

Guest Editorial

by Adam Nott, Chairman STAT 1980 - 1984

Towards an American Society of Teachers

Apart from an American upbringing and a general concern with the way the Technique is being taught everywhere, my immediate interest in the state of Alexander teaching in the U.S. is the indirect result of STAT's policy of encouraging members outside Britain to form their own professional societies. This policy reflects the changing scale of our organisation. In the Society's early days those responsible for training teachers outside Britain were known personally to members of the Society's Council. As our membership grows and spreads we feel we cannot indefinitely take responsibility for teaching standards all over the world. Under the present arrangement the day is approaching when a student who had never been in Britain could receive a British qualification after training with a teacher who had never been in Britain. We believe it is better for teaching standards to be upheld by a body whose members are literally in touch with each other.

This move towards decentralisation has seen the emergence of a Swiss and a Canadian Society but it has not been welcomed by some American members teaching in the U.S. They argue that, because things are so anarchic in the U.S., with teachers setting themselves up after a few months' training, the only meaningful qualification is the British one. This attitude is unfortunate, in my opinion, in that it does not give sufficient credit to an important group of teachers whose work, if it is at all possible to make comparisons, is comparable to their British-trained counterparts of similar experience. I mean, of course, those teachers connected with the American Centers in New York and San Francisco (ACAT).

To form a national society in a country the size of the U.S. must be a daunting task and regional divisions would be an obvious need. For such an attempt to have any chance of getting off the ground these two groups, British-trained and American-trained, would need to set aside their differences, which stem largely from the differences in the length

of their training, and agree to work together to form a professional body which would regulate the conduct of teachers and give them a unified presence in the eyes of the public. To become members of an American society of teachers would not deprive those trained in Britain of the distinction they may attach to a British qualification, any more than Ivy-League graduates lose prestige by sharing degree status with those who are, in their eyes, less privileged.

Professional bodies are often foisted on an apathetic membership by those interested in having power and are reluctantly tolerated because the members feel there is something to be gained by appearing to be united. I hope that an American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique will have a more promising beginning and perhaps a lesson could be learned from the STAT experience. To paraphrase Irving Berlin, "There's no jealousy like professional jealousy, like professional jealousy, I know." Alexander teachers are as susceptible to such emotions as their colleagues in other professions, even though their training may have led to profound changes, outward and inward.

Five years ago STAT was in danger of losing the support of its members because it had appeared to become a forum for factional strife. In an effort to heal the divisions within the Society the Council initiated a series of work-ins for teachers of different training-backgrounds. Those of us who have participated in these sessions have found our prejudices toward our colleagues undermined, and have been stimulated by examining the questions we have in common from different angles. It has been brought home to us that our training was only the first step in becoming a teacher. Rather by accident we have discovered an effective way of working towards professional unity which works as long as it is practiced regularly.

If the move toward an American Society of Teachers were to begin with teachers from different schools working together to explore their differences and find their common ground, then the formation of the Society could be an organic expression of shared experience and would have every chance of success. Are you interested? Then seek out those with whom you think you differ and, allowing time for understanding to grow, work with them.

Fear of Singing

by Angela Caine

Singing was aligned with music and musicianship from my earliest recollections, quality of singing being dependent upon two factors:

- a The ability to sing in tune
- b The ability to make a beautiful sound

Neither of these gave me a moment's concern, so I sang anywhere, anytime and for anyone, improving all through my school days. It seemed an easy choice to opt for a career in singing and I, therefore, began a training at music college.

This is the system by which most of our performers and teachers of music are developed. It is a very good system as it produces a standard of excellence in sight reading, musical style, accuracy of playing and presentation that more than justifies its continuation. The national system of external music examinations, by which both teachers and pupils can monitor each other's progress, maintains those standards and forms the continuous pattern of development which must be enviable to those opting for other careers.

(continued on p. 2, col. 1)

Seeing and Moving The Relationship Between Eye Use and The Alexander Technique

by Robert M. Rickover

My purpose in writing this article is twofold. First, I would like to draw attention to the neglected topic of the inter-relatedness of visual re-education and the Alexander Technique. This I hope to do by discussing some important parallels and connections which I have found during my own explorations of the two. Second, I hope this article will stimulate additional thought and discussion on the subject among Alexander teachers.

To begin with, I believe the tendency to overlook connections between the problems of vision and general use arises in large part from the quality of eyesight of the individual Alexander teacher. On the one hand, teachers who have normal eyesight are unlikely to have an instinctive understanding of visual problems which they have not experienced. On the other hand, teachers who do have a visual handicap have most likely dealt with it in the usual way—that is, by

(continued on p. 3, col. 1)

FEAR OF SINGING (continued from page 1)

At the age of twenty-four I felt sufficiently in command of my chosen profession to accept a full-time teaching job in a then Bilateral school. I had sung professionally for two years and, realizing that my personal standards had also to be maintained, I still kept up my lessons, and sang in such performances as I could manage, relative to my new responsibility.

I was personally satisfied with my lot, I enjoyed discovering the musical potential of my pupils in the same way as it had been discovered in me, inasmuch as I used my very sensitive musical ear to detect a similar sensitivity, and then I encouraged it. I was a good teacher, the school had a successful musical record and I became "established" as a person of ability.

In the middle of all this success, one of the vocal qualities, which I had always taken for granted, began to disappear and I ceased to make a beautiful sound. It was a very gradual process and always easily explained: I was working too hard, was tired, it was end of term, I was moving house, etc. Eventually, after a couple of harrowing years of unsatisfactory singing, I began to sing actually out of tune. I did not sing B when I should sing A but I could not maintain the centre of the pitch for anything but a moment, then the pitch began to flatten. School teaching was blamed, by my doctor and by other singers, as the cause. Loss of voice is deemed to be the occupational hazard of the School teacher. I, therefore, stopped being a School teacher and decided to return to serious practice.

I could always simultaneously improve the singing of others. My pupils passed examinations with flying colours, gained entry to music colleges and gave very good local performances. It seemed that as I increasingly failed with my own music making, I was able to push my pupils to greater and greater success. I became voice tutor to the music department of a college of Education.

My more flexible timetable enabled me to go back to regular practice and lessons with a teacher of advanced and professional singers. I realize now that had I been given the standard audition, I would not have been accepted in the first place, but at music college I had gained a scholarship and I was still remembered as one of the most promising students. It soon became clear that I was not going to improve by standard giving of exercises and a new slant on repertoire, there was something mechanically wrong.

I began to notice how many teachers dealing with voices did not, themselves, sing. A lot of them "used to," ("Why don't you now?" "Too busy—no one wants to hear me—too old") but mostly their qualifications for dealing with voices were purely musical ones.

If you were a violinist, or a pianist, and also a school music teacher, it was assumed that you could take class singing, decide whether voices had quality or not. This even went as far as non-singing musicians adjudicating singing classes in competitive music festivals and even becoming music ADVISERS.

Wherever I turned, singing seemed to be deteriorating. Were there holes in the training of musically gifted children? and had I fallen down one? Were there holes in the musical education of *everyone* and was this why singing had become such a poor relation in the life of musical and unmusical alike?

I shut myself far enough away to make whatever awful noises I would and discovered:

a I had a real animal fear of making nasty noises, so much so, that when I heard myself do it, something in me cut it off at source.

b Not only did my ear appear to be failing me, I was rhythmically sloppy. Sometimes I could not come in at the correct point in the music. I slowed down at cadences, lengthened some notes, shortened others.

c I could not learn words and I had forgotten much of my already acquired repertoire.

d I frequently lost my place due to shifting attention.

I felt that b, c and d could somehow be the result of a, but what had caused a?

At this time I met a teacher of Alexander Technique who offered to swap singing lessons for Alexander Lessons. I had no idea what I was to be taught, but she talked of fear response, and habit, which seemed to have more to do with my problems than all the singing instruction I had had lately.

I taught her that:

a Singing is a physically demanding activity, which also involves your feelings.

b It creates a strong desire to communicate, whether you be singing *with* others at, say, a rugby match, or whether *to* others as a Soloist, choir member.

c It stretches the imagination and intensifies looking and listening.

d It leaves a condition of excitement and elation.

She taught me that none of these demands can be met for long unless the person making them retains a sense of balance. To perform well any task, not just singing, you need to learn about your own physical behaviour. Not so that you can be still and poised, like a ballerina on a tight-rope, but so that you can allow adjustment in yourself relative to the demands being made upon you, much as a bird in flight allows adjustment to the wind conditions.

I cannot pretend that this new information brought back immediately my ability to sing beautifully and in tune, but it made me realize for the first time that there is an area of study, vital to anyone working with the voice, that comprises the instrument itself, its anatomy and function, and the connections that instrument has with our responses to other situations.

This is not the time to cover, in detail, the fascinating path back to 'intuneness' but one or two of the connections which emerged on the way may be interesting:

a I was a good hockey player. This gave me what my Alexander teacher described as 'overwhelming legs.' I used them powerfully to root myself to the ground before I sang, tightening my thigh muscles to prepare to begin. Learning to keep them flexible not only improved the moment of beginning, I began to run faster.

b My shoes would not stand up on their own after a wearing of six months. With the attention to balance, I began to walk and stand quite differently. I became longer, shoulder to waist, more upright. My shoes now stand up independently and straight.

c With the change in voice use, my speech also altered. I no longer lost my speaking voice teaching, however many hours I talked. More important than that, classes were much more interested in what I was saying, because the sound of the voice was much more attractive. The pitch was lower and the lowered more resonant pitch was obviously more audible, more intelligible.

d My memory returned, along with my ability to learn words and recall them at will. I am convinced that this was due to the renewed freedom in the movement of my eyes which occurred as my posture and balance improved. Singing with a constricted larynx produced staring. This destroys communication through blanking off the audience. With no stimulus to trigger them, memory and recall do not function. As the larynx became free, all my old repertoire returned. With freely moving eyes, I no longer lost my place.

These experiences were bound to change my attitudes to my own singing, practice, learning, and most important of all the teaching of young people. I say young people as opposed to young musicians because if the use of the instrument can be so dramatically improved by changing its use, it raises a disturbing question.

How many young people are prevented from participating in music because their own ignorance of the function and use of their voices has allowed habits of posture to develop which do not allow singing to occur? They are then labelled "unmusical" and never more consider music as anything but a closed shop.

If the use of the voice were taught away from the music room, linked with learning about (a) *use of the eyes*—for all the reading necessary in

school; (b) *communication*—telephone and microphone techniques, pupil/teacher relationships; (c) *brain/ear/eye associations* to improve coordination for sport. All this is work both for singing and for the increased awareness.

For the last ten years I have taught all ages and all abilities to sing. I have not yet encountered one person who could not sing and sing in tune when the larynx was free. That freedom was never gained by conventional musically orientated teaching. Nor is this a means of improvement exclusively for the apparently unmusical. In mixed ability classes, the very talented can explore and develop there in a way that they would fear to do in an atmosphere which sought only excellence.

Fear of singing is fear of making a mistake. Fear of making a mistake is the greatest barrier to learning. If, by approaching the teaching of singing with a new imagination, we can help to deal with this fear, the contribution both to music making and education as a whole would be incalculable.

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SEEING AND MOVING

(continued from page 1)

wearing glasses. This reliance on artificial lenses, described by Aldous Huxley (an early exponent of both the Alexander Technique and vision re-education) as "crutches" which "neutralize, but do not get rid of, the causes of defective vision," provides an inflexible "solution" to the problem which probably makes general awareness in this area as difficult for these teachers as it is for their normally sighted colleagues.¹

I think it would be useful at this point to say a little about my experiences in this area. While training to be an Alexander teacher, I began studying the Bates Technique of vision re-education with a teacher of many year's experience.² My original aim was to reduce the severe astigmatism and myopia with which I had been afflicted since early childhood. Over the past six years, my vision has improved substantially: I experience increasingly long and frequent periods of completely clear vision, the astigmatism is gone, and while I still rely on glasses at times, they are only about half as strong as previously. I feel certain that eventually I will be able to do away with them altogether.

As gratifying as these improvements have been, I have come to regard them of secondary importance to the insights which I have gained by working on and thinking about my vision at the same time that I was studying and teaching the Alexander Technique. Some of these insights relate primarily to my own development and are thus not of general interest. But I have found, from my own and others' teaching experience, that many have a general relevance to movement re-education. As is so frequently the case, exposure to two fields which run parallel in many ways, yet differ in important respects, can lead one to a deeper understanding and appreciation of both.

I shall be referring throughout the article to the Bates Technique which is the best known of a number of systems of visual re-education.

The first parallel I would like to draw between Bates and Alexander is that both techniques are concerned with quality of performance. Both aim at the reduction or elimination of "interferences" to proper functioning. For instance, while the popular view of myopia is that there is something organically at fault with the eye which can only be corrected by the use of artificial lenses, this concept is as foreign to the Bates Technique as the "posture-improving" Victorian practice of strapping young women's backs to wooden boards would be to an Alexander teacher. In other words, both techniques reject any kind of external "straitjacketing" of a problem out of apparent existence. Both seek to remove such self-imposed obstacles to proper functioning as inappropriate muscular tensions and malcoordinations. However, a major difference in practice is that there can obviously be no direct "hands on" method for the eyes.³ The Bates teacher must rely instead on the use of language, mental imagery and exercises in order to promote change. This restriction is probably largely responsible for its having generally a lower rate of effectiveness than the Alexander Technique.

Good use from the Alexander point of view occurs when the head balances lightly on top of the spine, ready to initiate movements which can then be easily followed by the rest of the body. If, however, the head is fixed in place (usually by being pulled back and down on the spine), its freedom of independent movement is lost and it can no longer lead. This points to the second parallel with the Bates Technique which maintains that with good vision, the eyes lead the head—that is, the initial response to a new object appearing in the field of vision is an eye movement and/or change of focus which then may be followed by an appropriate movement of the head. In bad vision, the eyes are, on the contrary, "fixed" relative to the head, producing, for example, the characteristic myopic stare. Locked into the head and unable to lead it, they can only move simultaneously with it.

This leads to a further and closely related analogy between the two techniques. With good use, the body is able to respond freely and easily to changes in its environment. It is always ready to relinquish its balance (as, for example, in walking when the body "falls" forward from the ankle over the supporting leg) and then quickly and easily regains it (when the knee of the other leg moves forward). Like a spinning top, the body that is functioning with good use is not in a permanently upright position, but in a state of gentle oscillation around the upright. Similarly, in good vision, the freely moving eyes are always darting about, able to shift focus and direction in response to new, unanticipated, visual stimuli. Both free eyes and a free neck are prerequisites for the body to respond holistically to changing external circumstances.

I would like now to discuss a number of specific connections I have observed between eye use and general body use.⁴ Bearing in mind that there is a total interconnectedness between the two, I think it is useful to look at some of the details.

When glasses are worn, optimal vision occurs when each eye looks through a spot in the center of the lens. This frequently produces a tendency to pull the head slightly back and down on the neck in order to take advantage of this point of maximum sharpness. When the glasses themselves slide down a little on the bridge of the nose, this harmful effect on the head-neck relationship can be quite striking. Nor are these problems necessarily solved by wearing contact lenses. The lenses themselves often slide down over the surface of the eyes unless the head is retracted slightly backward on the neck.

The fact that lenses do not provide equally sharp vision in all directions also encourages the whole head to move in order to look about rather than just the eyes. This is particularly noticeable when looking from side to side, beyond the edge of the lenses. Substituting the rotation of the relatively large and heavy head for delicate eye movements produces two undesirable results. First, the muscles of the neck will be called upon to do things for which they are not designed and, second, these inappropriate demands will render them less able to do what they should be doing. The sub-occipital muscles, for example, are normally responsible for producing delicate changes in the relationship of the head to the neck. This function will obviously be obstructed when they are also required to help swivel the head as an alternative to the eyes themselves moving about freely.

The interconnectedness between quality of vision and overall use of the self can also be seen when an eye is slightly twisted, or rotated, on its axis. The tendency of the eye to rotate in one direction often results in the head being pulled slightly to one side to counteract the effect on vision. However slight the original twist and the consequent adjustment of the head, the result is again a restriction on the independent movement of the head, a pattern of muscular holding which has a detrimental effect on overall use.

Not surprisingly, the quality of vision frequently changes as a result of Alexander lessons. Many of my own pupils have commented during lessons that their eyes have come more into focus or that their field of vision has expanded. Indeed, this can serve as a useful indication of progress to both pupil and teacher. Yet, paradoxically, Alexander work can sometimes pose its own problems with regard to vision. The

improved use which occurs during a lesson usually results in the pupil's head being generally more forward relative to the neck than was previously the case. For the pupil to continue to look outward on a level plane in this new situation, his eyes must correspondingly be in a different positional relationship to his head. Should this change fail to take place, the pupil will be looking down towards the ground. If this becomes habitual, it will more likely gradually pull the pupil's body down too, thereby undoing the beneficial effects of the lessons. However, given the practical need to look out at the world, a failure to adjust eye use to improved body use is even more likely to result in the pupil's pulling his head back to look forward, thus reverting to old bad use patterns almost at once.

Another possible reaction of the eyes to Alexander changes has long been a familiar one to teachers—that is the phenomenon of the pupil's eyes closing, going out of focus, or "glazing over." In undertaking an activity such as walking or getting out of a chair during the course of the lesson, a pupil will often be able to sustain good use up to a definite point when there is suddenly an almost instant retreat back to old habit patterns. This point of relapse also usually coincides with the pupil's loss of visual connectedness with his surroundings.⁵

This "losing focus" phenomenon points to a more subtle, psychological aspect of the problem. For most pupils, the new style of eye functioning required to accommodate the improved pattern of overall use is one which makes direct eye contact with others much more likely. With good use, not only are the eyes looking out, but they are more "open" to being seen into. Looking down, or pulling the head backward, can afford "protection" against direct eye contact and, unfortunately, this understandable retreat from the new and more vulnerable style of eye functioning may undo the very improvement in use which began the process. I have found that effective teaching requires an awareness of these emotional aspects of the problem, as well as the more mechanical connections mentioned earlier.⁶

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Little is known of Alexander's own thoughts on vision and use. Frank Pierce Jones reports that he was displeased by Huxley's involvement with the Bates Technique, dismissing it as "another form of end gaining."⁷ However, I have been told on good authority that Alexander's unhappiness arose not from disapproval of the Bates Technique itself, but, rather, from Huxley's failure to credit his earlier lessons with Alexander with having helped him arrive at a state at which he could profit so greatly from the Bates work.⁸ Indeed, Alexander is known to have taught a few simple Bates-type exercises to some of his own pupils.⁹ These were probably developed independently by himself. It is interesting to remember that Alexander himself used glasses—a monocle for reading and, in later years, more powerful spectacles. My overall impression, based on conversations with teachers who knew Alexander is that he recognized the importance of proper eye functioning and that this recognition was implicit in much of his teaching. It was not, however, one of his main interests, perhaps because he felt his own eyesight did not interfere with his self-development or teaching.

This leads me to my final point. At the beginning of this article, I expressed the hope that it might stimulate further thought and discussion among teachers. To conclude, I would like to suggest one possible framework and convenient starting point for the development of ideas on this topic. We are all aware, of course, that the Alexander Technique originated in one man's original and independent enquiry into voice and breathing difficulties which arose during his public recitations. It could be a fruitful line of enquiry to hypothesize what form Chapter I, "The Evolution of a Technique," in Alexander's *Use of The Self* might have taken had he been not an actor with a voice problem, but, say, an artist with a vision problem. We might usefully ask ourselves how, endowed with the same self-reliance and independence of thought, he might have tackled his problem had it specifically been that of the relation between vision and general use.

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Footnotes

1. Huxley, Aldous L., *The Art of Seeing* (Seattle, Montana Books, 1975; re-issue of original 1942 publication), pp. 1, 2.

2. Originated by Dr. William H. Bates, an ophthalmologist who practiced in New York during the early part of this century. He postulated that the key to clear vision was a relaxed, coordinated effort of mind and body. Bates was the author of *Better Eyesight Without Glasses* (New York, Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1940, reprinted in several paperback editions in recent years). *The Art of Seeing* provides, I believe, the clearest introduction to Bates' ideas.

3. Alexander work, particularly with the teacher's hands on or near the pupil's face, can, of course, affect the quality of vision. Apparently some Bates teachers use their hands in this way on occasion.

4. Additional examples of this sort, relating to visual fusion difficulties, can be found in Frederick K. Nevins' excellent article, "Some Visual Problems and Their Relationship to the Alexander Technique" in the Winter 1983 issue of *The Alexandrian*.

5. Interestingly, the startle pattern, as described by Frank Pierce Jones in *Body Awareness in Action* (pp. 178-179) "... begins with an eye blink; the head is then thrust forward; the shoulders are raised and the arms stiffened; abdominal muscles shorten; breathing stops and the knees are flexed." (italics added)

Louise Morgan, in her book *Inside Yourself* (London, Hutchinson and Co., 1954) reports that Alexander "has found that when his pupils keep their eyes closed during lessons, they tend to hypnotize themselves. So he has always refused to allow them to shut their eyes, in spite of their constant pleas that they can 'think better' with closed eyes. His aim is to make his pupils make greater and greater use of their conscious minds." (pp. 182-183)

6. This is, of course, an example of the more general problem of adjusting to a more open (less "armored," to use a Reichian term) state. See "Habit and Compulsion" by Charles A. Noble in the Autumn 1983 *Alexandrian*. Many psychological aspects of vision are considered in *Total Vision*, by Richard S. Kavener, O.D. and Lorraine Dusky (A and W Publishers, New York, 1978) and in *Visionetics*, by Lisette Scholl (Doubleday and Co., Garden City, L.I., 1978). *Trance-formations*, by John Grinder and Richard Bandler (Moab, Utah, Real People Press, 1981) includes a fascinating description of the use of hypnosis to correct myopia (pp. 166-168).

7. Jones, Frank Pierce, *Body Awareness in Action* (New York, Schocken Books, 1976), p. 77.

8. Based on a conversation with Walter Carrington, July, 1983.

9. Walter Carrington also reports that Bates and Alexander corresponded for a time and may even have met each other.

From A Colleague

I would like to express my thanks for the efficient work of ACAT in sending me regularly the newsletter and *The Alexandrian*. For those of us trying to promote Alexander's work here at the fringe of the Universe, as I sometimes feel to be in Sao Paulo, you can not imagine how valuable these written communications can be.

First of all, there is the feeling of not being completely forgotten and still somehow participate in the community of those few privileged who could train as an Alexander Teacher. During my training period in London all this was taken for granted, only time and distance could bring me the awareness of our position in society.

Second, there is the actual content of the articles and the smaller communications. So many things I read about I miss not being able to know in more depth or sometimes the outcome of meetings and workshops, the announcements of which are already new stimulus in my teaching life.

I would like to offer my services in any way I could help the Center in its active work to preserve and promote our work and teaching. Also, I would be most interested to know more about new teaching aids, films, video, printed material, reports on workshops, group teaching, introductory classes, lectures or demonstrations. In short other activities by way of which I could bring about a more active promotion of Alexander's work in Brazil, besides my private teaching.

Perhaps to best achieve the above I would need to come to New York for a refresher course, and here I would like to put forward this idea which might interest other teachers who do not have the ready access of London and New York residents. Being the only teacher in a large and far away country like Brazil on one hand brings the possibility of starting a new work without any problems of conquering the market as there is no competition. On the other hand, however, the isolation can lead sometimes to stagnation as there is nobody to share the experience of teaching, to discuss ideas and problems, to stimulate active thinking about Alexander's teachings.

If any teacher would like to share his/hers experience in writing I would be most pleased in such a dialogue, and here I want to express my thanks to you for your kind help.

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