

WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT TO BE FAMILIAR WITH ALEXANDER'S BOOKS

Walter Carrington

Walter Carrington gave this talk at the Constructive Teaching Centre on 4th March 2005.

I'D LIKE TO SPEAK to you about why it is so important that you all be familiar with Alexander's books – that you have not only read the books, but that you really have given some thought to what he says, and related, as far as possible, what you read to your own experience. His books were written out of his experience and the Technique arose out of his experience. It was all the result of what he observed. It wasn't a matter of theories that he formulated – ideas out of the air. It was a very practical matter.

The reason why it's so important to know about the books is because there isn't really any other source from which you can get this practical information. People these days say "Oh well, the books are all very old, they were all written a long time ago." And yes, it's true, this book was written in 1910. Good heavens! That's nearly 100 years ago! People have been teaching the Technique ever since that time, and surely we must have learned quite a bit in that subsequent hundred years.

And yes, indeed we have, no doubt about it. We've gained a tremendous amount of knowledge and experience. We know vastly more about it all now than he did in 1910. But at the same time nobody has, to my knowledge, succeeded in writing a book giving an account of the Technique that is any improvement or advance on what he wrote.

Part of the reason is that all of us, when we came as students to learn the Technique, we had lessons from our teachers, we had it all explained to us, but none of us went through a process similar to what Alexander went through himself. That is to say that he didn't have a teacher. He didn't have anybody to show him. It was up to his observation and reasoning and so on to make these discoveries and the discoveries he made were extraordinarily important.

The basis for these extraordinarily important discoveries was unquestionably as well recognised in 1910 as it is today: that people's postural behavior is of some importance. It's recognised very well today that the evolutionary story shows how we human beings have arrived at the upright stance and postural coordination we have today. In that process, it is self-evident that we walk about on two feet; and if we are going to do that we have to balance; and if we are going to balance, we need not to be in a little dream, but we need to be consciously aware of what's going on around us.

These are all very simple and obvious things – things that people, in a sense, know, if you put it to them in a theoretical way. They'll say "Of course I know that! Of course

I walk on two legs. Of course it's important how I use my feet!" Nobody's going to deny that. But it's one thing to recognise all of these facts theoretically, but quite another when it comes to considering their implications – what it actually means, for you and me, for our lives, for our individual behaviour. Then it's a very different matter. And, of course, that is what Alexander found himself, and that is what he set about doing his best to show us and tell us.

In very, very simple terms, you might say almost caricature terms – there is obviously so much more to it than this – Alexander's problem was that he was losing his voice and he couldn't speak properly. He was stiffening his neck, he was pulling his head back, he was pulling himself down. The problem was then how to stop doing it, and to get familiar with the implications of the whole observation that stiffening the neck, pulling the head back, pulling down was a bad thing. And that it was a good thing, if you could manage, on the other hand, to keep your neck free and keep your head going forward and up and so on and so forth.

Now, he realised from the beginning that if he was going to communicate his solution to the problem, he had to try to explain it to people and show them both the problem and the solution. He had to communicate these things in a way they could understand. And that was as big a difficulty in his day as it is today – or let me put it the other way around – it's as big a difficulty today as it was in his day. The difficulty has never changed. I've been teaching for quite a long time, and when I meet somebody who comes in to see me for a first lesson, it's no different now to my experience of giving a first lesson 60 years ago. And I am sure that my experience of giving a first lesson 60 years ago was no different to Alexander's in 1894. The difficulty is the same – always the same.

And quite simply, we've found over that time that it's all very well talking to people, it's all very well reasoning with them, it's all very well putting it into words – nothing suffices except showing. You've got to show them. You've got to somehow or another give them the experience. And the words that you use, well, you'll find that the best thing to do is to choose words that your pupils understand. It's no good deciding that you're going to use some verbal formula of words that are totally unfamiliar to them. You've got to find a way to communicate and I think that always will be the difficulty. You cannot communicate this work, you cannot get people to understand, unless they have the experience.

There's nothing short of the experience that will enable people to understand. Yes, you've got to, as a teacher, you've got to get people's agreement to accept the experience. A lot of people stop short of that. They don't want the experience; they're afraid of the experience. Seriously! They're afraid of the implications. Something inside them says, "If I really experience this, I'd know something that might make me feel that it was necessary to change. And I don't want to do that, I don't want to know!" And people come to you as pupils; they come for an interview or to inquire about the Technique, so you would think they would want to know. But it isn't by any means as simple as that. Some people, yes, some people are really ready to know and want to know, but there are other people who have managed to persuade themselves that they want to know, but in their heart of hearts they don't want to know at all.

So we do have an awful lot of real difficulties, and what I'm saying is that the dif-

difficulties haven't really changed very much since Alexander first started to teach. The daily difficulties I find myself are described in Alexander's own writings. What he refers to is something that in teaching we encounter time and time again. I find it very useful, very helpful, very important to read his thoughts about it, and his experience, how he confronted these difficulties and how he worked out a way of dealing with them. That is some of the reason why I'd recommend that everybody read Alexander's books, but not only to read them but really make the effort to understand and think about what he wrote. I suggest that you take what he says as the basis for a little experiment of your own to see whether things work out the way he said. "Yes, that 's what he said, he said it'd work out like that. Let's try it and see. Let's give it a go. Let's see if things do work out in accordance with what he said."

Now from a practical point of view, the first training course was the first time that he had ever really set about formally training students to be teachers. He'd trained various people on an apprenticeship basis, but apprenticeship is a little different. He was going to have a number of people coming together on the training course, men and women from all sorts of different backgrounds and experiences, and he wanted above all to try to ensure that these people got the necessary experience from which they would be able to derive the necessary understanding. So he knew that he must work on them individually. Although there was a group of people, the group didn't eliminate the individual element. It was always you, the individual pupil, FM and you. It was between you and him. It didn't matter how many people were in the group, it was always individual – it was you and him! He recognised that very clearly "That's what I must do!" As I recognise it now. As I sit here, I know it would be absolutely futile to try to work as though you were all the same or anything like that. You can't help people; you can't give people an experience that way. It's got to be – of course – it has got to be individual.

So knowing all of that, he decided to write up an account of how he developed the Technique – the process he'd gone through. He thought he'd do his best to get it down on paper. So he wrote *The Use of the Self*, particularly the chapter on "The Evolution of the Technique," which he thought he could give to the students. They'd have their classes, they'd have all the daily practical work, and they'd have this written record to refer to that would help people very much: it would guide people in their thinking to a clearer understanding of what it was all about. That was his idea in writing *The Use of the Self*. His other books were written not just with his students in view, but as an attempt to reach anybody out there, anybody in the audience who was prepared to listen. And he worked very hard in choosing his words to make them as intelligible as possible.

Now, of course, while he was alive, Alexander was always the resource. If people read his books and didn't understand what he was saying, or indeed if they'd had lessons and they didn't understand, they could always go to him and ask and get the whole explanation from him. When we were working on the training course, and I was teaching on the training course while he was alive, I always had the happy thought that he was there. If there were any problems, I didn't have to worry about them too much, because I could refer them to him. He could deal with it. I could get on with teaching, as best I could. I knew my own limitations, and I knew that I didn't know

all the answers, but he was there, so I wasn't going to worry at all! But of course when he died, all of a sudden there you were, you couldn't go and ask him anymore. If a thought occurred to you, if something happened, you couldn't go and ask him. The only way in which we could know what he might have thought was to go and read his books, because we knew he'd done his best in the books to be as clear as possible and comprehensive, but that was that.

So suddenly, from not having had any responsibility, suddenly I was responsible for the training course. Here was the responsibility – and it was mine. And I thought, well, I'd better read the books to people, because it's all very well saying to people, just as I've been saying to you now this morning, "Read the books." It isn't an easy task. It isn't easy at all! And these days, after all, for a lot of you English isn't your first language, so I'm really, really making quite a demand in saying "Read the books." I know how difficult it is.

Of course, I do read them to you on the training course, as I've been reading them to you today. We have come nearly to the end of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* to this chapter on "Notes and Instances." There is much written here that is difficult to understand. If it isn't explained to you, if there isn't somebody to say, "Well, this is what it's about, this is what it really means," you will find it extremely difficult to understand yourselves. Very largely this is because what he wrote and what he thought was what he experienced up to 1910. We can now draw on what people have experienced almost up to 2010, and, yes, our experience does enable us to define, to describe and clarify a great deal. We now know certain things very clearly and positively about the Technique which were known only rather vaguely in 1910.

So you do need to have the books read to you by somebody who's got some of the necessary experience, and you do also need to read them and know them yourself. Because you may well find one day that, like me, you haven't felt any overwhelming responsibility and so on, you've felt "Well, they don't have to ask me, they can go and ask somebody who really knows." But the time is going to come when you are the person who's supposed to know. What I'm saying to you is that you might as well face that in good time and prepare for it, so that you are sure, as far as possible, that you will be able to answer some of the questions put to you when that time comes. There we are. I think that will do.

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