

EXCHANGE

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On Not Having in Order to Have More: Some Reflections on Inhibition Part I

by Andrea Matthews, Alexander Technique teacher, member,
Alexander Technique International

(Part II will appear in the next issue of Exchange, Ed.)

“The Technique *is* the inhibition.” Frank Ottiwell, Sweet Briar Workshop 1996

So what is inhibition?

In preparing this article,¹ I first scanned Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate (a technique I’ve learned from a number of fine Alexander Technique teachers) and found it massively unhelpful, at least from the Alexandrian point of view. Later, after some extensive but still preliminary wallowing in my notes from the 1996 Sweet Briar Alexander Technique Workshop, Moshe Feldenkrais’ *Body and Mature Behavior* (1949/1979), and Deane Juhan’s *Job’s Body* (1987), where I found more of a comfy, Alexander-friendly feeling for the subject, I decided to try jumping again into that rather bracing pool of information. This time I surfaced with some nice little pearls. For example, per Webster’s, inhibit and habit have the same root!

inhibit [fr. *Latin in + habere* to have—more at HABIT] [note that *in-* can mean both *not* and *in, within, into, toward, and on*; although *not + to have* is the obvious surface meaning, it is interesting that inhibition is the “not having” that allows us to move toward having] *vt* 1: to prohibit from doing something 2a: to hold in check: RESTRAIN b: to discourage from free or spontaneous activity: REPRESS *vi*: to cause inhibition syn see FORBID

inhibition *n* 1a: the act of inhibiting: the state of being inhibited b: something that forbids or debars 2: an inner impediment to free activity, expression, or functioning: as a: a psychological activity imposing restraint upon another

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ATI Vision and Mission

To establish an open means of global communication for people to discuss, apply, research, and experiment with the discoveries of F. M. Alexander.

To foster the use of the F. M. Alexander Technique in social and environmental interrelationships.

To create a vital organization whose structure and means of operation are consistent with the principles of the F. M. Alexander Technique.

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Editor's Page

by Dan Arsenault, editor

One of the little pleasures in my life is living in New England. Among other things, I get to pursue my stock photography business with what I like to think of as safaris. I get up early, say three a. m. or so, get in the Jeep and go in one direction until the sun comes up. I stop, get off the big highway, load film, and start home on the small roads. I find great, saleable, New England scenics all over. Covered wooden bridges, waterfalls, that sort of thing.

On one safari on a Saturday last fall I happened on a yard sale in Claremont, New Hampshire, with lots of older books on photography for ten cents apiece. Can't go wrong there. One of the books was Aaron Sussman's *The Amateur Photographer's Handbook* (New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, Inc., 1973). Although out of date and aimed a different reader, I did enjoy it. Imagine my surprise, however, when, on page 271, in the chapter on indoor portraits, there is the famous portrait of F. M. Alexander (the one with the quizzical grin) that most Exchange readers have probably seen. Here's the caption:

F. Matthias Alexander, who taught Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, and many other greats how to use their bodies more effectively through "constructive

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From the Chair



Dan Arsenault photo

Power, Vulnerability and Influence

by Jamee Culbertson, Chair of Alexander Technique International

I'm sitting here at my computer with a sprained ankle thinking about what I can say to ExchangeE readers about ATI and the Alexander Technique to give validity to my role as Chair. After all, this column is called 'From the Chair.' In leadership, one of the most important things to realize is that you really don't have much power at all, and at best you can have some influence. The Latin derivative of the word influence, *influere* means 'to flow in'. The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines influence as an indirect power that has an intangible affect on a person or an outcome of events. In this issue of ExchangeE our two main articles focus on Alexander's principle of Inhibition, something that is also sometimes thought of as indirect power.

Currently, and quite literally, I have but one leg to stand on. I could compensate for this condition and charge ahead with all sorts of muscling about. I could be honest about my vulnerability and listen as my system acts and reacts to the unfamiliar state of 'quick mind, slow and injured body' which presents new and different choices to make. I could simply stay off it and wait. Even though a certain level of power is usurped for the time being, I find that I am still able to influence the quality of my experience if in fact I

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activity b: a restraining of the function of a bodily organ or an agent (as an enzyme)

habit [some of the interesting or relevant entries] 1: (*archaic*) CLOTHING 2a: a costume characteristic of a calling, rank, or function 4: bodily appearance or makeup 5: the prevailing disposition or character of a person's thoughts and feelings: mental makeup 6: a manner of behavior: CUSTOM 7a: a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance b: an acquired mode of behavior that has become nearly or completely involuntary 10: ADDICTION

While I was swimming around, I decided to explore a word which Feldenkrais used repeatedly in regard to habit and inhibition:

labile adj [F fr. MF, prone to err, fr. LL *labilis*, fr. L *labi* to slip—more at SLEEP] 1: characterized by a ready capability for change: CHANGEABLE, ADAPTABLE 2: readily or continually undergoing chemical, physical, or biological change or breakdown: UNSTABLE

“I shall proceed to show that such an objection is the outcome of a total misunderstanding of the fundamental psychophysical processes concerned with the application of the preventive principles employed in my technique.”

One sees what somatic educators (and re-educators) are up against with the slant of these definitions—to us, inhibition is good, habit borders on the pathological, and lability is devoutly to be wished.

The Two “Inhibitions”

As everyone involved in the Alexander Technique is at great pains to make a distinction between Freud's mean and nasty inhibition (repression) and F. M. Alexander's nice and helpful inhibition (non-doing), it occurred to me to spend some time exploring how they really are similar and different.

1. Both involve prevention of a response/activity that would/might otherwise happen.
2. Inhibition as described by Freud seems to build up pressure behind the repression over time (the image of a pressure cooker comes to mind), whereas physiologic and Alexandrian inhibition imply a lessening of such pressure (and thus a lesser reactivity).
3. Freudian repression would seem to reinforce habit and the bond between stimulus and response (triggering the conditioned response to the stimulus in the name of repressing it) while masking the source of the

habit from consciousness. Physiologic inhibition, by contrast, gradually disassociates stimulus from response and allows the conditioned response to be extinguished. Alexander's inhibition, operating as it does in the field of human consciousness, tends to bring the original source of the habit (or at least the habit itself) to consciousness, so a choice of response can be made. In this case, the *conscious* use of inhibition speeds the extinguishing of the stereotyped response.

4. Because of assumptions we have acquired culturally (and which exert a constant, if unconscious, influence on our thinking), Alexander's version of inhibition is frequently misinterpreted at first as a "doing" kind of restraint, and thus lapses into something repressive, along Freudian lines. A behavior is judged undesirable and the person decides to change or eliminate it. However, he feels the need to sense its operation, in order to feel himself "inhibiting" it. In this way, he actually reinforces the stimulus/response connection by activating it once again, adding to it the strain of trying to contradict the habit as it is struggling to enact itself (a kind of "push me pull you" effect). Eventually, since stimuli tend to "link" neurologically, "inhibition" could conceivably replace the original stimulus in eliciting the response, even adding to the pattern the newly associated sense of struggle in the form of increased tension! So, Alexandrian inhibition is about "non-doing" rather than either "not doing" or "doing it right." In light of this, Marjorie Barstow's remark (quoted by Michael Frederick at the 1996 Sweet Briar Workshop) that "inhibition is actually movement" takes on, for me, an even more koan-like quality than when I first heard it. It's like being asked, "What is the sound of non-doing activity?" It is, however, only a *seeming* paradox—when we are willing to let go of our cultural assumptions, we can get our hands (and our heads) out of this particular monkey trap.

Alexander himself offered important distinctions between these two concepts of inhibition in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (pp. 77-78):

There has just come to my knowledge an interesting objection to the importance which I attach to the process of inhibition as a primary and fundamental factor in the technique of the scheme I advocate, and the objection is made on the ground that this use of inhibition will cause harmful suppression in the individual concerned. I shall proceed to show that such an objection is the outcome of a total misunderstanding of the fundamental psycho-physical processes concerned with the application of the preventive principles employed in my technique.

There has been and still is a growing tendency to attempt to free children from undue external restraint, both at home and at school, with the idea of preventing those harmful suppressions supposed to be the result of the inhibitions associated with the imposition of the restraining characteristic of less

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modern methods. The idea concerned is conceived on a specific and curative basis and is generally accepted, particularly in schools where an effort is being made to create conditions of environment and occupation to meet the pupil's needs. The points I wish to emphasize in this connection are (1) that the process of inhibition involved [in such efforts] is employed in connection with ideas directly associated with the gaining of "ends," these ideas being the response to a stimulus (or stimuli) arising from some primary desire or need, and (2) - and this is all important - that the stimulus (or stimuli) to inhibit this response comes from without, and the process of inhibition is *forced* upon the pupil. This means that his desire is thwarted in consequence of compliance with a command from an outside authority, and this could account for the disturbed emotional conditions associated with what is known as suppression.

Now the inhibitory process involved in my technique has little in common with that to which reference has just been made. For the idea concerned with inhibition in my technique is conceived on a general and preventive basis, and the process of inhibition involved is employed primarily in connection with ideas which are dissociated from any direct attempt to gain an "end," but associated instead with that indirect procedure inseparable from the practical application of the principles concerned with the *means whereby* an end may be gained. These ideas are the response to a stimulus (or stimuli) arising from a reasoned, constructive conscious understanding and acceptance by the pupil of the principles concerned with the "means-whereby," and as the procedure concerned with the application of these principles involves the prevention of "end-gaining" acts, the performance of which is associated with misdirected activities, it follows that the pupil's acceptance of the need for and efficacy of such procedure includes also his acceptance of the principle of inhibition of primary desires concerned with such "end-gaining" acts. This, again, really means that in the application of my technique the process of inhibition, that is, *the act of refusing to respond* to the primary desire to gain an "end" *becomes the act of responding* (volitional act) to the conscious reasoned desire to employ the *means whereby* that "end" may be gained.

The stimulus to inhibit, therefore, in this case comes from within, and the process of inhibition is not forced upon the pupil. This means that the pupil's desire or desires will be satisfied, not thwarted, and that there will be present desirable emotional and other psychophysical conditions which do not make for what is known as suppression in any form.

Later in the same book, he points out how inhibition operates for good and ill in human development:

There can be little doubt that the process of reasoning tends to develop more quickly and to reach a higher standard in a person whose attitude towards life might be described as calm and collected. In such a person, the psychophysical processes called 'habits' are governed by moderation, and his inhibitory processes are adequately developed in all spheres of activity. Their use is not limited to those comparatively few spheres where it was considered necessary

to establish taboos during the early and later periods of Man's struggle with the problems which arose in the various stages of the civilizing process. In these spheres there has been a harmful and exaggerated development of the inhibitory processes, often causing virtues to become almost vices, while in other spheres there has been a correspondingly harmful lack of the development of inhibition, particularly in those spheres connected with the use of the psychophysical mechanisms in practical activity. This represents an unbalanced use of this wonderful process of inhibition, and tends to produce, as a general result, a state of unbalanced psychophysical functioning, throughout the whole organism... (CCCI, p. 85)

The Well-Inhibited Neuron

With these preliminary reflections in mind, I asked myself, what is inhibition and how does it operate? What does it do for living organisms? How does physiological inhibition (at the cellular level) relate to Alexandrian "conscious" inhibition?

I found I had laid hands on a giant tarbaby, from which I have extricated myself only at the risk of oversimplifying the scientific details. I'm displaying here only the sticky residue I managed to bring home from the tussle; hopefully it bears enough resemblance to the still untamed critter looming out there in the literature.

How does "constructive" inhibition work at the level of nerves and neural impulses? According to Deane Juhan (pp. 154-5; updated with information from Peter Nathan's *The Nervous System*), nerve cells transmit a stimulus received from an external source, or from another nerve, on an all-or-nothing basis; if the stimulus is of sufficient magnitude, the nerve will transmit an action potential to its neighbor(s). Action potential (AP) is the name given to the energy released in nerves by a wave of depolarization (i.e., a change in the electrical charge) formed by the release of positive and negative ions along the cell membrane; the AP then causes the release of neurotransmitters across the tiny gap (at the synapse) between the nerve and its neighbor(s), triggering the next depolarizing wave and thus transmitting the nervous impulse from one cell to another.² The effects of this process are in many ways

analogous to electrical signals, but APs are really hydraulic and chemical in nature, travelling from one-half meter per second up to 225 mph, depending on the size of the nerve (faster through larger and myelinated ones) (Nathan, p. 88). (By contrast, electricity, which is produced by the

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transfer of outer electrons between the atoms on the surface of the conducting medium, approaches the speed of light.) Once set going, the size and duration of the wave is identical to all other APs for that cell. Normally, a number of impulses must occur within a brief enough time for their effects to be accumulated before they can push the next cell into depolarization. This is summation, either temporal (sufficient impulses over time to pass the threshold of stimulation) and/or spatial (enough cells in a region firing at once); “all nerve cells are capable of both types of summation, and in fact they are both occurring all of the time.” (Nathan, p. 88)

“In general,” according to Nathan, “the nervous system is set at a high level of excitability and it is constantly restrained. When increased activity is needed, the brakes are released...

Some neurons seem to be firing most of the time; they do so to keep an adequate excitability at the synapses where their nerve fibres end... There

is an ever-present background of impulses coming in from the brain keeping the system ready to respond to orders to move.” (p. 94) The “brakes” he writes of are in fact the nervous system’s built-in inhibitive mechanisms. It is important to note, for our purposes, that even though a nerve is not firing, it may be maintained by incoming stimuli at a greater readiness for firing—resulting in “normal” tonus or, if excessive, the “hair-trigger” responses of the chronically tense. One might say that the “set point” of such nerves (and their owners) is raised, a concept the importance of which will become clear when we come to consider the conscious use of inhibition to alter reactions to stimuli. For one thing, a raised set point would tend to reinforce habit, by making habitual responses more rapid and more likely; as such, it would also contribute to the difficulty students experience (especially in early lessons) in employing conscious inhibition between stimulus and response.

“Once a stimulation passes beyond the sensory nerve ending that initially receives it, it bears no resemblance to its original quality.”

Deane Juhan states: “Once a stimulation passes beyond the sensory nerve ending that initially receives it, it bears no resemblance to its original quality. What was a physical distortion of tissue becomes a coded train of action potential impulses. As it continues through the afferent pathways [(those leading toward the brain)], it can be inhibited, facilitated, rhythmically altered, or blocked at various stages. It has been *transduced*, and is no more like its origin than the current in a telephone wire is like the person talking at the other end.” Similarly, impulses in the motor pathways are “transduced into tissue distortion... Somehow it is in the mingling and shuttling of these coded sequences that interpretation and selection occur.” (Juhan, p. 163) As is noted in the Time-Life volume, *Mind and Brain: Journey through the Mind*

and Body, because of the net-like arrangement of nerves in higher organisms (which will be discussed in more detail below), nerve impulses can be transmitted in convergent (many to one nerve), divergent (one to many nerves), parallel (one or more one-to-one connections), or even reverberating (impulses feeding back, reinforcing the stimulus) patterns.

This latter pattern may have much to do with the phenomenon Feldenkrais called the “irradiation” of impulses when a stimulus is received, and which explains the nervous system’s generalized response to novel, unfamiliar stimuli. Feldenkrais further noted: “The complexity [of the spreading of excitation by irradiation through the nervous system] is, however, so great, that a considerable amount of unwanted, unnecessary, and quite often detrimental activity is produced. We sneeze when looking at the sun...we often freeze when a slight movement would take us out of danger; and so on. The irradiation of nervous excitations is greatest in the autonomic nervous system. Indeed, one may say that in the sympathetic system any impulse gets the whole thing going... The irradiation of the ANS spreads to the rest of the nervous system.” (Feldenkrais, p. 18) This reveals another aspect of the importance of inhibition from the level of neural impulses up to that of the conscious control of behavior; however at the mercy of the seemingly involuntary responses of our organs and emotions and responses we feel, we would be far worse off without the electrochemical and corresponding conscious faculty of inhibition.

The threshold at which a nerve cell’s depolarizing wave can be triggered can be raised by a number of factors, such as fatigue (overuse at the synapse, specifically) and chemical conditions inside and outside the nerve (in particular, neurotransmitters). When the threshold is raised, the nerve is less likely to respond to the stimulus and pass it on; in other words, it is inhibited. Also, “not all synapses, and not all neurotransmitters, are excitatory. Some have the opposite effects; that is, they *hyper*-polarize the next cell’s membrane (giving it an interior charge greater than -70mV . [i.e., more negative than its resting charge of -70mV .]), so that the propagation of an action potential is even *more* difficult to achieve. Most nerves have several axons that contact several other cells. Some of these axons may end in excitatory synapses, while others end in inhibitory ones, so that the action potentials of one cell can have the opposite effect on various other cells which it contacts... It even appears that individual synapses can *change* their orientation, adapting themselves to release either excitatory or inhibitory neurotransmitters according to traumatic experience, training, conscious mental set, and the like... Most action potentials, then, do not serve simply to fire the next nerve or a motor unit. Rather they serve to facilitate or to inhibit, to a greater or lesser degree, the next cell’s nearness to its threshold of excitation. Depending upon the frequency and chemical nature of the synaptic secretions contacting its membrane

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(which are, remember, greatly influenced by experience, training, and attitude), a specific nerve cell or motor unit may be very easy or quite difficult to spark into the transmission of an action potential.” (Juhan, pp. 154-155) Considering that a single motor neuron may receive up to 15,000 synapses from other cells, summation (or the inhibition of summation) becomes very complex.

It seems even more so, when one reads that there is not only post-synaptic (that is, in the cell beyond the synapse) but also pre-synaptic inhibition, either just where the axon leaves the cell body or near the end of the axon just before its termination at the synapse. This creates “a mechanism for directing the excitation to one neuron [of the many the transmitting nerve may contact] and not another or to the dendrite of a neuron and not the cell body [the two locations where the axon can contact a neighboring neuron].” (Nathan, p. 95) Inhibition thus serves to select which nerves (and thus which organs or muscles) will respond to a given stimulus.

Inhibition Rules

Inhibition helps bring a large and complex system under control, while defining and refining response. Such a refining process is graphically illustrated by PET scans, such as one in *Mind and Brain* (p. 17) showing brain activity in a novice executing a task vs. an expert; as one learns a task, the general and broad pattern of excitation becomes more efficient and specific. As Richard Haier of the Brain Imaging Center at the University of California at Irvine is quoted in the same volume, “‘It is possible the brain learns over time what neural circuits *not* to use to perform a task, eventually relying only on certain circuits.’ Moreover, the experiments would appear to indicate that intelligence...has a real basis in physiological efficiency,” the volume’s editors go on to note (p. 108). This more conscious learning process seems analogous to what Feldenkrais pointed out in his explanation of how conditioned reflexes develop along Pavlovian lines: “At the beginning of conditioning, the animal responds to no well-defined quality of the stimulus. Thus, the sound stimulus may be of any frequency. When the conditioned reflex is well established, the animal will respond to the precise sound of, say, 256 cycles per second and not to 247 or 264 c.p.s. It is said that the animal has learned to inhibit its response to all other sound but the correct stimulus—within the discriminating power of its auditory apparatus.” (Feldenkrais, p. 45)

In another respect crucial to learning, as well as to smooth functioning in general, inhibition is used in selecting input to brain, which would otherwise be overloaded with information from the various senses. Here inhibition is imposed on the transmission of stimuli of lesser importance, at points any-

where from the receptors in skin, muscles, joints or organs, to the brain itself. By the same token, “inhibition is used to highlight an important stimulus,” thereby focusing immediate attention on it (Nathan, p. 128). In fact, “each primary receptive area of the cerebral cortex is able to control its own input, its own afferent pathway.” (Nathan, p. 131).

Feldenkrais discussed another mechanism of inhibition (which Alexander seems to have discovered on his own) revealed by Pavlov’s work in conditioning. It seems that a second stimulus, or a more important stimulus, can override and actually inhibit transmission of a first. This is confirmed by Nathan (p. 130), who points out that the first stimulus can completely cease to register on the brain. Alexander’s directions, which he termed preventive and inhibitive, act in this way to inhibit the ongoing stimulus to habit; of course, for this to work, the directions must register in the brain as sufficiently important to override the existing habitual stimulus—as Walter Carrington says in *Thinking Aloud*, “it’s the willing and wishing, the going on willing and wishing, so that there’s the persistency and the continuity, the drive, the force, the energy in that channel” that make the difference (p. 19).

Inhibition also functions to protect the organism from debilitating fatigue in a particular nerve or cortical area due to overuse, allowing time for recovery (i.e., “restoration of potential energy” (Feldenkrais, p. 28)). “When the intensity, or the duration, of the stimulus has to be considerably increased in order to produce the usual reaction, the nerve or fibre is said to be fatigued.” According to Feldenkrais, experimentally, all things being equal, it is the motor nerve cell in the cortex that fatigues first, then the motor end plate of the

“Inhibition helps bring a large and complex system under control, while defining and refining response.”

nerve (the relatively enormous synapse where a single nerve axon branches out to meet individual muscle fibers); fatigue of the muscle itself depends on depletion of the substance that supplies energy for contraction or accumulation of waste

products, and is comparatively rare under normal circumstances. In the living person, however, “because impulses arrive at the end plate from many different motor nerve cells, ...it will be the first to fatigue.” (Feldenkrais, p. 29) “In normal life, activity is never strictly confined to one and the same motor cell in the cortex. In exceptional circumstances, when such a concentration of activity is called for, there is an immediate fall of reactivity. It is Pavlov’s contention that to prevent complete exhaustion of a cell or a small group of cells on which activity is thus focused, an inhibitory process comes into being which reduces the reactivity of the cells concerned. The spreading of this inhibitory state to the surrounding cells is what we call sleep.” (Feldenkrais, p. 30) Nathan would seem to concur with this hypothesis, stat-

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ing that sleep is not just passive; “there are neural structures in the brain that actively cause sleep” and these structures are scattered through the more “primitive” parts of the cerebral hemispheres (Nathan, p. 135). (Such a mechanism would, I presume, also be responsible for the “May I be excused? My brain is full” syndrome so familiar to new Alexander trainees, I should think.)

Surfing the Internuncial Net

“When it is important to influence the message, to let messages interact, then chains of nerve fibres are used, so that at each junction or link in the chain modifying influences can be introduced. The more synapses, the more modification is possible,” Nathan writes (p. 86). Juhan continues, “It is within this network of intermediary neurons [those that are neither primary sensory or motor nerves, but rather serve to connect them], arranged end-to-end and side-by-side between our sensory nerve endings and our motor units, that all of our tone levels, reflexes, gestures, habits, tendencies, feelings, attitudes, postures, styles have their genesis. It is called the *internuncial net*, [and] composes roughly ninety percent of our nervous systems, including the entire spinal cord and the brain. It is nothing less than the total activity of this internuncial net which influences the responses of the motor units... It is only by influencing the flow of impulses through the vast internuncial net that we can have any effect upon tone, habit, and behavior.” (Juhan, p. 163) In other words, this is where inhibition first becomes a physical possibility in evolution (previously the reception of a stimulus led immediately and inevitably to a built-in response) and, furthermore, is where inhibition, whether unconsciously or consciously engaged, operates.

In tracing the evolution of the nervous system, Juhan points out that the appearance of these intermediate neurons between sensory and motor neurons (which first occurred in flatworms), by interrupting the purely reflex relationship of stimulus/response that existed previously, “makes possible a much wider and a much more precise distribution of stimulation and response. This is the beginning of the centralization of the nervous system... It is natural enough that the densest distribution of these internuncial neurons developed in the head end, since this is the portion which receives the first and the most stimulations in the forward-swimming flatworm.” (p. 166) “Thus what was once only a head ganglion becomes the full-fledged brain. This process of enlarging [*sic*] the head—or *cephalic*—ganglion and increasing its influence on the rest of the system is called *encephalization*. More and more local reflexes become mediated by the cephalic ganglion’s expanding means of integration and control, and older forms of organization are supplanted by newer, more sophisticated, and often more flexible ones.” (Juhan, p. 168)

Getting Evolved

At this point, the masses of information I had stuffed into my head began to reach a point of spontaneous combustion and the thought flared up that because evolution favors lability of the brain (as increasing adaptability), the brain has become more and more shaped (literally) by experience. This contention is supported by Ashley

Montagu (*Touching*, pp. 51-52); he posits that we are born only half-gestated, because of the need to be born before skull gets too large to pass safely through the birth canal. That necessity turned into an asset, increasing lability and the capacity

“At this point, the masses of information I had stuffed into my head began to reach a point of spontaneous combustion...”

for learning. As the human species' brain grows in size,³ it can make more use of the masses of sensory information received by the individual, which in turn make the connections of the internuncial net of that individual's nervous system ever denser and more complex, conferring benefits in terms of evolution that will be explored below.

“An important feature of every new formation of the nervous system” according to Feldenkrais,⁴ “is that the control it exercises on the older formations is always both excitatory [*sic*] and inhibitory. Thus, with the advent of the new control, certain reactions will disappear. They remain alive but are suppressed so long as the newer control is operative. Others, on the contrary, will appear and be sustained permanently while the new formation is in control.” (p. 17) He had previously noted that under sufficient threat or stress, the higher system shuts itself down in favor of the more time-tested responses of older systems. “Thus when the irritation originating in the outside world is very sudden, intense or entirely novel, the first reaction is obtained from arc reflex structures straight away.” (p.16) [Arc reflexes involve communication from sensory to motor neurons via the spinal cord only, not involving higher centers such as the brain. The simplest example is the knee-jerk response, a stretch reflex that excites the extensors of the knee to contract sharply, *while actively inhibiting the flexors*. (per Juhan, pp. 194-5)] “Everything occurs as if the newer formation were a tentative advancement in the nature of a biological luxury.” (Feldenkrais, p. 16) Thus higher systems can even inhibit themselves under certain circumstances.

That Alexander was aware of the value of this arrangement is clear from comments in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (p. 11): “in the earlier stages of man's development, the inhibition of the subconscious animal powers was frequently a source of danger and of death... [The] control was imperfect, wavered between two alternatives, and rejecting the guidance of instinct,

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suffered, it may be, destruction.” However, he went on in the same chapter to show how and why the time has come for a reliable conscious control to be developed and applied, and closed by asserting a concept far ahead of its time (*MSI* p. 19): “there is no function of the body that cannot be brought under the control of the conscious will.” Bearing in mind his complete commitment to the unity of body and mind, this statement (made in 1910) becomes all the more impressive. Note that here we reach a new level on which inhibition functions, becoming a powerful tool available to the higher centers of the nervous system to take control over previously reflexive responses and behaviors. This can be seen, for example, in the development and subsequent extinguishing (or ongoing inhibition) of physical reflexes in infants. (That some inborn reflexes are in fact constantly inhibited is sometimes revealed by brain injury or disease that incapacitates the higher center, releasing the inhibition, allowing the older pattern to reappear in behavior.) It gives us the chance to extinguish and truly change (and not just exchange) our *conditioned* reflexive responses—our habits. Without it, we cannot really be said to have free will.⁵

“This process will probably never be completed. The human cortex seems very much in the middle of its struggle to exert conscious control over instinctual responses and unconscious behavior, and we are just beginning to understand the awesome extent of influence—both for better and for worse—that the newer, higher portions of the brain can potentially exert over the older patterns of response. *Encephalization is the slow creation of the means to develop greater awareness of, and greater conscious control over reflex response.*” (Juhan, p. 168; my emphasis) This certainly brings to mind Alexander’s oft-stated conviction that conscious constructive control is the next stage in man’s evolution. (For examples, see *MSI*.)

How can we assert that evolution favors lability? After all, man is farther at birth from full development than perhaps any other animal, with a brain that is roughly 1/5 of its adult size, and thus is less equipped to cope immediately with the environment and in need of both protection and a lengthy apprenticeship. Yet this initial defenselessness appears not to have exacted enough of a price in terms of survival of the species to discourage the initial genetic changes in this direction or their subsequent elaboration. Logically, since the downside of such changes is readily apparent, one must assume it also confers some overriding advantage(s). Because so much of the newborn brain, now subject to stimuli from the environment, is yet to be formed, and so very little is preprogrammed in it in the form of unconditioned reflexes, it is extremely labile, that is, open to learning novel, environment- and situation-appropriate responses. Also, it’s not just that we learn one appropriate response to a given situation in the course of our apprenticeship that is most significant, but that we *could* learn an unlimited number of new ones. In

many cases, we do get stuck in a groove—perhaps the first response we tried and managed to survive with (an idea I owe to Alexander teacher Don Weed). Such a scenario leaves us perfectly attuned to the specific environment we first encounter, but terribly vulnerable to any sharp changes in that environment. Our acquired responses would then become perhaps even more inappropriate than ordinary unconditioned ones, leaving us little better off than any dinosaur (justifying the tendency, discussed above, for older, evolution-tested reflexes to take control under conditions of unusual stress).

Human Dinosaurs — Or Gifted Personalities?

In human beings, such rigidity takes on a noticeably psychological cast, as Feldenkrais pointed out. “In the mature individual, the conscious control selects from among the preexisting patterns formed in earlier experience, one which is the most appropriate to the present circumstances. He may be mistaken in judging the appropriateness of the response. In each case, he will alter the response if the situation is repeated. He may even be a *highly gifted personality* [my emphasis] and may discard all previously used patterns and elaborate entirely new ones. A person who finds unwanted patterns of earlier experiences reinstating themselves repeatedly *in spite of his conscious control*, is behaving neurotically.” (p. 52)

This “psychological” aspect of inhibition (which I personally find particularly intriguing) has been remarked upon not only by Alexandrians—and not only

“Our acquired responses would then become perhaps even more inappropriate than ordinary unconditioned ones, leaving us little better off than any dinosaur...”

by those working in the field of somatics per se. Feldenkrais, in his fascinating study of his work with a stroke patient, *Body Awareness as Healing Therapy: The Case of Nora*, noted, “Often a patient, when relieved from anxiety and muscular stiffness, will spontaneously recall

and say things about himself which he would never do in the presence of others.” (p. 10) Further on he explained, “The effects of my work alter the inhibition and excitation of the cortex, which is reflected through muscular flabbiness or contraction. The emotional content associated with the habitual attitude is deprived of its material support and the person becomes aware of the emotion. As he becomes aware of the emotional content linked with his body pattern, through the reduction of the superfluous intensity of contraction, his state is that of peacefulness and ease and he expresses his feelings calmly. There is usually an increase of the sense of well-being which lasts for some time.” (p. 48) This return of forgotten emotional content has been described in psychological terms by Dr. George Weinberg (for example, in *The*

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Heart of Psychotherapy, pp. 106-109). “The person stopping any habitual behavior becomes subject to an illusion, which becomes pronounced as the impulse mounts to resume the habit. I call it the *hunger illusion*... Often the technique of stopping a behavior and studying the reactions puts people in close touch with some impression they had dimly sensed, some perception they had held for a long time without identifying it... [While] the habitual behavior is engaged in, it *silences* the true perception that underlies it... In the hunger illusion are buried glimpses of motives. They become vivid, and the person has a sense of possessing a part of his life that seemed lost... Every act that breaks with the past evokes the past.” Note his important observation that the hunger illusion (the unconscious reason for engaging in the habit) tends to become *more* insistent as the habit begins to “starve.” Meaningful change takes time—and courage.

Where do these patterns of habitual contraction and anxiety originate? Feldenkrais contended that the unconditioned reflex contraction in response to falling is the *only* inborn reflex in man, and from that stem all the conditioned patterns and behaviors subsequently associated with the fear and anxiety accompanying that primal response (pp. 83-94). So bluntly stated, this is certainly debatable; Nathan cites a number of other inborn reflexes (pp. 109; 113-114). The response to falling is, at least, of fundamental importance. It is one of the only inborn reflexes (if not the only) not subsequently inhibited in favor of higher processes in the normal course of development. Also, because of its accompanying high emotional tone (in this case, of fear), it strongly reinforces conditioning (Nathan, p. 301). An important reflex from birth on throughout life, it is the template of the “startle response” that is subsequently evoked by other threatening situations. This echoes Tommy Thompson’s viewpoint that all fear stems ultimately from the sense of a lack of physical and emotional support; that’s the other side of the coin of the fear of falling. Thus we are led to wonder (as both Feldenkrais and Alexander suggested, despite their different methodologies) whether it wouldn’t be more profitable, rather than trying to extinguish every subsequent associated conditioned response (a never-ending task), to learn how to gain conscious control over the fear of falling, whether the stimulus appears as a threat from outside (requiring a more appropriate response) or an imbalance from within (triggering fear and requiring a solution more in accord with somatic design, which, *when not interfered with*, operates to provide the very support that seems lacking). This approach not only helps (over time) to extinguish already established anxiety-based contractive habits, but also works to prevent the formation of new ones, by encouraging the awareness and reliance of the student on the psychophysical support available from the teacher and ultimately from his own soma, the integrity and totality of his embodied consciousness, fully engaged with his environment, activities, relationships—his

complete context.

Whose Arm Is It Anyway?

A passing remark by Peter Nathan in *The Nervous System* made me appreciate another way in which inhibition, particularly as consciously applied by Alexander's method, helps us to refine our psychophysical awareness. In contrasting the passive "stretch" reflex with active contraction, he comments, "One imagines that the parts of the brain concerned with afferent information from parts of the body can distinguish between inputs from external stimulation and inputs derived from one's own commands to move." (pp. 78-79) Functionally speaking, as anyone who has taken or taught an Alexander lesson can attest, the important ability to make such differentiations is usually at least somewhat impaired (if not rendered largely inoperative) by habitual interference from the "higher" cerebral centers. Who has not seen (or been!) the student who mistakenly insists the moving of his arm was not his idea or act, but rather his teacher's? It is inhibition, consciously applied and attended to, that allows such students to regain their "sight" in this regard.

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¹This article grew out of a talk given at Tommy Thompson's teacher training at the Alexander Technique Center at Cambridge (MA) in September 1996, during my first year of training; as such it is more a reconnaissance report than an exhaustive survey of the vast territory of inhibition. I simply had to stop *somewhere*, despite the many tantalizing books and articles behind every bush.

All citations from Feldenkrais refer to *Body and Mature Behavior*, except where otherwise noted. Readers may wonder why I have referred so extensively to the work of Feldenkrais in a paper on the Alexander Technique. I've found his writings extremely helpful in deepening my appreciation for Alexander's pioneering discoveries, because of the way he echoed and built upon those discoveries, his training as an engineer and martial artist, his rather more straightforward prose, his access to more recent research, his evident personal warmth, and most of all, his equally fundamental commitment to psychophysical unity and his focus on reeducating a student's general awareness rather than treating a patient's specific problem. I would venture to say that in those last two crucial respects, he and Alexander stand alone, together.

²Nathan points out that the sodium-potassium ion exchanges generate only a small amount of current, sufficient for crustaceans and fish; reptiles and mammals, however, have evolved systems of neurotransmitters that not only provide (presumably) more current, but also a more complex and refined mechanism of excitation and inhibition (p. 96). Neurotransmitters must be rapidly inhibited to allow new responses (sometimes many hundred impulses per second); this is accomplished by the release of other (inhibitive) neurotransmitters, or of enzymes that break them down, or by reabsorption at the nerve endings. The subject of neurotransmitters is still a relatively new one in physiology, and many details (such as how many kinds of neurotransmitters there are and exactly how they operate) are being hotly debated by researchers.

³I recently came upon a book (which I am in the process of tracking down again) that proposed a "radiator" theory of the brain, meaning that a shift in the pattern of cranial blood flow as man became truly bipedal allowed the brain to maintain a livable temperature throughout, even as the brain increased in size (otherwise it would overheat, damaging delicate tissue). Thus a physical, structural barrier to a further increase in brain size was overcome (an increase the effects of which were otherwise evidently evolutionarily favorable), leaving only the problem Montagu discussed, birthing a large-headed offspring without irreparably injuring mother or child.

⁴At this point, as we hasten on from the level of the nervous impulses themselves to one where those impulses play out as movement and behavior, I would like at least to recommend a possible side trip for future travelers. Feldenkrais' observations (*Body and Mature Behavior*, pp. 113-126) on the development of the normal (as opposed to the relatively impoverished "average") human adjustment to gravitation,

the overall significance of that adjustment, how proper development gets derailed and then what must be done to get it back on track, are both concisely presented and consider the individual as a psychophysical unity, and thus form another resource for understanding the processes and mechanisms with which the Alexander Technique is so concerned.

⁵As Feldenkrais wrote in *Body Awareness as Healing Therapy*, “The freedom to learn is a great liability, and a restriction from the start. There is no freedom of choice or free will where there is only one way of acting. Learning makes it possible to choose among alternative ways of acting. The ability to learn is synonymous with free choice and free will. But once learned, the choice is made, the die is cast, and the tabula rasa is no more. Herein lie the liabilities as well as the restrictions...”

“Many of the evils from which we suffer are rooted in our conception of human education as the training of a complete being to do this or that, as though we were making a computer perform a desired activity.

“In spite of the apparent doom of the human future, I believe we have not yet reached Homo sapiens’ capacity for learning. It is too early to condemn man on the strength of the little awareness he has acquired by chance and not by his outstanding ability to reduce greater complexity to familiar simplicity—in other words, to learn. We have never used our essential freedom of choice and we have barely learned to learn.” (p. 64) ☺

Sun and Moon

by Tommy Thompson

*Presented at the sixth International Congress of the Alexander Technique,
Freiburg, Germany, August 1999.*

Birds ceased to fly, the wind ceased to blow and the temperature dropped; the planet appeared stilled in the non-ordinary. In the absence of primary light, secondary reflection illumined the body of the earth—casting light and shadow in such a way that when viewing people and landscape, the depth of field and color were more delineated than ever before. Stillness penetrated and permeated both earth and atmosphere. While looking out over the Valley of the Rhine two days ago, this is how I experienced the solar eclipse. Because of the immediacy of this past event in all our experience, I shall use the metaphor of sun and moon to illustrate my views and thinking about direction and inhibition in our work.

Recall for a moment your own personal experience of the eclipse, when for a brief period of time the reflective light of the moon gave the appearance of being primary, the true and primary light having been shadowed by the moon's passage between the sun and the earth. My personal experience of that passage, when secondary reflection gave the semblance of being primary, was how quickly all that was cast in the reflective light preempted what I remembered as being primary.

Similarly, when I consider my body (that is to say that aspect of myself which provides me with a sense of place, boundary and context from which to respond to all I am in relation to), I do not think of the physical me as my primary expression of self. More primary is the quality of my being, my awareness, and my intention reflected in the expression of my body. To the untrained eye, however, whether it's my own or an observer's, the patterns of movement expressed in my body are far more tangible than the initial movement of energy, which originates in my awareness and my intention.

Now, let's consider the body in relation to the solar eclipse. While the body is tangibly available for view to an observer, and kinesthetically available for sensing to the person embodied, less tangible is a person's intention. Not unlike the moon reflecting light from the primary source, the body reflects the fact that I am up to something, but physical patterns of movement are not the cause of whatever I am up to. Which of the two, then, the body's patterns or the attention patterns, needs to be addressed to effect real and lasting change?

By way of analogy, during the solar eclipse when the sun could no longer be seen, did you believe for a moment that our primary source of light would not return? The reflective light of the moon was far more tangible given the moon's preeminence. If you doubted that the sun's light would return, you

might have been tempted to accept the conditions of light caused by the moon's passage between the sun and the earth as primary. Otherwise, you'd probably just allow the experience of the change in light, and would wait for things to return to the integrative state of the natural order of things.

Is there something we can learn from this solar eclipse? It might very well be the degree to which, in our thinking about habit and change, we are prey to similar paradoxical inferences of primary and secondary sources characteristic to the eclipse. In other words, when changing habitual patterns that manifest themselves physically, if our attention self is the primary source of interference, then our focus on changing the way we use our bodies, however tangibly apparent the habitual patterns appear, is secondary. When we give direction, to some extent are we not working with the reflection of the problem rather than with the true and primary source of the problem? If so, how then do we use the kinesthetic messages sent by the body in a constructive way and not delude ourselves into thinking that if we change the body, we'll rid ourselves of the problem that in itself governs the body's response. Essentially, which do we hold accountable — the reflection of our interference, or the primary source of interference?

Let me offer by way of example an incident from my recent experience that speaks to this conundrum.

As a boy, my home environment was not all that it might have been had my parents' own childhoods had been different. Life at home was unpredictable, prone to emotional and physical violence. To avoid experiencing that which

“More primary is the quality of my being, my awareness, and my intention reflected in the expression of my body.”

was unpleasant and threatening, and in order to protect myself from the overwhelming nature of a given experience, I distanced myself from my actual experience. This helped me manage the present, in anticipation of the future. Ask me about some-

thing “close to home” today, and I know quite well what I feel in reaction, but I don't have the same clarity of feeling or clarity of thinking about my actual experience.

Is something missing here?

A part of me is missing.

Unfortunately, this is the part that usually helps one to make decisions that enrich one's life. However, when you only know what you think and feel in reaction, or more specifically what you think and feel having reacted to yourself having experiences, you miss valuable information about how life en-

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counters have really affected you, and because of this, what really matters to you. You end up making decisions based upon your attachment to a series of experiences you never knew you were avoiding and which, as a result, were partially lived.

This dilemma has become clearer to me than ever. During this past year my wife and I sold our home of 12 years in a neighborhood we truly loved, to buy a home in a neighboring town better suited to our children's education. When we placed a bid to purchase a new home, the circumstances around the sale required the purchaser—me—to know much more in that immediate moment what the experience of home was. However, historically, my favored reactive response was to make things work, even when clearly they did not. As previously suggested, this distances one from one's true feelings. So, distanced, and with my wife's blessings, and under great pressure from the realtors I placed a bid on the house—fearing I would lose the purchase if I didn't act quickly. The bid was accepted; then, when I saw the house for the first time in the light of day, I regretted my decision, and was baffled and distraught as to how I could have made such a decision in the first place.

I was in despair. To console me, a friend offered an Irish saying: when you move into a new house, the first year you invite your enemies, the second your friends, and the third you move in. I took this to heart but was hardly consoled. The realtor who sold us the house was exasperated over my angst. She claimed that I knew nothing was wrong with the house. "A house is," she said, "after all just a house." She said I was upset about the circumstances in which I had to make the decision: having viewed the house at night and being under pressure to find the right house for my family.

In fact, I was more upset about the process by which I had made my decision. In hindsight, at the moment I placed the bid to buy the home I wasn't present in my feelings, except in reaction to my past. I had learned, as a boy, rather than to live through what I actually felt, to distance myself from the actual experience I was in the process of experiencing. Unconsciously, I taught myself how to avoid feelings and thoughts which were associated with unpleasant experiences in order to manage situations and make them work. I favored reactive responses which circumvented the actual experience first presented.

Alexander suggested his method would preclude a person from having to make good what was entered into wrongly. In using his method of learning, a person could reason the better way before the wrong way was taken. I have no doubt that the inhibitive thought and the inhibitive emotional response do provide a space between the stimulus and response necessary to reason the better way. However, I am not entirely convinced that any method of reasoning which places at the helm the very part of me that keeps the other miss-

ing, can ever make the appropriate selection of the information necessary to right the wrong. I am more interested than ever, after this house episode, in knowing when I am allowing myself to experience the actual experience I am experiencing, and when I am reacting to myself having an experience.

In other words, at what step along my path of awareness do I inhibit? Moreover, who is doing the inhibiting, the part of me who is missing, or the part of me who, although more present, is nonetheless present in reaction? First, I offer a tale which will hopefully shed light on this dilemma, and second, we will explore this issue in practical ways: as teachers in the traditional sense we will inhibit and give direction, through using our hands and verbal instruction, to dissuade our student from reinforcing habitual patterns of reactive behavior: then secondly (somewhat untraditional), we will encourage our student to allow their awareness to expand to include not just what they experience but to take in as well that moment when they distance themselves from the immediacy of the experience, and move towards reaction. At that moment the teacher through using his hands and verbal instruction continues to provide the integrative support of primary control, however, without guiding the student away from the direct nature of their experience. In this manner, one is asked to reorganize one's awareness but not to reorganize the body. Since intention is the organizing principle around which the body organizes itself, one has been encouraged to inhibit reaction, but to let direction coordinate around one's clarity of intention.

Believe me, they are two different worlds. In the former, the teacher works with his student as if the primary source of interference resides in the student's body. The teacher subsequently directs the student's attention to the habitual patterns in the body, attempting to make the changes in that context. In the latter, the teacher sees the body as a reflection of interference and works more directly with the student's attention self as the primary source of interference.

Let me offer a tale which illustrates both approaches. To witness what I shall describe, imagine that we are in Switzerland, in May of 1997. Suspend time for a moment. Watch with me as I arrive by car at the retreat where I will lead a workshop for Swiss teachers. During the next five days, we will live together, work together, take meals together, and walk in the hills together, while studying the principles of Alexander's teaching.

There is an incredibly soft, mostly misty rain. The hills surrounding the inn are covered with wine vineyards and dotted with small, Swiss-designed homes. In front of the inn there is a freshly plowed field, in the midst of which there is a farmer, and two young boys about the ages of nine or ten, whom I make out to be his sons. The two boys are standing apart from each other, watching silently as their father, who kneels on one knee, and holds

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his arm at shoulder height, stretched out — poised. I wonder what exactly is he doing? Then as he continues his movement, I see what he is up to.

Between his thumb and index finger he holds a seed. Kneeling he lets loose the seed to drop from shoulder height, to the earth. The farmer repeats this process with three seeds, each time letting loose of the seed, allowing it to fall and find its place in the soil. The farmer is strong in his appearance, yet his fingers pull apart from holding the seed gently, albeit with great certainty. The boys watch. The farmer, still kneeling, scratches some dirt around the seeds, rises, then he and his sons walk away from the field. Maya, the driver of my car, pulls to a stop at the side of the inn. The spell is broken.

With no interpretation, I step from the car, having taken in this tableau of the hills surrounding me, the homes scattered about the vineyards and the misty rain I can barely see, and now feel. My experience is impressionistic, a mutual interchange of information and impression of which I am a part. I attach no meaning to this unusual way of planting seeds. I am simply in the experience of what I see.

The next day, the Swiss teachers are interested in, among other things, the value of Alexander's directions, given in context with his concept of inhibition. Alexander himself argued both ways. He was for them because the instructions to free the neck, etc., provided the necessary means whereby in that space between habitual stimulus to a given response, habit might give way to more neutral conditions associated with primary control. On the other hand, he bemoaned ever coming up with the directions because he never felt people knew how to give them without doing them.

Personally, I believe, like Frank Jones, that, while directions do help to supplant personal identification with habitual patterns, nonetheless, the conscious giving of the instructions often substitute for the real learning that comes from simply meeting yourself at that moment of inhibition. What lasting value is there in changing patterns by avoiding patterns, without seeing yourself being yourself? Once you give directions, rather than consciously experiencing yourself being yourself at the moment of interference, which is who you really are in that moment, you run the risk of turning yourself into someone you're not for the sake of good use. My response to the Swiss teachers went something along these lines. However, to my mind, I still didn't give a satisfactory answer.

We break for lunch. Then after lunch, we have three hours to process our morning, to do whatever comes to mind. Like most, I take a solitary walk in the hills. This day,

“What lasting value is there in changing patterns by avoiding patterns, without seeing yourself being yourself?”

unlike the previous one is bright and sunny, no rain. Spring-like, all newly alive. After my hike, walking back towards the inn, I come upon the field that had, on the previous day, belonged to the farmer and his two sons. Today the field is empty. There is no misty, enchanting rain, just the field, freshly tilled, fertile. Without the rain and without the farmer and his sons there is only the field to view, a broad and fertile expanse of earth.

In that moment the meaning and place of directions becomes clear to me. This field I thought at the time, had to have been tilled before he planted his seeds. I realize that the farmer had only planted his three seeds in the manner he had done because he trusted that the field was fertile. There was no question, no doubt as to whether or not the seeds would take hold in the soil. The field was fertile. His raising his arm, poised to plant one seed, simply allowing it to fall into a random place was, to my mind his way of acknowledging the relationship between soil and seed. And for me, between inhibition and directions. His dropping the seed was more of an offering in celebration of the way he had come to view things in his life. His sons had come to watch. They, like he, had come to celebrate the mystery they depended upon. Perhaps? Who knows? It is what I took from the experience because of the questions the Swiss teachers had posed. Today, as the field stands empty in the sunlight the impressions of the previous day have meaning because of the Swiss teachers' questions.

Why had I not experienced this interpretive view before? I believe it was because I was captivated by the dropping of the seeds. The farmer, moreover in his arresting, stilled poise, was filled with such certainty and grace that he completely captivated my attention. My entire impression was that of the farmer planting and his sons who observed. I took for granted the fertility of the soil. However, at some point previously, the farmer certainly must have plowed the earth, for that must be done in preparation for planting. Sounds simple, but let's look at this for a moment in terms of direction and inhibition. Let's say that the seeds are Alexander's directions, the planting of which he wishes to take root, to grow apart from the habitual seeds which seed themselves, moment by moment in habitual response. Now, where are we in this analogy of soil and seed? Certainly, we are not the directions. Rather, we are the soil, either barren without the space to receive that which is new, different and unknown, or fertile, without attachment to the habit of identity.

First and foremost, our bodies provide us with our experience of ourselves. The nature of the integrity of our design is that we are designed to function without our having to do much about it. We do not have to work at being us to make us work, especially since we are designed to function even apart from our desires. Essentially, with so many seeds blowing in the wind, we don't really have to select which seeds we feel are right to plant (certainly not

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if the soil is prepared, sifted clean from interference) Similarly, from an Alexander point of view, we don't need to determine which directions need to be selected and given at a specific moment. There are no receptors in our makeup designed to tell us when things are right; rather the receptors let us know when we interfere.

Astonishingly, when all is working right, and this is important, we tend to feel little apart from the experience we are having. When we are working right, we have the luxury of being more directly involved in the experience at hand with no reaction to it. I repeat, when all is working in the manner in which we are designed to function, we are more available for the experience, free from preconceived notions, and less inclined to retreat into reaction — which is to manage the experience. One either informs the experience, thus fitting all information into one's own paradigm, or else one allows the experience to inform oneself.

Since our design is self contained, and without the need of our personal assistance, this raises an interesting question: what's in it for us? What's left when we are not in reaction? We are, of course, not the we whom we are constantly grooming, but rather the we who allow our experience to inform us anew over and over of who we might potentially be. Yet this, as we know, is not the way it usually happens. Seldom do we allow ourselves to experience directly what we are engaged in experiencing.

Almost immediately, we move away from the direct nature of the experience and into managing that experience, making certain it fits into our paradigm. Rather than allowing the experience to inform us, we inform the experience. This is reaction. It is usually the field onto which we toss our seeds.

Is not our task, however, simply to prepare the soil of ourselves first, before we plant the seeds: to inhibit reinforcing old patterns of reactive behavior and perception, allowing new information to flood our senses apart from the information we feel we must have in order to respond? For many, directions are the manner of preparing the soil. But the priorities appear to be wrongly placed. If Alexander truly meant that his Technique was only doing what nature was already doing anyway, of what real value is this constant attention to directions? This presupposes that the experience you are having is ill suited, ill placed, and not worth it. It is what it is, however faulty one's sensory impression.

How then do we prepare our soil except that we inhibit continuing to react, reinforcing our same perceptions? What if, indeed, the soil were simply our experience of things; just simply us experiencing something. My way of preparing my own soil to receive this analogy of the soil and seed the day following the original series of impressions was to allow myself simply to take in

information apart from what I customarily see, and not try to fit it in anywhere. This led me to experience more directly the experience I was actually having, moved merely by the impression of it all. What if I had been so inclined at that critical moment “close to home”? Drawn by the direct nature of the experience, might I have met myself being myself at my weakest moment, and backed off from the decision to buy the house? And, which of the two—the body’s patterns or the attention patterns—needed to be addressed to affect my awareness and insight sufficiently to make a choice apart from reaction? I’m not certain. I still believe that my learned and patterned behavior in that instance was so deeply ingrained that today I can only live with myself having made the decision, awaiting the opportunity to make a better one.

Remember, when changing habitual patterns that manifest physically, and yet occur attentionally, if our attentional self is the primary source of interference then our focus on changing the way we use our body is secondary.

When we give direction, might we not be working with the reflection of the problem instead of with the primary source of the problem? If so, which do we hold in accountable — the reflection of our interference, or the primary source of interference? I simply offer this question as territory to explore.

“Historically, our approaches to making changes when learning the Alexander Technique are based on kinesthetic recognition of habitual patterns.”

Historically, our approaches to making changes when learning the Alexander Technique are based on kinesthetic recognition of habitual patterns. However, because kinesthetic recognition necessarily involves bodily sensations, we often reflect inward, drawing away from active participation in what we are up to and we behave in effect as if what patterns we perceive kinesthetically are primary when in fact they are really more of a reflection of the quality of our attention and awareness. My daughter once said to me, “If you want me to change, change my mind, not my body.”

What I’d like to explore with you now are patterns of interference given a person’s involvement in an activity. Let’s see what happens when you make changes in the primary source, (i.e., attentional recognition) versus making changes in what is reflected in the body (i.e., kinesthetic recognition), and how working with the primary source of interference will likely guide you through the experience you usually avoid, thereby informing you of what you actually think and feel. The retreat into reaction is obviated because, indirectly, you’ve inhibited through direct experience.

This concludes the paper; now, let’s explore the sun and the moon. ☾

Coming Events

The Professional Association of Alexander Teachers (PAAT), **Birmingham, U.K.** Recreational Course in the Alexander Technique, 20 April, 2000 - 13 July, 2000.

PAAT has a well-established Recreational Course in the Alexander Technique for individuals who are already having private lessons and who would like to deepen their understanding of the Technique by studying it in a broader context than private lessons allow. The Course is offered on a term-by-term basis, with each term consisting of 12 weekly sessions which take place in Birmingham (UK) on Thursday evenings between 7:00 - 9:00 p. m.

Sessions focus on the practical application of the Technique to the solution of life's problems and take both a general and participant-generated approach. Talks are given based on the writings of F. M. Alexander and related subjects. Cost is currently £192.00 per term. Open to all, contact Fred Oldfield (E-mail: FOldfi1426@aol.com), Tel: +44 (0)121-248-1133

May 5-7 in **Rheinfelden, Switzerland** (near Basel). Workshop with Tommy Thompson of Boston, MA USA, 9:30 -12:30 / 14:30 -17:30, teaching the Alexander Technique in a group for individuals.

This workshop will examine the relevance of using group and individual instruction to convey the discoveries of F. M. Alexander. In the afternoon, we will be "practising" and applying the principles seen in the morning to persons from the public. Open to the general public in the afternoon.

Contact: Maya Dolder at: 011-61-322-6879 or MayaDolder@datacomm.ch

May 21 - 24 in **Lausanne, Switzerland**, Workshop with Tommy Thompson of Boston, MA USA

This workshop will examine the relevance of using group and individual instruction to convey the discoveries of F. M. Alexander. In the afternoon, we will be "practising" and applying the principles seen in the morning to persons from the public. Open to the general public in the afternoon.

Contact: Philippe Cotton, tel/fax: 41 21 781 12 16 email: cotton@creation-entreprise.ch

Alexander Technique and The Creative Impulse, Seven Oaks Workshop, near **Charlottesville, Virginia, USA**, June 11 - 16, 2000

Cynthia Mauney, Dale Beaver, Meade Andrews, Jan Baty and guest teachers Chloe Wing and Patricia Long are joining forces to create a five day residential, at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, centering on the relationship

Alexander Technique on the Net

Alexander Technique International uses the Internet in a number of interesting ways. Log into the ATI World Wide Web site at www.ati-net.com. You can also log in to Alexander On-line at www.alexandertechnique.com/online. This site provides links to the rapidly growing number of Alexander Technique resources on the Internet. Alexander Teacher listings can be found both the ATI web site and on the Ask Dr. Weil web site at www.drweil.com.

ATI maintains an Internet forum of members called Interchange. You can send e-mail to all listed members by addressing your e-mail to interchange@ati-net.com. You can send mail to the ATI board as a group at board@ati-net.com, or to individual board members at:
chair@ati-net.com
assistantchair@ati-net.com
treasurer@ati-net.com
execsec@ati-net.com
correspondsec@ati-net.com

We have news this issue of yet another new web site. Robert Rickover has put up www.posturepage.com. ☺

between the Alexander process and the awakening of the creative impulse. Open to all. Contact: Jan Baty, 807 Kenyon Lane, Newark, DE 19711, Email: jbaty@udel.edu. or please visit the website at: <http://www.thevillagegreen.net/>

The 27th Annual Barstow/Alexander Technique Institute, Doane College, **Crete, Nebraska**, (near Omaha, Kansas City, and Lincoln) June 17 - 24, 2000.

The Institute is open to new and experienced students and emphasizes the unique approach to teaching the Technique pioneered by the late Marjorie Barstow. Contact Robert Rickover, 2434 Ryons, St., Lincoln, Nebraska 68502, USA, Telephone (402) 475-4433, E-mail: robert@alexandertechnique.com, or visit the web site at www.alexandertechnique.com/barstow.

June 24 and 25 at **Cambridge, Massachusetts**. Two Day Intensive workshop with Tommy Thompson for Alexander Teachers and the General public. Fee \$175 for the weekend. The workshop will be given at the Alexander Center, located near Harvard Square with access to both Boston and Cambridge in the evening. Contact Raewyn Haywood at: 617-497-2242 or TTATIInt@aol.com or fax at: 617-497-2615 ☺

From the Chair

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choose to allow my vulnerable condition to inform and influence me.

Recently, I've had conversations with some active organizational players of ATI. Some of these players didn't know what their job was when they signed up for it. Often, when they found out what it was they said, "I don't know how to do it." Realizing this, some said no thanks, 'you do it', while others jumped in bringing themselves to the task at hand finding value in it and adding value to it. All any of us can do is to address situations by applying who we are. The 'not knowing how to do it' is actually a juncture, albeit a vulnerable one. It's a place of connection that asks us to transition. Like the phase of learning that takes place during Alexander Technique lessons. The student begins to notice how she/he tends to get in her/his own way of coordinated wholeness, they can see that they are somehow interfering, but do not understand what to do about it yet, enough to be effective. Even though there are no answers in sight for some present situations, the answers will be revealed from the basis of who we are. People bring themselves to their lives, their jobs, and it has value. The point is: individuals can make a difference in ATI. We are doing things right and cooperatively and are striving to run an organization with Alexander's principles. At times, when all is said and done, sometimes more is said than done. Still, we must maintain our organization for the reasons we began. Why? Because the reasons are still valid.

As Chair I thought that I could drive us into the 'bigger picture' for the future of ATI and the Alexander Technique. But the truth has been that there is so much detail work to do to maintain day-to-day operations that it doesn't feel like I've stepped on the gas pedal much at all. So, I do what little guidance I can and then wait, wait for the opportunities to expand into the larger picture, for instance, the one that's stated in our Vision Mission Statement (see front page).

I often wonder why so many people in the world haven't even heard of the Alexander Technique. We have all felt joy and enthusiasm from the way we have experienced our own personal transformation. So much joy, that some of us were so moved as to become teachers so that we could offer this whole and organic gift of natural benefit to others. Yet, why do you think that there are so few people who have this information at their fingertips when the Alexander Technique has been available for over half a century?

We are here with ATI because we have found value in 'the work.' Can we be active in getting the word out? To people who have never heard of it before, what's primary is its usefulness. What it is and how it's done is secondary. Describe the value, its usefulness, why it is desirable. Speak from your heart of your experience, you know what it means to you! Tell your story. Tell it to the cashier at your grocery store, tell it to the person next to you on the el-

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Editor's Page

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conscious control." Taken with a Speed Graphic and Optar lens, on Plus-x film, developed in D-76.

Begin Quarterly Rant

One of goals as editor of Exchange has been to try to find a way, through this publication, of helping the members of Alexander Technique International to 'get the word out' about the Technique. As I'm sure you've noticed, there has been a conscious effort to include more material in this journal that is accessible to larger audiences. This can, in turn, lead to wider circulation. One of my strongest sensations at the beginning of my learning about the technique was the astonishment I felt that the Alexander technique appears to be a pretty well kept secret. And this, I feel, is wrong.

What can be done to bring the Technique to more people, to raise awareness? I have some ideas that may be looked on favorably by the ATI board. One is a free distribution of back copies of Exchange to medical and therapeutic practitioners for the own edification and to keep in the waiting room. What do you think? Let us know. Seeing that picture of F. M. just brought it home to me again. My contact information is in the masthead on page two.

Mea Culpa

In the last issue, I promised the article *Poise Upon Poise, Alexander Technique... Teaching the Mounted Rider*. I spoke before speaking with the author, and I spoke too soon. The article, derived from a presentation at last year's annual general meeting of ATI, may appear in the next Exchange after some more work. ☹

From the Chair

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evator, tell it to the tele-marketer that hounds you at dinner time. Do you not want to share a beautiful sunset when you see it? I remember as a teenager walking by myself one day in the countryside of Connecticut. I looked up to the sky and to my surprise I saw a triple rainbow! Not just one or two but three rainbows all at once! One rainbow arced directly above the first one and the third rainbow was on top of the other two but up side down! The first thing I did was to turn around to say to somebody, anybody, "Hey, look, I can hardly believe what I am seeing." It was so incredible and so beautiful I wanted to share it with somebody immediately! There was no one else around but I was filled with the urge to share the moment. I have told this story many times since then. As an elocutionist, F. M. Alexander found power through the spoken word, yet, he discovered his technique because of

his vulnerability in speaking. In my experience true power yields and transforms in the presence of vulnerability. Power then gets influenced by vulnerability and takes on a new characteristic, simply, the ability to move.

There are some larger issues at hand for ATI as an organization. We need to continue to address issues concerning government regulations working on them constructively and cooperatively with other Alexander organizations worldwide. We'll continue to grow our membership, strengthen and evolve our ethics procedures, reach out with our sponsorship program and continue to educate the public. These are the places where movement must be constant.

I'll attempt to cast some one-legged chair influence and end my message with this passage from G. K. Chesterton in a book called "The Poetics of Music" by Igor Stravinsky:

"In everything that yields gracefully, there must be resistance. Bows are beautiful when they bend only because they seek to remain rigid. Rigidity that slightly yields, like Justice swayed by Pity, is all the beauty of earth. Everything seeks to grow straight, and happily, nothing succeeds in so growing. Try to grow straight and life will bend you." ☹

Book Review

The Act of Living

Talks on the Alexander Technique

by Walter Carrington, Jerry Sontag, editor

Mornum Time Press, San Francisco, 1999, ISBN 0-9644352-3-3

reviewed by Dan Arsenault

When my brother was laid up and considering a course of Alexander Technique lessons, I borrowed a copy of another excellent book from Mornum Time Press, *Curiosity Recaptured: Exploring Ways We Think and Move*, for him to read by way of introduction to the Technique. I'm equally impressed with this new volume by Walter Carrington from the same publisher.

As presented here, Walter Carrington gives wonderfully crisp definition to a very wide range of Alexander Technique topics. The book contains 29 transcriptions of talks given by Carrington to Alexander Technique teachers-in-training over a period of several years. These are amplifications of passages from one of F. M. Alexander's four books.

Although perhaps not best suited for beginners in the work, for teachers and students with some experience this can be a very valuable resource of insights and fresh approaches to the many subjects on which a student of the Technique is likely to ponder.

Starting with *Thinking to do*, through talks on *Sciatica*, *The feet* (my pet topic), *The length and the width*, *Walking*, and, finally, the *Act of Living*, these talks provide an illuminating view on these and other subjects that perhaps only Walter Carrington can provide. But I gush...

I'm almost embarrassed to pick two nits with this otherwise excellent volume, however...

As described above, all Walter Carrington's talks presented in *The Act of Living* were developed from passages from F. M. Alexander's works. It would have been helpful to have those passages as well as the follow-on. There may well be a good reason why this wasn't done. More's the pity.

If it weren't for the page of back matter describing the electronic design of the book, I wouldn't have mentioned it, but the leading (the space between the lines) is uncomfortably large. Truly a nit? Well, yes.

Highly recommended! ☺

Mornum Time Press
381 Bush Street, Suite 500
San Francisco, California 94104
www.mtpress.com
\$28.00

Prosperity Principles

As an extension of the 1999 Annual General Meeting theme of ‘Networking in the Spirit of Prosperity and Gratitude,’ we’d like to continue to offer this ‘coaching’ to teaching members of ATI to strengthen and build their teaching practices. Please let us know how this is helpful to you!

The following are excerpted from *Is Money the Matter?*, chapter three, by Toni Stone of Wonderworks in Fairfax, Vermont, USA, (802)-849-2257, mindnames@aol.com. Copyright © 1999. Used with permission.

“...only our minds are able to discover the *generalized principles* operating without exception in each and every special experience case which if detected and mastered will give knowledgeable advantage in all instances.” -R. Buckminster Fuller

Prosperity principles are not part of the “traffic” of ordinary expectation or usual understanding. They do not form the foundation of any religion so to speak...they could be called spiritual. they could be called ethical. they could be called philosophical.

They are “generalized principles operating without exception” as Bucky Fuller would say. They represent an unchanging multiplicity in an unseen world of ideals. They are rhizomes rather than a fixed set of bulbs. They can help grow life into its possible future.

Principles of Prospering

1. Life is generated with exchange. Exchange is going on everywhere.
2. What is freely given generates greatly multiplied return.
3. Money is a symbol of exchange. With no worth of its own it only has value through agreement.
4. To give is to cause something. Giving begins everything...
5. One only gives what they are willing to receive.
6. One can only get what one is willing to give.
7. One must think, speak and feel it before one can possess it.
8. Imagination is a power. It must be used to prosper.
9. Whatever has attention, continues. What is praised increases.

10. Satisfaction is first a mental decision, feelings follow.
11. It takes discipline, to decide beyond doubt and persist.
12. What you *get* is equal to your perception of what you think you are getting. Receiving occurs with vulnerability.
13. An attitude of *gratitude* is the major prosperity disposition.
14. Complaining undermines life unless there is a request or promise.
15. Language determines outcomes. Whatever you speak, you are getting.
16. Words are symbols of organization and perception.
17. Perception is learned, without being taught. One adopts patterns of perception unknowingly.
18. Results gather around intention. Outcomes depend on continuing attention.
19. When you have adverse situations your unchanging perceptions keep them persisting.
20. Shifts in perception result in changing circumstances.
21. Possibilities are revealed when old conversations disappear. Possibilities are always under everything.
22. Anything which doesn't represent the past will be uncomfortable initially.
23. To have futures, unlike the past self-observation. New habits are necessary.
24. Heroines and Heroes offer blueprints for futures unlike our past.
25. Taking action for new futures will break up lack and limitation consciousness.
26. Prospering requires intention, new talk and like-minded company.
27. Things are more manageable when they are not abundant. Constant practice to shift thinking is required, in prosperity consciousness.

Alexander Technique International (ATI) is a worldwide organization of teachers, students, and friends of the Alexander Technique created to promote and advance the work begun by F. Matthias Alexander.

ATI embraces the diversity of the international Alexander community and works to promote international dialogue.

About the Alexander Technique

Experience of the Technique has led to praise from George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Prof. John Dewey, Sir Charles Sherrington, Julian Bream, John Cleese, Robertson Davies, and many others. It is taught at the Juilliard School of Performing Arts in New York, and the Royal College of Music and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, the Stratford Shakespearean Festival and the Shaw Festivals in Canada, Boston University, Brandeis University, and many other centers.

Olympic-level athletes have similarly used the Technique to improve their performance, as have leading golfers and business people. Medical studies have shown the Technique to be as effective in lowering blood pressure as the normally prescribed beta blocking drugs. Other studies have shown significant improvement in respiratory function.

The common factor in all of these aspects of life is that how we are using ourselves—the way we do things—affects the result we get. The Alexander Technique is a means of improving that use. It has been called a “pre-technique” which people can apply to furthering their own special skills and activities. It is also essentially a preventative technique with which we can learn to improve and maintain our health.

The individual is the focus of the Alexander Technique. We are all unique, with different bodies, different experiences, and different problems. We go about the process of change in different ways and at different rates. For these reasons, what happens in an Alexander Technique lesson depends very much on the needs of the student at the time. In the basic sense, though, you will learn an attitude of not trying to gain your ends at any cost, and, at the same time, how to prevent your harmful habits that cause unnecessary stress and restrict your capabilities. Obviously, since what you are changing are patterns built up over many years, a permanent change will not be brought about overnight. However, the person who learns to stop and take time, to think constructively about how he uses himself in everyday life, will find that this simple procedure can have far-reaching results.

Further information about the Alexander Technique can perhaps best be gained from a teacher near you (see page 31 for teacher listings through the nearest ATI office), as your changing experiences through lessons are the only real way to understand the nature of the work and what change is possible.

