

Emotional Issues

Alexander teachers work routinely with people suffering from such things as stage fright, panic attacks, stress, poor body-image and lack of confidence. A few teachers have made more specialised forays into the implications of constructive conscious control of the individual in such diverse and emotionally charged fields as death,¹ sexuality² and artistic motivation.³

Any method which reduces pain and improves performance is an obvious cause for happiness, and the morale of many students of the Alexander Technique has been raised in this way. However, this pleasure in physical improvement may be brought about by purely physical means, such as a hip replacement operation, making no reference to an individual's manner of using herself. What is of interest here is how the quality of our use (as distinct from our structural health) may affect our emotional wellbeing.⁴

Successful inhibition and direction demand an overall neuromuscular quietness; by insisting that we become calm and fully present the Alexander Technique can often free us from the cyclic brooding which is typical of destructive emotional states. Even when this seems impossible from within, the external influence of good hands-on work may "persuade" us otherwise.

It is not unusual for a student to begin a lesson feeling stressed, frustrated, miserable and emotionally exhausted, but even if there are very real circumstances leading to this condition, she may find herself at the end of the lesson feeling refreshed, content, even happy in a non-specific way, and either able to deal with her problems or, as sometimes happens, only able vaguely to

remember why she was so wound up in the first place. One of the long-term benefits of the Alexander Technique is that this equanimity may become a prominent part of a student's personality. Losing your temper or "lashing out" at someone is anathema to the Alexandrian, but of course, this does not preclude consciously chosen, strong, even fiery behaviour when the situation demands it.

Alexander used to point out to his students:

You are not here to do exercises, or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and learn to deal with it.⁵

Alexandrian good use in other words is not so much skilful *body-mechanics*, as it is the purposeful and constant monitoring, filtering and modulation of our *reactions* to everything around and within us; as Alexander implies, the *nature* of the "stimulus that puts you wrong" – whether it is a physical, intellectual or emotional stimulus – is not important.

In addition to the generally calming quality of the Technique, some people experience quite powerful cathartic reactions to Alexander work. These may take any form from fits of the giggles or unexpected crying during or following a lesson, to excessive sleepiness or disturbed eating patterns. Occasionally these events may be accompanied by the "resurfacing" of forgotten events from the past, traumatic or otherwise.⁶ Most people say that this Alexander induced catharsis is accompanied by a profound sense of relief and comes at a time when they are "ready to deal with it". In contrast to practitioners of certain psychotherapeutic techniques, bodywork systems, and quasi-spiritual disciplines, Alexander

teachers do not *set out* to elicit such responses, nor to analyse them when they do arise; to do so does not so much encourage healthy self expression, as it does a sort of emotional incontinence. The role of the Technique in this situation is simply to render an individual clear to herself, by increments which are determined by that individual's willingness and readiness to meet such a challenge.

There are, obviously, serious psychological cases which are outside the scope of the Alexander Technique. However, the Technique can provide a suitable medium through which to address quite complex emotional issues if the student has a clear understanding that her emotional responses are inappropriate, out of balance with the rest of her experience and that they are getting in her way.

1 *Curiosity Recaptured*, edited by Jerry Sontag, 1996, Chapter 11 "Grief" by Vivian Schapera.

2 *The Alexander Principle*, Wilfred Barlow, 1973, Chapter 8 "The Psychomechanics of Sex".

3 *Indirect Procedures*, Pedro De Alcantara, 1997, Chapter 17 "Aesthetic Judgements".

4 See references to the significance of emotion on pages 6, 11 and 12.

5 Alexander quoted in *The Alexander Technique, The Essential Writings of F Matthias Alexander*, Edward Maisel, 1969, Chapter 1 "Notes of Instruction".

6 Some people feel that they have adopted a particular pattern of tension in direct response to an event in their past, and that when that tension is released, the associated mental experiences are also unlocked. This theory is congruent with the ideas of the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich (1897-1957).