

# The Alexander Technique:

## Its Call To Greatness

By Felix Morrow

*An address to the First International Congress of Alexander Teachers,  
Stony Brook, August, 1986, by one of America's  
leading proponents of the Somatic Viewpoint.*

I AM PROUD TO be able to say to this audience of Alexander teachers that I am the original publisher who commissioned two of the best books on the Alexander technique: Frank Pierce Jones' *Body Awareness in Action* and Edward Maisel's *The Resurrection of the Body*. I am equally proud to have edited and published in English Gerda Alexander's book on her system of body-mind work which is called *Eutony*. I am also equally proud to have published Moshe Feldenkrais' first book, *Body and Mature Behavior*.

I am trying to indicate that all three of these psychophysical disciplines—the discipline of F. Matthias Alexander, the Feldenkrais work, the Eutony of Gerda Alexander—stand on common ground, share the same revolutionary discoveries. Elsewhere, I plan to demonstrate this common ground in considerable detail. I shall also try to demonstrate that these same revolutionary disciplines and principles are to be found in the psychophysical practices of five-thousand-year-old Chinese Taoism, certainly as they are practiced today by Taoist Master Mantak Chia, whose books I am now publishing. It takes nothing away from the genius of F. Matthias Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, and Gerda Alexander that they have rediscovered for

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the modern world principles and practices which are to be found in ancient Taoism and, no doubt, also in some of the other ancient traditions.

I have been interested in these psychophysical traditions not only as a publisher but very much personally for some thirty years. But my interest did not include any great personal need—until two years ago when I found myself in desperate need of help. My medical history of the past two years could serve as a textbook example of the failures of orthodox medicine and the successes of alternative medicine—in my own case, the Feldenkrais work. But it might just as well have been the Alexander work that saved my health and well-being.

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Two years ago, at age seventy-eight, I found myself having increasing difficulty in walking and breathing. Is this it? I wondered—it being the last grim stage of old age. The dire threats to my walking and breathing made my happily busy life begin to lose its savor.

First, I tried grade A medicine. That

is something most people do not get near to, but I have a forty-year friendship with a first-class internist who has always opened the doors for me to the best that medicine can offer. My internist then sent me first to a cardiologist who, after thorough examinations, concluded that my heart was not the cause of my walking and breathing difficulties. My internist sent me to a neurologist, then to a circulation specialist, and then to specialists in cat scans and sonograms. Then the doctors met together and came to the conclusion that they did not know what caused my breathing and walking difficulties. Orthodox medicine had ushered me out the door without a clue.

Unlike most people in my plight, however, I had an idea where to try next. Of all the psychophysical disciplines, I knew most about the Eutony of Gerda Alexander, whose workshops I have been participating in for several years, in Europe and America. So I phoned Gerda at her school in Copenhagen and asked if I could come for hands-on treatment. Gerda's ecumenical spirit enabled her to suggest that I should first try Feldenkrais practitioners near me in New York. The first one I tried was of no help. The second I tried was Bonnie Humiston.

I had been on her table for little more than fifteen minutes when Bonnie was



able to tell me what my collegium of physicians had been unable to decipher. Bonnie told me that the onset of the years had so rigidified my rib cage, my diaphragm, and my spine to the point that my breathing was too shallow to fuel me and my walking. Much of this, she said, was reversible with due effort. We began; we continued. On June 3, 1986—my eightieth birthday—I could say that ninety per cent of my seventy-eight-old difficulties had been reversed.

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During that time, in addition to the Feldenkrais work, there were three or four week-long workshops with Gerda Alexander (in Berkeley and Strasbourg) in which I participated with a new kind of wholehearted attention. In New York, I have also been participating in a weekly class conducted by Carola Speads in *Ways to Better Breathing*. I also began to work very intensively with the Taoist master, Mantak Chia, whose active meditation practices, as I have already said, are very much akin to Alexander work. But all this became possible only thanks to the success I first had with Feldenkrais work. And as I have said, it could also have happened through F. Matthias Alexander work.

Four years ago, before any of this happened, that is, in June, 1982, I delivered a talk at an invitational conference of scientists and educators called by the Institute of Noetic Sciences. We were convened to discuss ways of introducing into the educational system our new knowledge of the scope of consciousness. For my part, to illustrate how difficult would be the task of getting into the school system, I gave the example of the way in which the academic world has ignored or suppressed William James' writings on psychical research, which William James considered central to his teachings.

I also showed how a similar process of ignoring or suppressing had befallen John Dewey's writings on F. Matthias Alexander. I don't think I have to tell this audience how much significance John Dewey attributed to the treatments he

received from the Alexander brothers. But perhaps I do have to tell this audience that John Dewey's colleagues in philosophy, education, and psychology have systematically ignored or suppressed the profound writings of John Dewey on the universal significance of the work of F. Matthias Alexander. John Dewey's original literary executors, Ernest Nagel and Sidney Hook, have been as silent as the grave about Dewey's thirty-five-year relationship with F. Matthias Alexander. Nagel and Hook have been occasionally buttonholed by Alexander teachers and have responded with stuttering embarrassment—embarrassed because their teacher believed in something so bizarre.

I know of nothing publicly written by any educator commenting on Dewey's reiterated proposals to incorporate Alexander work in the school system. I know of very few favorable comments by scientists supporting Dewey's proposal for thorough scientific study of Alexander work. There is, of course, the amazing example of Niko Tinbergen's

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Nobel Prize speech in 1973, when Tinbergen was awarded the Nobel prize for physiology/medicine and devoted the main part of his speech to praising Alexander as a hero of medical research. But there is also the fact that Tinbergen's speech created not a ripple in medical and scientific circles! In John Dewey's field of philosophy, an obscure Jesuit priest is the only person who wrote a doctoral thesis on Dewey's work with Alexander—and that doctoral thesis has never been published! And, of course, we know that in his nineties, in his last years of life, Dewey was deeply discouraged by the wall of silence and lack of response that had met his writings on Alexander's work.

For the past twenty years, since I discovered Dewey's writings on Alexander, I have thought a great deal about the meaning of this wall of silence surrounding Dewey and Alexander. The

philosophers who have most influenced me throughout my life are William James and Dewey, and they are also by common consent the most important philosophers and psychologists in American history. And yet both have suffered this suppression and ignoring of what they believed to be central pieces of their *Weltanschauungen*. In James' case, his psychical research writings are taught neither in the courses dealing with James' philosophy nor in the courses dealing with James' psychology. And, as we have seen, Dewey's writings and experience of Alexander's work are ignored in the courses dealing with Dewey's philosophy and psychology.

What does this ignoring or suppressing mean? Certainly, it means that we must face the fact that we—the advocates and practitioners of the psychophysical disciplines, we who number by now in the hundreds and even the thousands—nevertheless have made not the slightest dent in the public opinion of the establishment. We must not have any illusions about the wall of silence still surrounding us.

Why is it important for us to understand fully this failure to make a dent in public opinion? Because, I regret to say, that failure has led to a failure of nerve among many practitioners and their advocates. Quite without being aware of it, many of us claim much less for the Alexander work than was claimed by F. Matthias Alexander and John Dewey.

They claimed that the unity of the somatic being, the total person, means that successful Alexander work not only brings health and well-being to a person but also brings more sound judgment, more sanity, more successful functioning in all areas of being. And, further

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Dewey, in all responsibility, conclude that—and I quote from one of his three introductions to Alexander's books:

*When once a reasonably adequate part of a new generation has become properly coordinated (by Alexander work), we shall have assurance for*



*the first time that men and women in the future will be able to stand on their own feet, equipped with satisfactory psycho-physical equilibrium, to meet with readiness, confidence and happiness instead of with fear, confusion and discontent, the buffeting and contingencies in their surrounding.* (The Resurrection of the Body, p. 179.)

I think Dewey was right in saying this. He dared to say—to put it in its negative form which is perhaps more appropriate to our time of even greater crises than in Dewey's time—that if a “reasonably adequate part of a new generation” does not become “properly coordinated” by means of the psychophysical disciplines, then humankind will go on to ever greater and greater crises of failure to control the juggernauts that humankind has let loose.

It is, I say, a failure of nerve for practitioners and their advocates not to say, with Dewey and Alexander, that humankind cannot come out of its endless and worsening crises unless humankind learns to become properly coordinated, learns the conscious control taught by the psychophysical disciplines.

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I shall give you a telling example of this failure of nerve. It is to be found in Edward Maisel's otherwise valuable introduction to his book of Alexander's writings, *The Resurrection of the Body*. I hasten to add that it was not in the original edition which I published, for Maisel has much enlarged his introduction in later paperback editions.

In his failure of nerve, Edward Maisel says that Dewey and Alexander offered “a fanciful program of evolutionary repair which in the present world state scarcely warrants respectful attention.” (p. xiv) Maisel thus denudes the Alexander work of its universal social significance. At another point, Maisel writes:

*Can there be anyone left today who*

*does not concede the truth in Randolph Bourne's early assessment of this scheme for saving the world . . . ? “For if this next step in evolution is to mean anything,” said Bourne, “it means that every separate human being must make over his bodily*

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*coordinations.” And if we must all await the consummation of this appalling task—if we must wait till everyone has learned conscious guidance and control—then indeed, as Bourne remarked with gentle irony, “the next step in evolution will be very long delayed.”*

And then Maisel goes on in his own voice:

*To expect in fact that that any changes whatever in the techniques and methods of educators, rather than in the society which supports them, will now transform the world is no longer a serious viewpoint. The impact of events has proved Alexander, and Dewey as well, hopelessly wrong about that—woefully, grievously wrong. (p. xxxix)*

Maisel doesn't try to prove his assertions; he really takes it for granted that there is no one left today who agrees with Dewey and Alexander on this question. But I am here to say that he does have to argue the point. Maisel simply does not understand that Dewey was in no way so naive as to think that introducing Alexander teaching into the system would save the world. *Saving the world* is Maisel's patronizing term, not Dewey's. For Dewey understood very well that a profound change in society would have to take place before Alexander teaching could become part of the school system. Even more to the point, Dewey understood very well that making Alexander teaching part of the school system would not save the world. It is utterly alien to Dewey's realistic and

pragmatic philosophy to impute to him the idea that any single educational reform would save the world. What Dewey was saying is that if humankind does not adopt a system of proper coordination humankind cannot advance further.

I should like to conclude with an incident indicating how strongly John Dewey felt about all this. One of Dewey's closest human, social, and political ties was with the founders of the weekly magazine, *The New Republic*, and Dewey's name was on the masthead as one of its editors. But when *The New Republic* published Randolph Bourne's review of Alexander's book, on which Maisel depends to give Dewey the *coup de grace*, Dewey thereupon cut his ties with *The*

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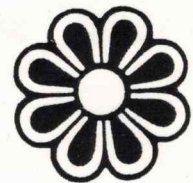
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*New Republic* and insisted on his name being removed from its masthead. Nor did Dewey ever change his mind about that. Nor did Dewey ever change his mind about humankind's urgent need for Alexander teaching as part of its education. Yes, it is difficult to see how from the bleak present we can get to the acceptance of Alexander teaching that Dewey insisted must take place. But the difficulty does not make Dewey's view less true and less urgent. ■

## REFERENCES

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# A Conversation with Marjory Barlow

by Joan Schirle

**M**ARJORY BARLOW IS A MASTER Teacher of the Alexander Technique. The niece of F.M. Alexander, she began lessons in her teens and has been teaching for fifty-four years. In this conversation with Joan Schirle, she talks about Alexander himself, the nature of his work, and the demands of being a teacher. It was taped on August 12, 1986, during the First International Alexander Teachers' Congress in Stony Brook, New York.

**J.S.:** Would you say that F.M. Alexander was an extraordinarily patient man to have experimented with himself in this way—to come up with this?

**BARLOW:** I simply can't believe it—it's the most fantastic story! I think that he was a very passionate, very tempestuous man, and in his initial state very quick-tempered. My mother said that if he saw someone ill-treating an animal or something like that, he literally saw red; they were afraid he was going to murder somebody one day! He was really so quick, and this is his initial endowment, really. Before I started going to Ashley Place to have lessons, my mother warned

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*He saw that it was his automatic habitual response to a stimulus—that was the trouble.*

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me; she said "You'll be in tears every day." Only once—but it wasn't F.M. who did it. (laughs) And this was the fantastic change, you see—and, of course, it was very important to him to apply the work to these terrifically quick, deep emo-

tional responses. In a way that was *why* the work appealed to me when I first read *Constructive Conscious Control*: that it was possible (a) to become more aware, to reach perhaps a level of awareness that was a little bit better than the one I'd got, and (b) not to be so subject to these emotional swings. I was like a pendulum.

**J.S.:** Was it difficult for F.M. to be patient with beginners?

**BARLOW:** It *had* been, obviously—from what my mother told me about how cross he was going to get with me—but by the time I landed up there, it was 1932, and he was never impatient with me or with anybody I saw him teaching. He realized, you see . . . he really knew and remembered how difficult it was. He used to say to me sometimes: "People who come here are the salt of the earth; but if they knew what they were going to have to undergo, they wouldn't come." Then he added: "But where else can they go?"

**J.S.:** How would you talk about what Alexander called "Direction"?

**BARLOW:** I would say that every time an idea comes to you to do anything at all, messages are sent from your brain through your nervous system to the rest of you—I'm not a scientist, I'm an Alexander teacher, and this is the way I see it, very simply, really—and the movement is then carried out. Before we have lessons, all this is totally automatic. Habits are built up, and they are built up in the nervous system. It is not the old muscles and bones—it is the direct connection. There is no division between your brain and the rest of your nervous

system, and it is that immediacy that is so wonderful; when you send a message, a conscious message, it is there before you know it. And if anything gets into the work that is interposed—for example, a lot of people have "images," or all that sort of nonsense—that is all unnecessary.

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*To me, he was the most religious person I have ever met.*

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**J.S.:** So when you speak of how we interfere with ourselves, you are speaking of that neuro-response that takes place between the brain and the rest of the body, and how we interfere with the purity or the directness of it?

**BARLOW:** Yes. When the stimulus comes—I mean, this really brings us back to inhibition, doesn't it? *This* is the keystone of the whole Alexander Technique. You see, he could not get anywhere. He tried going up every avenue that he could think of, and it was not until he realized that every time that the stimulus came to speak, back went his head. And he tried *everything*, from putting it [the head] forward to . . . everything. One day he saw that it was his response—his automatic habitual response to a stimulus—that was the trouble: It was so quick. He realized that his first work—when the stimulus came—was to say "No!" Not to say "No!" to the stimulus—and this is very important—but to say "No!" to the *first* reaction to that idea. What happened at first was a habitual thing. If you say "No!" there is the stimulus, there is the response. But