this advice, to have it in mind so that you can be saying to yourself: well, let's really take a look and see what's here; let's take a fresh look and try to arrive at a fresh assessment above all. Alexander had a favourite story that he was always quoting about an old Scottish professor who used to say to his students in the labs, "now, gentlemen, be sure you don't see what you're looking for." It's a good, sound quote.

But in teaching, quite rightly and inevitably, there will be times when you will pause and ask yourself what the hell you're doing this for--and very frequently the only answer you'll be able to come up with is: the money. Amusingly enough, this most sordid justification has got to be the starting point in many ways: if you're just doing it for enjoyment or good experience, you can get very far off the rails indeed. But if you're taking pupils' money, you have a moral responsibility to give them value for it. This pushes you to ask yourself what you're doing and why, and what the over-all objectives are--and this in addition to the question of the pupil's most obvious and immediate needs. You must inevitably work to some theory or concept of what it's all in aid of. Here there are far more questions to be asked than can be answered, but I firmly believe that you've got to keep asking the questions all the time.

You must also keep the whole thing very fluid and experimental. The big temptation in all sorts of teaching is to keep yourself from the difficult task of thinking by adopting stereotyped procedures. Thinking is what bugs us all and is so tedious, and if you've got a set of stereotyped procedures that you can just trot out without thinking about them, everything is much easier. Obviously you mustn't succumb to the temptation. In the practical teaching situation, the fewer preconceived ideas you have, the better and more experimental your work can be. It's better to be as open as possible, and not really know in many ways where you're going. Be open enough to see how you're going and observe the path, even if you don't know where it leads. Admire the view on the way, so to speak.

But in considering the evolution of the technique, the basic and simplest way to answer the question posed is to take a very potted history of the thing as I know it--how I observed it or guessed that it happened. My understanding is that it all went something like this. When Alexander reached the point of having solved his speech and vocal difficulties to a very large extent, and particularly when he'd overcome the difficulties with

his breathing, he gave some recitals and public performances. They were very well received, with people remarking upon his very good use of voice and remarkable control of breath. In the reviews published at the time, the press journalists (trust them!) characterised him as "the breathing man". An extraordinary fellow, you see, who had extraordinary aspects to his breathing. As a result, a number of people clustered around him and asked him to give them some lessons. He had never intended to do anything of the sort, but when invited thought, why not.

And then he asked himself what you do to give some one a lesson; the answer, as far as he could see, was to give them something of the sort of experience he'd had himself. This experience is spelled out fairly clearly in The Use of the Self, and we know that it involved recognition of the effect of stiffening the neck, pulling the head back, shortening stature, and all the rest of it. First of all, then, he would have to tell people that when they speak, and above all when they recite, they tend to stiffen the neck, pull the head back, depress the larynx, and pull themselves down. They would respond by asking what, precisely, he meant, and no doubt he automatically raised his hands to show how they were pulling the head back or raising the chest or whatever. The using of the hands to give practical demonstrations was the most natural step in the world: as soon as he got into the teaching business, the first thing he did was use his hands to show people.

His operative concept was that his job was to explain about pulling down, about the effect of the depression of the larynx, and all the rest of it, and that they would then also understand it, would get the intellectual idea. As far as he was concerned, he had understood what he was doing wrong--had understood consciously, intellectually, and been able to explain to himself in rational terms: I do this, and that follows; if I don't do this, then that doesn't follow. He believed that this sort of conscious reasoning was the way to proceed with those he taught, and he supplemented this conscious reasoning by practical demonstrations with the hands.

Very soon--I don't know precisely at what point--it became clear that people had all sorts of unexpected, quite unforeseen difficulties. They seemed to him awfully thick, very opaque indeed, since he felt he was explaining and showing them something perfectly obvious. In his reasoning and thinking, he realised at an early stage that it wasn't a matter of doing anything; he didn't have to teach people to do something difficult. All he had to do was show them what was wrong and get them not to do it; if they had any sense, they must be able not to do it. As he used to say, there may be some doubt whether anybody can do something you ask them, because there might be all sorts of reasons why they couldn't, understand why they were so thick, so stupid, why it was all so difficult. What was even more baffling was that his early teaching brought him in contact with many well-educated people in major positions--like politicians and heads of theological colleges and hospitals, people whose position in life indicated that they were intellectually capable. And yet they seemed as stupid as everybody else. All this was very worrying indeed. And I would say that for a long time in his teaching, he kept trying to get through to them intellectually by every means in his power, including any form of illustration and practical demonstration that he could devise.

Gradually he began to realise, after all, that the intellect has less influence on what really happens than we all like to think, and that it is really sensory mechanisms--the feeling apparatus--that dominates. He perceived that people are all dominated by their feeling, which is mostly bound up with the wrong things. Because feeling is deceptive and unreliable,

great confusion results, and people are led to do the opposite of what Alexander saw that they should be doing. What he had to do, therefore, was to try more and more to get this feeling for people. The only way to get it was to use the hands, and to devise and construct situations the body or organism would have to respond to. Then he had to try somehow or another to assist the body's response to the situation.

He was working rather on these lines, then, and was getting a lot of very, very pulled-down, extremely heavy people. The situation was complex and it would take too long to go into very great detail, but let me say briefly that he had to give these very pulled-down people some experience of lightness, some feeling of what it meant not to pull down but to go up. So he found himself at the time I first knew him using quite a lot of physical strength which he had in abundance. He used it to take people pretty well up bodily out of themselves. He really got hold of them, lifted them up, and stretched them out. He succeeded in giving them a feeling through it, but he was still trying to get through to them intellectually even while he was supplementing it with a great deal of physical effort. He was talking above all about inhibition, but also about direction, and he was also realizing, more and more, I think, that what he said didn't have anything like the effect he'd hoped it would have. He was still trying, but they weren't able to take it in, to understand

In terms of Alexander's first teaching work, let me answer another student question about whether most teachers' work with the chair or table evolved through habit or deeper intention. I think that at some very early stage in his teaching, Alexander came to realise that the chair was a good practical instrument because, as he said, it was universally used. Everybody sat in chairs, quite a lot in fact, and everybody did it badly. It was a universal thing, universally badly done. So if you wanted to take a practical activity from people's daily lives in order to relate your teaching to daily life, it was obvious that the sitting in the chair--sit to stand and stand to sit--was a convenient thing relevant to everybody. He also began to find at a fairly early stage that if you could get people to lie down, to get the weight off their feet, you could get changes that standing and sitting couldn't manage. And so he began to incorporate it, but he didn't actually do it with people very often. He used to advise them to lie down, and he got his assistant teachers to lay people down. Progressively, when he had assistant teachers working with him and observed the difficulty they had, he told them that as soon as they ran into difficulty in the chair, they should lay the subject down, get him freed up a bit lying down, and then get him back in the chair to see how it goes. If the teacher couldn't manage any more in the chair, he should lay the pupil back down again.

But by this time he himself had sufficient expertise to manage pretty well in the chair. He could get what he wanted without having to lay them down; he simply didn't need to. He began to find out, and his reduced strength after the stroke confirmed, that he didn't have to lift and manhandle people as he had done earlier. It simply wasn't necessary. Of course, his own power of direction with his hands was tremendous: he had a very, very clear picture in his mind of what was wanted and, above all, what was not wanted. He was very clear-minded, and there was no doubt or uncertainty about what was wrong and in what way it was wrong. He began to find that, with a much more subtle use and direction of his hands, he was able to get through to people in a way he had never managed before, either with the heavy work he'd been doing, or with his verbal and intellectual attempts.

By the end of his life, I would say that he was doing much less talking and explaining. If anybody came to him for an interview, his procedure

was to put his hands on the interviewer straight away, and once he'd got his hands on some one, no questions or answers were necessary. He was able to give an experience that was incomprehensible intellectually, but at a much deeper level you knew that this was what you wanted, and needed, and had to have, that this was how it had to be. In a way it was very confusing because you didn't know how to get it, and you also knew that anything you tried to do about it would most certainly be wrong.

To my knowledge no one, certainly not in the later years, failed to get an experience. Even before the stroke, from the time I first knew him, he'd already gotten to the point where people would have to be in an extraordinarily terrible state for Alexander to be unable to get through to them. They might not like it--might indeed resent it and cause drama--but he'd got the way in there: he was able to give them the experience, and from there it worked on. Here was somebody who could communicate something to a most extraordinary degree, communicate it very efficiently. We who worked with him had a very vague idea of what it was all about, we had some idea of what was supposed to be communicated, and we had some idea of how to communicate it. Obviously, our ideas and experiences were very, very limited, but since those days we have come quite a long way. We aren't yet to the point he had attained, but we are working firmly in that direction.