

No 25 Aldous Huxley (II)

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1. Today I am continuing with Aldous Huxley. We had reached the stage in 1935 where he was in a dreadful physical and mental state and completely stuck in his writing of *Eyeless in Gaza*. He could only work on the book while lying on his back with the typewriter on his chest.
2. There is no record of how he discovered the AT. Perhaps it was because "Going to Alexander" was a fashionable thing in the circles in which Huxley moved at the time.¹
3. However it happened, he began daily lessons with Alexander in 1935. Huxley was so impressed with the results that he persuaded his wife Maria to have lessons as well. Huxley, like Dewey, not only benefited hugely from the AT, he became intellectually fascinated by it.
4. It also helped him to find a way forward in his novel. He introduced a character called Dr Miller who is partly based on Alexander and is an Alexander teacher. In the novel, Huxley quotes from the diary of his central character, Anthony Beavis, who has just had a lesson from Miller.
5. He says that Miller thought it possible to develop a non-theological form of meditation, which

...he would like, of course, to couple with training, along F.M. Alexander's lines, in use of the self, beginning with physical control and achieving through it (since mind and body are one) control of impulses and feelings.²

6. Elsewhere, Beavis says:

At today's lesson with Miller found myself suddenly a step forward in my grasp of the theory and practice of the technique. To learn proper use one must first inhibit all improper uses of the self. Refuse to be hurried into gaining ends by the equivalent (in personal, psycho-physiological terms) of violent revolution; inhibit this tendency, concentrate on the means whereby the end is to be achieved; then act.³

¹ Jones (1976)p56

² Huxley (1936)p10

³ Ibid.212

7. He managed to finish the book which was published in 1936 and then he and Maria moved permanently to the US where he wrote the book *Ends and Means* which was published in 1937. This is basically a collection of philosophical essays on the nature of society and it was hugely successful. The copy I have is from the sixth impression.
8. In the chapter on education he discusses what is required from an ideal system of physical education and says that to his knowledge the only one that meets all the criteria he has laid down is that developed by F. M. Alexander.
9. He gives a description of the Technique which few of us would fault. He says:

Complete understanding of the system can only come with the practice of it. All I need say in this place is that I am sure, as a matter of personal experience and observation, that it gives us all the things we have been looking for in a system of physical education: relief from strain due to maladjustment, and consequent improvement in physical and mental health; increased consciousness of the physical means employed to gain the ends proposed by the will and, along with this, a general heightening of consciousness at all levels...⁴

10. Once he and Maria were settled in the US, they began to build up a network of friends which, rather like their network in England thirty years earlier, included leading intellectual and famous figures as Christopher Isherwood, Igor Stravinsky, the astronomer Edwin Hubble, Charlie Chaplin, and Harpo Marx.
11. But despite the improvement in his general health and well-being that came with the Alexander Technique, Huxley was still having major problems with his eyes and in most of the photographs where you can see the right eye clearly, it looks completely blind.
12. In 1938, he discovered the Bates Method of vision improvement and began to study it with Margaret Corbett. Bates himself had died in 1931 but Margaret Corbett had carried on his work and was running a vision improvement school in Los Angeles. Huxley, as he tended to be when he

⁴ Huxley (1937)p223

discovered something new, was an immediate and enthusiastic convert.

13. He went to her six times a week and found his vision rapidly improving.⁵ In a letter to his brother Julian he said he had given up reading glasses and was seeing much better at a distance and his bad eye had improved to about 50 percent of normal.⁶
14. Sybille Bedford remarks:

*What Aldous did not mention were the daily hours on learning these simple practices, the vigilance, the submission, the tough perseverance. Not to strain, not to stare, is as hard to learn for an urban adult as turning cartwheels; harder.*⁷
15. In 1941, Huxley wrote to Alexander looking for support for Margaret Corbett who was being sued for practising medicine without a licence in California. Alexander was quite annoyed at being included in the ranks of unorthodox practitioners and complained to Huxley about deserting the means-whereby principles in favour of “beastly exercises.”⁸
16. But Huxley was not put off and continued having lessons with Margaret Corbett. He also wrote a book on vision improvement which was published as *The art of seeing* in 1942.⁹
17. When it came out, Michael Bloch said it confirmed Alexander’s view that the Bates exercises and other end-gaining pursuits had impaired Huxley’s general condition as well as his judgement and that he had gone off his head.¹⁰
18. After the book was published he continued his lessons with Margaret Corbett and Sybille Bedford mentions him still going to her in 1951. I think this book by Huxley is what lies behind the involvement of various AT teachers with the Bates Method.
19. The basic problem is that though Huxley’s eyesight showed some improvement, it remained extremely bad. One friend who

⁵ Bedford (1974)p373

⁶ Ibid.p375

⁷ Ibid.p375

⁸ Jones (1976)77

⁹ Huxley (1943)

¹⁰ Jones (1976)78

had dinner with him in 1949 describes him feeling for the knife and fork like a blind person, while his wife verbally guides him.¹¹

20. An account of him in 1951 describes him in his writing den at the end of a dark corridor with the desk piled up with books in Braille. He was wearing pinhole glasses and had completely taped over the right eye.¹²
21. At the end of 1956, *The People* newspaper in England published an article with the headline **HE HOAXED THE WORLD WITH AN EYESIGHT CURE**. The article was by an American ophthalmologist who had written an anti-Bates book and described an episode in which Huxley was giving a lecture and pretending to read it.
22. According to Nicholas Murray, Huxley had memorised the text but had forgotten one paragraph and got stuck. To the great embarrassment of the audience, he brought the paper closer and closer to his eyes and eventually took out a magnifying glass to make out the words.¹³
23. Nicholas Murray says:

*It remains doubtful whether he (Huxley) had anything other than the briefest of intermissions in his struggle to see adequately.*¹⁴
24. The curious thing is that Huxley, who prided himself on his intellectual rigour, seemed unable to admit, even to himself, that in his own case the Bates Method had fallen very short of the success he had claimed for it.
25. In the meantime, Huxley had become increasingly interested in religion and oriental philosophy. He became a follower of the fashionable Californian guru Krishnamurthi, one of whose lectures whom Dilys Carrington attended and was extremely unimpressed by. She said he invited questions and when anyone asked one, he said “What do you think?”
26. Krishnamurthi is long dead but I looked up the Krishnamurthi Foundation on the internet and I found they have actually trademarked the phrase “*Truth is a pathless land.*” So don’t go round saying that without permission.

¹¹ Murray (2002)379

¹² Ibid.p389

¹³ Ibid.p422

¹⁴ Ibid.p422

27. In 1952, Maria was diagnosed with breast cancer but responded to treatment. Huxley had now moved into experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs and under the supervision of a Canadian doctor, Humphry Osmond, he had his first mescaline trip. Mescaline is a psychedelic drug extracted from certain kinds of cactus. It was he and Osmond who coined the word psychedelic.
28. He had other mescaline trips and also tried LSD and believed that through these he was introduced to new levels of awareness. He wrote a book called *The Doors of Perception* (pub 1954) which relates his experiences. And if anyone ever asks you the connection between the AT and Jim Morrison, you can say his band got the name *The Doors* from Aldous Huxley's book.
29. If you look at the jacket of *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* you'll see Huxley's picture towards the top left of the crowd. So there is also a connection with the Beatles.
30. Huxley's last written reference to the AT that I have found is an introduction to an extremely enthusiastic book on the AT by an English journalist called Louise Morgan which was published in 1954 under the title *Inside Yourself: the new way to health based on the Alexander Technique*¹⁵.
31. She never had any Alexander lessons and worked it all out from Alexander's books. In her book, she tells how she read them all in the order in which they were written and how she tried to put them into practice in her daily life. She said:
- I came to see that it was not only for the sick, the depressed and the disabled, but for the average healthy person. And I came to agree with the reviewer of Alexander's third book Constructive Conscious Control who called the technique "organised common sense".*¹⁶
32. She describes the day of her breakthrough and says:
- Then one wonderful day I found myself walking, sitting down and getting up in a new way. It was like moving on a cloud, and indeed I felt up in the clouds altogether. The sensation is indescribably satisfying and invigorating but you will feel it yourself if you learn*

¹⁵ Morgan (1954)p

¹⁶ Ibid.p33

*the technique. From that day, I made rapid progress, and I am now unable to conceive how I lived before I discovered Alexander. The struggle to learn is as nothing in the light of the results.*¹⁷

33. She was so delighted with the results that she felt she should write a book about Alexander and the Technique. She interviewed Alexander and asked him if he thought people could learn the Technique from his books without having lessons.

34. His answer was:

*Depends on whether they can read!...Most people today can't read.*¹⁸

35. Her book does not claim to be an exposition of the Technique. She says

*This book is merely the account of one person who found a new lease of life by applying the technique as described in his writings.*¹⁹

36. I think it is of considerable historic interest but I would not recommend it for its scientific rigour or modern attitudes. In one place she is giving advice about not using muscles unnecessarily and says:

*Women are particularly given to using unnecessary muscles. They often clench their jaws when attacking difficult brain work. This is a great mistake. The jaw is not far from the brain, and a stiff jaw means a stiff brain.*²⁰

37. Huxley's introduction is quite short and there is no hint that he actually read the book. The review was probably organised by the London publishers, Hutchinsons, but we can assume it made a significant difference to the sales of the book.

38. But then tragedy struck the Huxleys. Maria's cancer came back and in 1955 she died. Huxley appears to have been in deep denial about her illness and her death left him in a state of profound shock.

39. A year later he married Laura Archera. She was forty four at the time, and Huxley was sixty two. She had been a friend of

¹⁷ Ibid.34

¹⁸ Ibid.37

¹⁹ Ibid.37

²⁰ Ibid.69

the Huxleys for some years. In her early life she had been a concert violinist and made her debut at Carnegie Hall in her teens. She later became a documentary film-maker and then a psychotherapist.

40. Nicholas Murray says that there is evidence that when Maria realised she was dying, “she more or less engineered” the marriage to Laura.²¹
41. Huxley continued his restless travelling and lecturing. He became increasingly famous and was appointed to visiting professorships in MIT and Berkeley. He was always pushing at the boundaries of the conventional – he would have been called a celebrity these days
42. Of particular interest to us, he maintained his interest in the AT. He got to know Frank Pierce Jones who had himself learned about the AT from Huxley’s books..²²
43. Jones said that Huxley had lessons from him in 1960 and also mentions that three letters he received from Huxley in the year he died showed that his interest in the AT had not lapsed.²³
44. In 1960, Huxley was diagnosed with tongue cancer but after treatment he made a recovery. In 1961, there was another tragic event. The Huxley house in California was destroyed in a bush fire with the loss of their whole collection of books, documents and letters.
45. In Laura Archera’s book there is an account of herself and Aldous wandering round the house in a kind of daze as the flames from the bush fire came closer. I suppose it was a state of shock. They managed to save the typescript of Huxley’s last book *Island*, and Laura’s Guarneri violin but all the rest was destroyed.
46. Huxley’s cancer came back and in 1963, on the day President Kennedy was assassinated, he died in the presence of Laura at their house in Hollywood. He was aged 67. Laura lived on for another forty four years and died in December 2007.
47. So there we have Aldous Huxley. Frank Pierce Jones says that Alexander sometimes had doubts about whether Huxley had properly understood the Technique.²⁴ But he was very glad

²¹ Murray (2002)406

²² Jones (1998)p56

²³ Jones (1976)56

²⁴ Ibid.56

of the publicity and prestige, as well as the pupils, that Huxley introduced to the Technique.

48. I think our own attitude can be somewhat similar. Huxley did not contribute to a deeper understanding of the Technique. His experience was from the viewpoint of a pupil who had benefited massively from it and his description of it in *Ends and Means* is one we can all identify with.
49. This, in my view, is where his continuing importance for us lies. We can be glad that we have a man of Huxley's fame and intellectual calibre who was prepared to associated himself so closely with the Technique and was willing to tell the world how much it did for him.

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