

Developing the Sensitivity of Our Instrument

Robin Möckli

“You can’t know a thing by an instrument which is wrong” – FMA

“In fact, you’re a sort of sophisticated bio-feedback machine, aren’t you?” – One of my clients

I wish to talk about two processes and how they intermingle and relate to each other. The first is learning to use the Alexander Technique for one’s personal transformation; the second is becoming an Alexander teacher. Our profession is comparable to an art in the sense that in order to teach it well you must first learn to practice it yourself, and in order to continue to teach well you must continue to refine your own instrument – your psychophysical self. My first Alexander lessons came about because my singing teacher, Paola d’Alba, found that I didn’t breathe well. So from the beginning having lessons was about improving my singing. I was the instrument – I needed to be opened up, taught to release, to allow myself to lengthen and widen, encouraged to stop pulling myself down with unnecessary and unproductive ruminating. I also needed to be woken up and invited to come and live in the real world after years of escaping into books and shying away from relationships with real people. It was astonishing to realize how much I had been missing, not just in terms of air for singing.

All this was masterfully set in motion by my first teachers, Jeanne Day and Aksel Haahr, and later Linda and Ed Avak. It helped that my teachers were open-minded and easy to talk to and had a wealth of knowledge about all kinds of things as well as the Alexander Technique. A space was created in what was already at the age of seventeen quite a stressful life by my, at first tri-, then bi-weekly sessions. Here was a place where I didn’t have to do any of the things that were normally required of me, where I was listened to and allowed to be myself. One of Marjory Barlow’s pupils has described it thus “it gave me a place to go when things got difficult”. For me things had already been difficult for quite a while. But now a door had been opened and a new path had been shown to me. In Frank Pierce Jones’s words, I now had a possibility to “escape from the monkey trap”. I continued to sing and discover new ways of making progress. My instrument became more resonant and more capable of nuance because my way of using it had improved.

The type of personal experiences I have described will be familiar to most Alexander teachers. They are characteristic of learning to apply the Alexander Technique to different aspects of our lives and thus beginning to live more consciously. I think it is important not to forget how life-changing and revolutionary these first steps can be. At some point in this process we

may reach conscious control, which Alexander refers to as “a plane to be reached rather than a method of reaching it”. In my personal story I was not yet there by any means, but I reached a point where I did not want to stop working on myself because I became increasingly aware of the benefits. A journalist said of Alexander “He calls our attention to a change that is so subtle that only he can perceive it.” For many of us it may take time to be truly confident about the link between our work on ourselves and an increase in physical freedom and mental well-being. There may be different reasons for this, mainly to do with our sensory appreciation and awareness, as well as the subtlety of the work. I personally was physically quite numb and unresponsive when I began lessons, and did not take much pleasure in physical activities aside from singing and playing the violin. I did not like my body. After 35 years of teaching I realize that mine was not an isolated case; I have encountered many similar ones since, but at the time I felt very alone indeed, trapped inside my own strangely alien flesh. Women are particularly vulnerable to the pressure of trying to force their bodies to conform to unrealistic standards that are impossible to fulfill. Other ways in which we may become dulled and unresponsive psychophysically are pushing oneself to extreme muscle over-development, spending long hours in badly collapsed sitting positions, listening to very loud music for long periods, or overuse of alcohol or drugs. We must remember that often it is not just a question of educating people’s sensory appreciation, but in some cases calling it back to life, which may not always be a straightforward and pleasant process.

All of this takes time and a purely intellectual understanding of how the Technique works will not get us very far. I remember Walter Carrington saying “you must get your pupils to really want it”, it being the results of inhibition and direction. Whenever clients come back to me after a series of lessons saying things like “I know I should be thinking and directing more and taking more time to do semi-supine work”, I tend to say something along the lines of “forget about what you should do, what do you want?”. Frank Pierce Jones says that it is better not to praise students too much, but to let the process be its own reward in order to ensure that s/he is not working just to please the teacher. The reward is a pleasurable kinesthetic one as we begin to enjoy more sensory feedback, and increasingly more accurate information from our senses. The more we are able to notice about what we are doing the more we can let go of what is unnecessary and disturbing and the more alert and finely tuned we become. The clarity we gain about what is really going on has a positive effect on our decisions about what we want and how we wish to go about attaining it. You can’t know what you want until you know what you’ve got!



Learning the Alexander Technique is like learning to play a musical instrument, the instrument being ourselves. The difference is that musical instruments are inanimate and we are animate. The tone and action of a violin or piano will improve when it is played on by a master, but the human organism responds in a multitude of positive ways when used well. Health, energy and skill in living improve. Even a car will respond well to being used well, even perhaps to the driver’s use – Goddard Binkley assured me that when he was directing himself his car consumed less petrol! I have often told clients that if they treated their cars as badly as they use themselves the repair bills would be astronomical. The instrument Alexander is referring to in the above quotation is a measuring instrument of some kind, comparing a person with bad use to perhaps a compass which has been stamped on so it can no

longer give a correct reading. It is dangerous to be led by an incorrect compass, and indeed, if we look at certain human behaviours we can only conclude, as did FM himself, that the guiding faculties have gone completely off track. My decision to train as a teacher was based on a simple reflection: in order to teach I will have to work more on myself and that will be good for me and perhaps eventually also helpful to others. The other thing was, the Alexander Technique and how it worked fascinated me. It still does. There are not many professions where the benefits to the practitioner are so clear and systematically constructed. We see many of our senior colleagues continuing to work happily and in good health well into their eighties, which is unusual in other fields except for the very talented and motivated. At the same time as being a profession which is demonstrably healthy, there