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Learning to Teach

by Helen Higa

One of the most frustrating things about training to be an Alexander teacher is that although Alexander painstakingly recorded the account of his discovery and technique, he did not equally document the pedagogical means whereby one can teach this technique to others. Many of us are in training because we want to learn how to do what he did. As popular interest in the Technique grows, the diversity of teachers and how they choose to teach it also increases. It is the same for any educational method or tool.

The Suzuki violin approach is one good example of this tendency. Fifty years ago Shinichi Suzuki made the deceptively simple discovery that all Japanese children spoke Japanese. In fact, children all over the world spoke their native language with utmost fluency. This fact struck him with amazement as it suggested a "startling talent." He studied just how man learns his native language and came up with what he called the *Mother Tongue Approach* to learning. Since he played the violin, he decided to use this approach in teaching very young children to play the violin. Most people thought he was wasting his time, but it worked. Today there are hundreds of Suzuki violin teachers all over the world. Some are more successful at teaching the "whole" child than others. Oftentimes the approach is blamed for poor results when the fault really lies with the individual teacher. The opposite is also true, sometimes the approach is credited for good results and individual teachers do not receive the praise they so richly deserve.

No matter what the subject, teaching is a challenging profession and a profound responsibility. Many times I heard Suzuki being asked by visiting teachers just how long his teacher training course lasted. He used to tell them that he could tell if a teacher trainee was ready to graduate when they brought him an ashtray before he had to ask for one. Everyone got a laugh out of that one, especially Suzuki. I am very grateful that I had the opportunity to train with him in Japan, for Suzuki is very involved with teaching teachers. He has a genius for simplicity and a very big heart. One of his favorite sayings is that, "When love is deep, much can be accomplished." As teacher trainees we learned so much more than just how to teach violin to young children. Suzuki often reminds teachers to "forget the violin. It really isn't so important. Don't forget that we are educating children *via* the violin. If a child hears good music from the day of his birth, and learns to play it himself, he develops sensitivity, discipline and endurance. He gets a beautiful heart."

For the moment then I would like to "forget" the violin (which I now teach), and the Alexander Technique (which I hope to teach) and focus on some of the qualities of a good teacher (which I someday hope to become) that are exemplified in teachers such as Suzuki. When asked, Suzuki will tell you that it is very simple to be a good teacher, "You must know what, when and how." I now think that it's equally important for a teacher to know what not to teach, when not to teach, and how not to teach.

According to Zen in the Art of Archery, the fundamental relationship of instructor to pupil is that of "demonstration, example, intuition, imitation." By his example, we learned about Suzuki's philosophy which (in *Nurtured by Love*) he explains in this way:

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Habit and Compulsion

by Charles A. Noble

The keystone of the Alexander Technique is the use of inhibition as a means of changing unconscious habituated behavior. It is by a process of bringing to consciousness and inhibiting habitual use while simultaneously suggesting a lengthening of the axial skeleton and a release of the appendicular skeleton from the axial that we gradually weaken and replace inappropriate habit.

It is by means of this process that the kinesthetic sense may be reawakened and recalibrated so as to serve as a more reliable guide in use and most importantly to increase our sense of pleasure in movement.

After almost four years of work in the Alexander Technique and a journey from kinesthetic deadness to increasing awareness and clarity in the sensations of my self, I have no doubt of the validity of these concepts.

And yet from the beginning, guided by another set of conceptions and experiences, I have been drawn to a question I feel underlies the material the Alexander Technique addresses. That question is of the origins of misuse.

I take as my starting point the following observations of Alma Frank.

The interest which led to this study arose from observing over a period of years, a gradual diminishing of well coordinated movement in young children. The children were attending nursery groups in progressive schools. At the age of two, when they entered the school, they apparently possessed a degree of physical coordination which by the end of the third year had notably diminished; by the end of the fourth year this coordination had given way to definite well established postural habits—rigidly fixed positions of certain parts of the body. These habits inspire the question: Is their presence related, as it seems to be, to the disappearance of smooth and harmonious flow of movement which the two-year olds possessed?(1)

What strikes me in Ms. Frank's observations is that very young children seem to move with a high degree of poise. Presumably their movements are based on a sound kinesthetic sense.

If these observations are correct, we are then dealing with the question of why organisms with appropriate reflexive responses and sound kinesthetic senses so often end so misused and so kinesthetically dead.

One common explanation for this development is that we are suffering from the unnatural demands of civilization—our furniture, our sedentary life styles, excessive time spent in activities involving fine motor skills, and the general level of pressure, noise, and pollution under which we function, all lead to a gradual deterioration of our senses. What for me undermines the primacy of these factors is the young age noted by Ms. Frank at which the deterioration of poise begins—before the age of four. Presumably the average three-year-old is not leading a sedentary life, does not spend a great deal of time in a chair, has not yet had to deal with fine motor skills such as writing, and at least in a large number of cases has not been exposed to the pressures of our civilization to an inordinate degree.

(continued on p. 4, col. 1)

Love can be had only by loving. Our life is worth living only if we love one another and comfort one another. I searched for the meaning of art in music and it was through music that I found my work and my purpose in life. Once art to me was something far off, unfathomable and unattainable. But I discovered it was a tangible thing . . . The real essence of art turned out not to be something high up and far off. It was right inside my ordinary daily self. The very way one greets people and expresses oneself is an art. If a musician wants to become a fine artist, he must first become a finer person. If he does this, his worth will appear. It will appear in everything he does, even in what he writes. Art is not in some far-off place. A work of art is the expression of a man's whole personality, sensibility and ability.

Mrs. Suzuki once told me that the one thing which amazes her the most about her husband is his ability to treat everyone with the same respect, whether they are the princess of Japan or the janitor at his school. I remember when I first arrived in Matsumoto I was kindly met at the train station by two teacher trainees and whisked off to school. I had lived all my life in Hawaii and was not used to the cold winters. I dressed as warmly as I could for the train ride which at that point meant that I looked pretty weird upon my arrival at school. Immediately they told me that Suzuki wanted to meet me right away and to go upstairs to his office. I didn't feel ready for this and tried to stall saying that I wasn't dressed right and wouldn't it be better if we waited a day. Little did I know that Suzuki lives by the motto: "Never put off till tomorrow what can be done today." They assured me that I was fine and not to worry. About the time they made me coffee and I was seated across from Suzuki being treated like an honored guest, I was sure that some terrible mistake had been made and that I wasn't who they thought I was. Before matters got out of hand, I decided to tell Suzuki the truth—that I was an awful violinist who had heard five-year-olds play better and that I wanted to start at the very beginning again. I thought that he wouldn't want to waste his time with me and that I'd be perfectly happy to study with whoever he recommended if he was too busy. He just kept smiling, nodding and smoking and I thought, "Oh no. He doesn't understand English." Well to make a long story short, he did understand me and I became a teacher trainee under him. During the two and a half years of my training there, I learned that there was more to teaching the violin than I could ever have imagined.

Like the program here at the Alexander Center, much of our work as Suzuki teacher trainees was to focus on ourselves. The old adage that if you can't do then teach is no more applicable to the Suzuki violin teacher than it is for the Alexander teacher. To help us develop new skills, Suzuki stressed the importance of self-examination and self-correction in order to make changes:

Action cannot be separated from thought. People with fine judgment are people of ability. Reflective thought is part of judgment. Naturally, the finer the person, the greater his ability to think constructively. In training oneself, the road to improvement is closed if thoughtful self-examination is lacking. They say, "Happy are the thinkers." Why? Because thought is often just idle thought, and does not include self-correction. What is the use of pouring repentance on repentance? Too much thought makes thought meaningless, and finally we get so we reject thought altogether. Self-examination not accompanied by change is the same as not putting into action what we think of doing. Self-training is extremely difficult. If the ability is not developed, the power of self-examination, which should be a light to our feet, goes out altogether. We must cultivate thought, or rather self-correction. But how is it done?

All I can say is that I am very grateful to have learned about the Alexander Technique in regard to Suzuki's question (and my own): "But how is it done?" Personally, I needed the Technique to help me find answers to that question. Suzuki, however, managed to get some incredible results by relying on what he called his "sixth sense": intuition. He developed his intuition by practicing compassion in his daily life. He encouraged his students to be sensitive and aware of the

people around us and to attend to their needs rather than think only of ourselves. His experience and intuitive ability enabled him to individualize his approach to suit each student's personality, temperament and educational needs. In effect, during our lessons, he brought us all ashtrays before we even knew to ask for them.

Suzuki is very big on tone production and every graduating teacher receives a painting with his calligraphy saying, "Tone has a living soul without form." Suzuki could tell a lot about a person just by listening to the quality of his tone. Where Alexander talks of a man's individuality and character as being the way he uses himself, so might Suzuki speak of tone as a reflection of a person's personality and character. When he worked on our tone, Suzuki was very skilled at indirectly working on our "use" as well as emphasizing the importance of developing our characters during the process. Although his teaching formula was, "One point, one lesson," he consciously worked on many levels to develop the whole person. It was both reinforcing and inspiring to see trainees' personalities and use transform as I heard their tone become fuller, more beautiful, and resonant. In addition to private and group violin lessons with Suzuki, teacher trainees also studied flower arranging and calligraphy every week. I learned a lot one depressing day when Suzuki got so fed up with our heaviness that he bought a ping pong table to lighten things up. We had a little tournament and I couldn't believe how this seventy-five-year-old man could play. None of us could even touch him and we all had a lot of fun. He would often tell us that in the Suzuki method, "The student must always be better than the teacher." I hope that doesn't include ping pong.

As the end of my second teacher training course looms ever closer, I think I can honestly say that learning to teach is very difficult. I will probably continue learning to teach for the rest of my life. This paper, in a way, is my thank-you note not only to Suzuki but to all of my teachers and fellow trainees as well. I would like to end this paper with a quote from Zen in the Art of Archery:

How far the pupil will go is not the concern of the teacher and master. Hardly has he shown him the right way when he must let him go on alone. There is only one thing more he can do to help him endure his loneliness: he turns him away from himself, from the Master, by exhorting him to go further than he himself has done, and to "climb on the shoulders of his teacher."

Wherever his way may take him, the pupil, though he may lose sight of his teacher, can never forget him. With a gratitude as great as the uncritical veneration of the beginner, as strong as the saving faith of the artist, he now takes his Master's place, ready for any sacrifice. Countless examples down to the recent past testify that this gratitude far exceeds the measure of what is customary among mankind.

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Editorial Note

As with several previously-published pieces, this issue's feature articles were written in partial fulfillment of the certification requirements at ACAT-NY. Judith Leibowitz instituted this requirement during her tenure as Director of the Teacher Training Program, and Barbara Kent, the current Director, is continuing it. As anyone knows who has tried, writing about the Technique is not easy; it is always beneficial, however, sometimes primarily to the writer alone, in terms of the clarity that comes with the struggle to articulate ideas, sometimes happily to the community in general, in terms of access to ideas that command a broader interest.

Helen Higa's account of her training under Maestro Suzuki is delightfully entertaining and affords an insight into the workings of a great teacher. Chuck Noble's article explores the largely-unmapped territory around the origins of misuse and also between the Alexander Technique and the Reichian approach to psychotherapy. Based on his personal experiences in both areas, Noble's presentation bears close reading, as the issues discussed are important, and possibly even crucial ones.

With some misgivings, I am reprinting an article of my own that appeared early last summer in another publication. The *Alexandrian* is not intended as a personal forum for its editor, but in this case, my article was the only one in hand that met the issue's requirements. The Winter issue will feature a Guest Editorial by Walter Carrington and a new article by regular contributor Robert Rickover.

—Ron Dennis

Reflections on the Alexander Method

by Ron Dennis

Formerly Principal Clarinet,
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Over the past ten years, musicians have been hearing more and more about the Alexander Technique as a resource for performance. In this article, I would like to share some of my experience with this technique, both as professional musician and Alexander teacher.

Briefly, the Alexander Technique is a method for acquiring skill in what F. M. Alexander (1869-1955) called "the use of the self." This concept encompasses our basic psycho-physical activities, such as standing, sitting, bending, walking, manipulating tools and instruments, speaking, and so on — all of our voluntary activity, in other words. Alexander, an Australian, developed his technique nearly a hundred years ago in response to a difficult personal problem: an actor by profession, his voice had begun to fail regularly during performances, and all available medical counsel and treatment had given no relief. Faced with the dilemma of giving up his career or finding out on his own what was causing the problem, Alexander chose the latter course, and over the next several years carried out an amazing self-analysis, his only equipment a set of multiple mirrors in which he observed what he later called his "manner of doing." He came to learn that in all of his activities he was interfering with his inherent poise and flexibility by unconsciously over-tensing virtually every muscle in his body. As he gradually learned to "un-do" this faulty use of himself, the vocal problem improved and eventually ceased. Free to return to the stage, Alexander instead devoted the rest of his life to extending and teaching his discoveries in a career that eventually spanned more than half a century.

The most important aspect of this work concerns the significance of *inhibition* as a key factor in behavioral change. Inhibition in the Alexandrian sense is not the undesirable suppression of activity, but rather the delaying of an habitual response so that a different, directed response can take place instead. "Prevent the things you have been doing and you are halfway home," as Alexander put it, an observation that will be understood by any musician who has ever changed an embouchure or other major aspect of basic technique. The teaching of inhibition on a general basis has remained a hallmark of the Alexander Technique, and in fact is what mainly distinguishes it from other "body-works" that have developed in recent years.

My own involvement with the Technique began in 1972, while I was still clarinetist with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Those first lessons were a revelation to me, in experiencing the ease and



Author Ron Dennis works with a student in one of his Alexander Technique classes at Juilliard.

lightness typical of the Alexander process. Five years later I began the Alexander teacher-training program in New York City, and received my certificate in 1979.

In practical terms as a clarinetist, I found the Alexander work most directly helpful in posture and breathing. Where previously I had done my best to follow advice such as, "relax," or "breathe from the diaphragm," I was now given direct experience in Alexander lessons of what those words really involved — namely, an *awareness* of what I was doing with myself, in order that I could *release* unnecessary tension, to allow a *free response* of my postural and breathing mechanisms to the on-going situation. The words in emphasis — *awareness*, *release*, and *response* — summarize neatly the Alexandrian dimension of potentially every learning process.

Another influence on my musical work has to do with my whole concept of *practice*, the musician's central activity. Practice I had always considered to be dealing with the clarinet, doing the scales, etudes, and other things that lead to musical proficiency. From my Alexander lessons I came to see that another kind of practice was possible, that of trying to use myself well in my other daily activities — walking down the street, waiting in line at the bank, rising from my chair to acknowledge applause, to

name a few. I realized that I was indeed the instrument that played the instrument, and that working on myself amounted to working on the clarinet, in a different but highly significant way.

Learning the Alexander Technique requires definite efforts in definite directions, and there are always implications beyond our knowing when entering into such a process. In my own case, I certainly wasn't consciously looking for a new life when I took my first Alexander lesson, even though things worked out that way. Of course, most people who study Alexander are not moved to such major changes — they go on with their lives, using the Technique for practical help in their particular situations.

Also, the Alexander Technique is a serious study, like music, and as such involves frustration as well as reward. This frustration — the gap between our actual performance and our vision of it — I prefer to call "creative tension." An inherent factor in all serious efforts, creative tension requires not reduction or elimination, but rather understanding, acceptance, and the *energy* to deal with it.

Energy seems mysterious enough to most of us, but one thing is clear: energy bound up in inefficient neuro-muscular habits just isn't available for other purposes. Thus, whatever one's initial reason for studying Alexander, the real goal of the Technique is making more energy available for meeting "the stress of life," as Hans Selye so aptly put it.

Musicians assuredly come in for their share of this stress; fortunately, they are well-equipped for dealing with it creatively because of their practical experience in developing skills. In this regard, it is encouraging to report that the Technique is being made increasingly available to music students as part of their formal programs of study. This is presently the case at the Juilliard School, the Manhattan School of Music, and the Mannes College of Music, among others. Unlike even ten years ago, many Alexander teachers are now in private practice throughout the country. A list of teachers is available from the American Center for the Alexander Technique, 142 West End Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10023. I wish to thank all of my own teachers in the Technique, each of whom has contributed uniquely to my present understanding of the art.

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I am not denying the significance of any of these factors in the degeneration of use—my point is rather that there is another factor that precedes them. Kinesthetic deadening begins at an early age and this early weakening of the kinesthetic sense leaves the child more susceptible to the damaging influence of these "factors of Civilization."

I would suggest that this original agent of kinesthetic deadening is emotional trauma and that the "rigidly fixed positions of certain parts of the body," which Ms. Frank related "to the disappearance of smooth and harmonious flow of movement," are in large part the result of muscular holding by the child against feelings which he is either unable to integrate consciously or finds unacceptable to the adult world.

At least two overlapping models exist for the mechanism by which the body responds to these traumas. The first is the startle reflex, which may be viewed as a prototypic model of misuse. Frank Pierce Jones has described and commented on this reflex as follows:

It 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 reflexed—it is a model of other, slower response patterns: fear, anxiety, fatigue, and pain all show postural changes from the norm which are similar to those that are seen in startle.(2)

From this, one might suggest that over a period of time the child learns to maintain a variation of the startle reflex as a response to the repetition of some anxiety-producing stimulus in his life.

The other model for this physical response to emotional trauma is Wilhelm Reich's concept of "Muscular Armoring." This Armor has been defined as:

The sum total of the muscular attitudes (chronic muscular spasms) which an individual develops as a defense against the breakthrough of emotions and negative sensations, especially anxiety, rage, and sexual excitation.(3)

Reich conceived of the living creature as an energy system, a system in which charge builds to a certain level and then in a healthy organism is discharged. The suppressed emotions and sensations in the above definition are functionally identical to the energy of the system. The armor serves to bind and dissipate the energy when a healthy release is denied. In this model these chronic holdings are not viewed as obsolete habits but rather as attempts by the system to regulate, no matter how defectively, the flow of energy.

If Reich's view is correct, it would provide for the Alexandrian conception of unconscious habit a powerful conditioning agent, sufficient to explain how a child could be induced to adopt and maintain maladaptive and painful postural habits.

We would then be dealing with two levels of habit. At the deepest level would be those chronic holding patterns that developed very early in an individual's life and which may still serve a function, however inappropriately, in terms of regulating energy in the system. These patterns would have as much the aspect of compulsive behaviors as of habits. The combination of the basic postural maladjustment and sensorial deadening resulting from this underlying holding would in interaction with our complex environment generate a host of secondary inappropriate habits.

It would follow that these secondary habits would be most responsive to the inhibition/direction procedures of the Alexander Technique and that the deeper compulsive habits might be recognized by their resistance to the Technique.

Assuming this model is correct, it is interesting as Alexander Technique teachers to consider how we and our students carry out this holding. What follows then are some, I would emphasize, very preliminary observations on this matter.

It is believed that the armoring process begins in the diaphragm in an inspiratory contraction. The resulting decrease in respiration serves to lessen the amount of energy in the system. This stopping of the breath is also observed in the startle reflex.

This response of not breathing has for me been a chronic problem. It occurs not only in states of over-concentration or when I find myself

observed, but also often at those moments when I have the strongest sense of communication with a student. It in effect deadens the excitement of the situation. Conversely, I have also noticed that when I or a student release an area of strong habitual holding, there is generally a simultaneous release of the breath.

I know from my experience in Reichian therapy that the eyes, at least for me, are another key area of holding.

There seems to be a direct correlation between the degree I am able to allow my eyes to feel, to be in contact to use Reich's words, and the degree I can sense the relationship between my head and neck. When one considers that the eyes are usually leading the head, which is leading the torso in movement, this is not surprising. The Alexander Technique seems to recognize the importance of the eyes in the emphasis placed on maintaining visual contact with the outside environment, indeed I suspect that the simultaneous internal/external experience Frank Pierce Jones refers to as an "expanded field of awareness" is identical to Reich's conception of eye contact.

A final pattern which is significant for me is the simultaneous tightening of the lower back, tilting forward of the pelvis, and holding in the hip flexors. This pattern, which I suspect is in large part responsible for the sense of awkwardness I felt in adolescence, has been one of the most resistant to change and emotionally charged. It is for me a clear example of an energetically reinforced habit.

This then brings me to the question of what effect does the Alexander Technique have on these primary habits.

In the model Reich created the release of armor is generally accompanied by a strong emotional release. Yet my back, despite its long resistance to change has begun to realign itself, and this change is occurring without any strong emotional reaction. Of course, the issue is clouded in my case since I am also in therapy, but there are numerous cases of use more distorted than mine returning to a balanced state without therapy and without catharsis. One possibility is that a self-selection process is occurring, those who remain with the Alexander Technique and make significant changes being lightly armored in the first place. I don't have sufficient information or insight to make a judgment on this issue at this point. What I can say is that if the Alexander Technique is not breaking down armor, it appears at the very least to loosen it and make it more amenable to therapy. It also appears that habits which developed as a result of armoring do not necessarily cease with the dissolution of the armoring. I know of no system superior to the Alexander Technique for undoing these habits.

Finally, I wish to point out that although the role of the Alexander Technique in resolving the issues I have raised in this paper is of obvious personal importance to me, I also recognize and value the Alexander Technique as a tool for renewing the development of our most fundamental creative expression, our movement; a development that for all too many of us was cut short.

- (1) Frank, Alma, "A Study in Infant Development," *Child Development* (Vol. 9, No. 1), March 1938.
- (2) Jones, Frank Pierce, *Body Awareness in Action*, New York: Schocken Books, 1979, p. 178 and 179.
- (3) Baker, Elsworth F., *Man In The Trap*, New York: Collier Books, 1967, p. xxvii.

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Habit, my good reader, hath so vast a prevalence over the human mind that there is scarce anything too strange or too strong to be asserted of it.

—Henry Fielding, from *Joseph Andrews*
(contributed by Robert Rickover.)

Gravity, a mysterious carriage of the body to conceal the defects of the mind.

—Laurence Sterne