

INTRODUCTION – OVERVIEW

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CTC

15 September 2015

1. Welcome back to all, including our new students. For about the past twelve years, I have been giving a fortnightly talk at this time on a Tuesday. The series goes on for about two years and then begins again.
2. You are fully entitled to have snooze. And there is no need to make notes because I put the text of each talk on my website so they are available any time you wish. That can be useful if you want to check out the references to the various books and sources I mention.
3. I am also happy if you want to ask questions, especially easy ones. If they are complicated, I can take them up with you by e-mail or deal with them in a later talk.
4. The talks are gradually evolving as I learn more and my ideas develop. So about once a year I try to produce an overview of where they have reached.
5. There are two basic themes I try to deal with. One is our heritage. We have been going for well over a hundred years. We are not some recent passing fad on the internet. We have truly stood the test of time. So I like to tell you about our history and the prominent people who have been associated with the Technique over the years and up to the present.
6. My other theme is the science of the AT. We are not relying on mysterious forces or new age ideas. There is a sound scientific basis for our work. This does not mean there is nothing more to be learned. Science is not fixed body of knowledge. It is always building and refining its ideas.
7. At the same time there are certain scientific ideas which been so thoroughly tested that it take a revolution in the way we view the world to world to overturn them. And as we delve into the neuroscience and physiology of what is happening when we give and receive AT lessons, it is reassuring to know that most of it is based in thoroughly well-established science.
8. There is another reason for looking at the AT in scientific terms. We have our own way of describing the Technique which can be rather specialised and mysterious to non-Alexandrians. I think if we can translate our specialised Alexandrian terms into language that scientists and people who are scientifically literate can understand, we will massively

widen the appeal of the Technique, as well as opening it to further understanding and development.

9. Roughly once a year, I like to do an overview of where we are in the talks. It is a broad brush coverage. I don't go into any great detail – that will be for later talks – but I think it is useful to provide the overall context.
10. Looking at our historical heritage, Alexander arrived in London in 1904. He was armed with letters of introduction to members of the medical profession and the story of the Technique as an internationally known and radically different approach to health and well-being builds from there.
11. But if we want to understand the Technique, we need to look further back at his career as a reciter and voice teacher in Australia. It was in these early years that he had his key insights into the development of the Technique.
12. We know the bones of the story. Alexander's early career was as a reciter of dramatic monologues in an old-fashioned declamatory fashion at which he was reasonably successful but he began to suffer serious voice and throat problems. The doctors had no solution and he worked out for himself what was going wrong.
13. In *The use of the self* he describes how he reached two vitally important conclusions sometime in the 1890s. You don't need to believe his exact description of how it happened, but the discoveries were real and very radical.
14. Even today, the extraordinary thing is that even though they are perfectly obvious when you think about them, most people, including the medical profession, have great difficulty in accepting them and their implications.
15. The first is that we are unified beings – mind and body act together. Alexander talked of the psychophysical unity of the human being. For him, saying something is all in the mind, as so many people do, is the height of nonsense.
16. So also is locating symptoms in separate parts of the body and treating them separately.
17. Working as a voice teacher, he saw that control over our breathing and voice production involves the whole body but especially the working of the junction between the head and the neck – the head-neck relationship – as we call it.

18. His other big insight was his realisation that we have a very poor ability to know exactly what we are doing with ourselves. He said we have a faulty sensory awareness or more colourfully a “debauched kinesthesia”.
19. As a result, he found that telling people what to do if they want to improve their voice control was not enough. It was only when he physically guided people into new ways of using themselves that he was able to bring about the necessary improvements in what they were doing
20. Another crucial insight by Alexander’s was that he noticed that when he applied his Technique, to the actors and singers who came to him with voice problems, the benefits were not confined to the voice and breath control of those who came to him. There were significant other benefits to their health and well-being.
21. It was on the basis of these broader benefits that he attracted the attention of some members of the medical profession in Australia. One of these was a Dr W.J. Stewart McKay, one of Sydney’s leading surgeons.
22. McKay saw that Alexander was more than a voice teacher and was on to something quite important in relation to chest and breathing problems. He sent him medical patients and Alexander began to advertise himself as providing treatment of “post nasal growths” and “throat and chest troubles”.¹
23. McKay encouraged Alexander to go to London and provided him with letters of introduction to some of his own contacts there.
24. Via these medical contacts he began to acquire clients in London where he began to be known as “the breathing man”. Via one particular contact, a man called Dr Scanes Spicer with whom he later fell out, he managed to acquire a number of prominent actors as clients.
25. He was soon giving lessons to the very famous actor Sir Henry Irving. He also become friendly with Sir Max Beerbohm Tree, the founder of RADA and had his daughter Viola as a pupil. Soon “Going to Alexander” became a fashionable thing to do.
26. Since then all kinds of interesting and important people have had connections with the AT. In the early days here and in the

¹ Bloch (2004)p50

USA, Alexander had a number of very formidable women supporters who were interested in progressive education, especially the Montessori method.

27. One of them was Maria Naumberg who was the founder of art therapy. Ethel Webb whose family belonged to very fashionable jewellers Mappin and Webb chose to devote her life to helping Alexander. Another woman who did exactly the same was Irene Tasker who had some lessons with Alexander around the time of the first World War and weaves in and out of the Alexander story until her death at the age of 97 in 1977.
28. Rather surprisingly, Maria Montessori plays an offstage role in the early days of the AT. She never had anything to do with it directly and in fact Alexander very much disapproved of what he saw going on Montessori schools. There is a passage in *Man's supreme inheritance* where he says:

I must confess I have been shocked to witness the work that goes on in these schools.²
29. In his view, instead of teaching children how to use themselves properly, they were being encouraged to be creative and hold their pencils however they liked. And however much harm it them.
30. At the same time, and very much at odds with this crusty attitude, was his enthusiasm for the so-called Little School which was set up by Irene Tasker in Alexander's teaching rooms in Ashley Place in Victoria in 1924 and later moved to Penhill in Surrey when Alexander bought a country place there.
31. The school had six to eight pupils most of them handicapped or suffering from learning disabilities. In addition to their general schooling, Irene Tasker gave them lessons in the Technique, ensuring that they did not pull down and encouraging them to be patient and never to try to do things until they had thought about the means whereby. It was a highly creative and advanced approach to dealing with these children.
32. Alexander loved children and he often looked into the school to work with the pupils.

² Alexander (1910)p79

33. Another person who influenced Alexander was the American philosopher John Dewey. He and Alexander met in 1915 and they were friends for the next thirty years.
34. We also have had various distinguished supporters of the Technique who had no particular influence on Alexander's thinking or came to the Technique after his death. These included the great neuroscientist Sir Charles Sherrington, Nikolaas Tinbergen who devoted half his Nobel Prize acceptance speech to the AT, Raymond Dart the paleoanthropologist who showed, against the prevailing wisdom, that Africa was the true cradle of humanity, Aldous Huxley, the author of *Brave New World*, and George Ellett Coghill the American neurobiologist to name a few.
35. Although they did not influence the development of the Technique, it is always useful to reflect on what these remarkable people saw in the AT to make them go on the record in support of it. And we will go into more detail about these in later talks.
36. I should also say a word about a Dutch author called Jeroen Staring who published a massive book³ about Alexander in 1996. Staring's background is that he had Alexander lessons from a Dutch AT teacher between 1986 and 1993 which he said convinced him *...of the value of this approach as a reconditioning body therapy.*⁴ Mark Jones has been in contact with Staring and says he still thinks highly of the Technique as such.
37. Staring, however, turned against the AT because of the way he saw Alexander being treated as a kind of demigod by some of his followers. He saw them as setting up some kind of Alexander cult with its own special language and sacred books and Alexander as the guru figure who is above criticism.
38. From his own personal experience of a cult when he was younger, Staring saw this as a very bad thing and as a result felt he had to cut Alexander down to size.
39. So he set about tracing every scrap of influence on Alexander that he could identify. He seemed to think that any idea in Alexander's writings that he could trace to anyone else was an example of plagiarism by Alexander.

³ Staring (1996)

⁴ Alexander (1910)p4

40. The fact is that Alexander was not an academic researcher. He was selling himself and his method and he did not quote his sources. This did not worry Walter Carrington who showed his typical openness and generosity and provided Staring with a considerable amount of help from his own knowledge of Alexander and the Technique.
41. The end result was a book by Staring that is relentlessly negative about Alexander. At the same time, it is a hugely impressive and fully referenced volume of research that is very valuable to Alexandrian researchers and scholars.
42. But there is a major problem that Alexander did not address and in my view it is the main obstacle we face in promoting the Technique. The fact is that most people, including the medical profession, don't believe the overall way we use ourselves matters.
43. Look at the way people including the medical profession walk and sit, the way they slouch and twist themselves at their computers and when they are doing things. Look at the young man twisted over the i-pad and frantically tapping this leg as he swallows his Red Bull.
44. As AT teachers we see ourselves surrounded by appalling misuse of the self but these people are quite happy with the way they are. They don't see anything wrong with it. How do we break through that barrier?
45. It is here that I think science can play an important part in breaking down the wall of indifference that we face when we try to promote the Technique.
46. A large part of our problem is that we are pigeon-holed as alternative therapists by the public and the medical profession. This marginalises us and enables people to write us off as being a bit vague and New Age.
47. To break out of this we need to be able to speak about ourselves in a way that is credible to the medical profession and the scientific world.
48. Although he was secretive by nature and obscure in his writings, Alexander firmly believed in this. In Chapter 7 of *The use of the self* he makes the case that the Technique should be included in the curriculum of medical schools. He was

backed up in this by the famous letter by nineteen doctors published in the BMJ in 1937⁵.

49. In the Introduction to *Constructive conscious control of the individual* published in 1923, John Dewey, the philosopher and one of the most famous intellectuals of his day, saw things in the same way. He said:

*Mr Alexander's teaching is scientific in the strictest sense of the word.*⁶

50. I recently came across something Walter Carrington wrote in *Direction Journal* 1997 when he was introducing an article by his friend T.D.M. Roberts, the physiologist and expert on balance. Walter said:

*The practical teaching of all skills must be fundamentally empirical, and there needs to be a clear distinction between practice and theory. But when it comes to putting forward explanations of theory, these must be correct and soundly based on the best scientific authority. If, as Alexander teachers, we appear to be scientifically illiterate, we cannot expect to engender much confidence in our pupils.*⁷

51. It is seventy years since Walter wrote that. I would not alter a word of it.

52. I am not saying that every AT lesson should be a science lesson or that every AT teacher should be a scientist. But I am saying that when called upon we should be able to explain ourselves in language that scientific and medical people can understand and relate to, or at least we should be able to point people towards where they can find the information they want.

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⁵ Alexander (1946)p13

⁶ Alexander (1923) pxxviii

⁷ Roberts (1998)p22