



ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE TEACHER TRAINING IN THE 1960s

A memoir by Chariclia Gounaris

Training in the 1960s at the Constructive Teaching Centre in London

Developing Life Skills through the Alexander Technique

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by Chariclia Gounaris



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Foreword

The memoir covers the period of my training at CTC (Constructive Teaching Centre, then situated at 18 Lansdowne Rd., Holland Park) from September 1964 to December 1967 and is in fulfilment of Jean Fischer's request for historical material regarding training in the 1960s. At the time of receiving Jean's request (October 2016) Jean was still in charge of the Walter Carrington Archives at CTC. More precisely, his request was for general memoirs, observations, and impressions of what it was like to train back then, and he asked me to say whether or not we had any lectures on anatomy or physiology, and if "games" were in use what they comprised.

Capturing the spirit of the time

“Memory, it is true, often plays small tricks which tend to embellish or to distort the past. But events that made a profound impact on one’s mind frequently retain much of their original and authentic import and flavour.” —Géza Vermes, *The Story of the Scrolls*

I joined Walter Carrington’s training course at Lansdowne Road in 1964 at the age of 20—nine years after F. M.’s death. Walter once said to me: “You would have liked F.M.” meaning, I suppose, “You would have appreciated the originality of his character and the way he looked at things.” I did not have the good fortune of meeting the Master himself, nevertheless I felt that I shared with the others in the class a sense of closeness to him. This was obviously due to the fact that the teachers I was training with had for appreciable lengths of time been in direct contact with Alexander since they had been participants in the teacher training course that Alexander had been running during the last twenty-four years of his life. So those teachers were now passing on to us the nourishment they had been absorbing from their contact with the source.

A special trait of Alexander’s character was his negative stance to dogmatic beliefs. We read that he questioned every fixed belief that was conveyed to him as “knowledge” during his school years. Consequently, he unfailingly retained a non-dogmatic stance with reference to his own work as well. He is reputed to have said, “Unless I am proven wrong I will carry on with the work as I do.” In this sense, teaching the technique was for him a continuous process of re-assessment of its fundamental principles. I reckon that this attitude to teaching was more prevalent in the early days than it is now fifty years later. Perhaps this is because there was a fervour for the work then that made this continual reassessing more imperative. The work had to be asserted and protected from assaults—note: F.M. wrote MSI (Man’s Supreme Inheritance) to protect his technique against plagiarism and took legal action against a case of defamation (the South Africa Libel Action). This element of fervour for the work for its own sake was definitely traceable right down to the time of my training.

It is worth noting that F.M had singled out the antigravity movement from “sitting to standing” as his principal procedure for demonstrating the principle of

the “primary control”—or as it is also called “the head-neck-back relationship”. Both in private teaching as well as in the set-up of his training course it remained *the* procedure through which basic experiences were conveyed to pupil or trainee and through which the pupil’s or trainee’s accumulated tightnesses and flaccidities could be reorganized into a balanced working as a whole. The supremacy of this procedure was equally indisputable during my training. In this connection, I remember, for instance, the enthusiasm of the teacher involved in the process of directing to get the “primary control” going while guiding the student from “sitting to standing”, and the exclamatory “That’s it!” to the student, when the intention was achieved. And “good girl!” if it was a female student who was the target—“good” because she was not interfering, and “naughty!” if she did not inhibit. And “there you go”, was another one of those expressions. Parenthetically: a decade later, the focus of attention would be shifting from “chair work” to “application work”—the prime advocate of this being Marjorie Barstow in the USA. This was not the case at CTC or any other of the teacher training courses in London, but a broader movement in teaching the technique claiming to free the Alexander principles from the bonds of tradition in order to make them more adaptable to group teaching.

I would like to emphasize one more point regarding the focus of attention in those early days. It was simply to help the “self” progressively function in all action, conduct and thinking as a connected whole. That was the attitude permeating work in class. The interrelationship between the “whole” and its “parts” with respect to use and functioning was, broadly speaking, the theme around which training revolved—the “primary control” being the mechanism through which the “self” (in the sense that Alexander used the term) could be helped to function as a concerted “whole”.

Consequently, the lesson passed on to us during my training was the inculcation of the “primary control” as a guiding principle in all activity—not only during class, but by and large in living. For this to happen, our teachers helped us, in the beginning through simple procedures and progressively through more complex ones, to grow a keen awareness of what “the primary control” involved so as to gradually develop the rudimentary skill of consciously integrating into its dynamics every intended act—this ability reaching a more advanced stage in the fully-fledged Alexander teacher. By the same token, the teaching skill that was required of us as graduates did not rest on sheer manipulative use of the hands,

but on the hands becoming connected to our use as a “whole”, seeing that the experience of being a “connected whole” could not be conveyed in any genuine way to a pupil unless we as teachers knew how to generate and maintain it in ourselves from moment to moment. I make reference to the above training circumstances to show that emphasis on the “whole” was a priority issue in both training and teaching in the 1960s. A fleeting glance at the titles of literature on the technique since the time of Alexander’s writings to our day can reveal where the weight of attention was placed in earlier days and how it has shifted over time.

In this connection, I remember reflecting on the comments made in class about Alexander having at the last minute withdrawn from a research project arranged by the American philosopher John Dewey [1] with funds that had been raised from a charitable organization. The impression conveyed was that F.M. was suspicious of research carried out by anyone with no background in the technique. On the other hand, he did not seem to oppose Frank Pierce Jones [2] attempts to set up pilot studies on aspects of the technique—Frank’s first pilot study being in 1949, when F.M. was still alive.

With hindsight, I am inclined to think that F.M.'s reservations might have been due to his protective attitude towards his technique and his conviction that *his* technique addressed the whole psychophysical “self”—as reflected in his writings—whereas research set-ups, by definition, concentrate on a particular part of the “body”, the objective being to investigate the effect of the technique on the function of that particular part. Thus, the original purport of his work that he so forcefully put forward during his lifetime might run the risk of treading in the background.

Since the 1960s, a number of pilot studies as well as other more extensive studies have been carried out intermittently, pointing to benefits from Alexander lessons on specific issues of human activity and health, a most recent major scientific research being one that corroborates the technique's positive effect on lower back pain. Although such documentation is in many respects useful and desirable, a less desirable side effect appears to be the inevitable public promulgation of a fragmented mode of looking at the technique. The purport of Alexander's original vision of his technique as a method of re-educating the kinaesthetic system and thereby the use of the whole “self” for the “act of living”, to use Walter Carrington's expression, seems to be losing momentum. It is analogous to losing sight of the forest for the trees.

The Training Course



The school premises

At the CTC, besides Walter and Dilys Carrington who were the directors, four other teachers trained by F.M. were attached to the school: Peggy Williams, Tony Spawforth, Edward Gellatly and later (when Elisabeth and Dick had returned from South Africa) Elisabeth Walker. Tony came into class daily since he was a paid assistant teacher, and Peggy's presence was felt almost daily. Edward was also coming almost daily whereas Elisabeth Walker came off and on. There were also two other teachers who joined the class, but who were not trained directly by Alexander. These were Joan Murray and Ursula Benn, who had trained with Walter a few years before I joined the class. Joan came almost daily, and Ursula was often in and out of class. I remember Ursula rushing into the classroom invariably with eye-catching bunches of flowers in her hands that she placed in a vase on the mantelpiece. Yes, there was a fireplace with an inserted gas stove in the big classroom, which during the cold winter months was turned on a quarter of an hour before class commenced—class was held five

days a week between 11:30 and 15:30 with a lunch break from 13:00 to 14:00—and turned off right after class to great discontent of the two students from Denmark: Vera Cavling and Grethe Laub—“dear and duck”, as Edward affectionately addressed them—who were used to the luxury of central heating in their homeland. At lunchtime the students consumed their packed lunches in the basement, in the room where a nursery school was set up in 1966 by Grethe Laub while she still was training and that ran for two years from 9:00 to 12:00. In another room in the basement there was a billiard table where Tony and Edward enjoyed a game of snooker during the lunch break.

Ever since Alexander brought to light that malfunctioning could be improved by improving the use of the “primary control” new horizons for betterment were opened on all levels of human activity. The people/students in the class at CTC in 1964 were drawn to the technique for various reasons. Some of them were accepted into the training course to give them the possibility of more intensive work than private teaching could provide, although Walter later avoided accepting people with overt psychological instabilities. Since the Alexander work by its very nature deals with the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses, which comprise “the sense of self”, the daily intensive experiences in a teacher training course often can lead to a kind of forced development which in certain cases can be difficult to grapple with. The students in the class when I joined in 1964 were: Denise Walls, singer (Australia), Grethe Laub, nursery school teacher (Denmark), Vera Cavling (Denmark), Alex Murray, first flautist in the London Symphony, Traute Weis (Switzerland), Audrey Holdron, Joyce Benson, Jennifer who was schizoid, Marcus who committed suicide during the course of that school year, and Marion who soon after ended up in a psychiatric ward. To me, at the age of 20, that seemed a strange lot!

The class was thinning out drastically in the following months until there came a time around the middle of my training where Alex Murray and I were almost the only students in the class surrounded by an abundance of teachers who kept coming nonetheless daily in the class. It was then that Walter announced to us his decision of closing down the training course if there was no radical change in the situation in the next five years. Luckily things changed. There was a slow influx of newcomers that gradually accelerated, and by the time I was finishing my training in 1967 there were many students in the class. The real boom took place after my time—in the 1970s and 1980s, where the class grew to 15

students and above.

The flow of newcomers included Jean Clark, Ed and Linda Avak from the States, Brian and Lisa Campbell from Johannesburg, Kri Ackers, Diana Mason, Roderick Beesley, Harry Loughlin from Scotland (who never finished his training), Nina Haahr and Aksel Haahr from Denmark, Ingrid Hvid Poulsen also a Dane (who did her first two years with Patrick Macdonald and her third year in 1967 with Walter), Sophia Gordon and the two violinists Paul Collins and Betty Rajna (Langford), so by the end of 1967 the plentiful number of a dozen plus was reached. I cannot remember exactly in which year of my training “games” were introduced, but they were certainly in current use before the end of my training, therefore I am led to think that they were ushered in when the class grew bigger. Earlier, when the class was small, the teacher/student ratio was high so we had the luxury of getting many “turns”, and definitely a longish “turn” from Walter every day—the “daily bread”. To crown it all, each one of us had a weekly private half hour lesson from Walter, which took place in his private teaching room while the class went on with the other teachers present in the class, and the private lesson must have taken place just before the lunch break because I clearly remember that I felt so free in my legs after the lesson that I ran with tremendous speed down the road to the grocery to buy extras for lunch. At a later point, when we had reached the early stages of using our hands, the private sessions with Walter involved a pair of students. I can vividly remember two of those occasions where I was in a group of two. One time, it was with Alex Murray, and the other with Joyce Benson. The procedure would be as follows: Walter would be working on me while I put hands on Alex who would be asked to sit on or stand in front of the chair inhibiting, attentive to what was going on around him and at the same time being attentive to his own directions while I would be sending my own directions and attending at the same time to both myself and Alex as I was putting hands on him, quite a demanding awareness exercise—connecting, so to speak, to the other person’s nervous system and communicating one’s state of “up” which kept improving through Walter’s direction coming through his hands—a circuit of kinaesthetic and proprioceptive outgoing and incoming messages being exchanged between the three communicating “selves” affecting balance, tone, breathing, liveliness ... Alex would also be giving a verbal feedback commentary if he thought it was necessary. When my time was over we would swap places and Alex would be in charge of directing me. During the session with Joyce I remember myself lying

on the table while she was doing work on me while Walter worked on her. At the end of the session Walter put his forefinger on my arm and whispered approvingly “good”. I suppose he must have been referring to my doing nothing, because I was utterly doing nothing, just observing what was going on.

I experienced this indirect way of teaching as a very characteristic trait of the learning process during training—of conveying only the necessary messages, thus making a demand on the student to be actively involved in deciphering what the technique is about. This style of teaching, I reckon, was rather more due to the essential qualities of the work than to any conscious plan on Walter’s part. It exasperated one or two in the class who thought they could not understand unless some more explicit elucidation was given, and who also found the exclamation of the teacher “That’s it” utterly mystifying. In the end, one had to come to terms with the fact that the special kind of understanding necessary to be gained involved a process that took place in the whole person and not something one could instantly grasp intellectually. Therefore, “inhibition”, as well as being a necessary ingredient in “directing”, also proved to be indispensable for the process of learning and understanding.



class 1967 ■ photo by courtesy of Jean Clark
left to right back row: Paul Collins, Nina Haahr, Alex Murray, Ursula Benn, Lawson Jones (visitor), Ingrid Poulsen, Diana Mason, Chariclia Gounaris ■ left to right middle row: Harry Loughlin, Aksel Haahr, Jeanne Day, Peggy Williams, Walter and Dilys Carrington ■ left to right bottom row: Jean Clark, Mary Chelf Jones (visitor), Joan Murray, Kri Ackers.

The atmosphere in the class

The atmosphere in the class was intimate and warm. Nothing in the room itself denoted the sterility otherwise characteristic of a standard classroom. Besides the fireplace with the mantelpiece that I mentioned above, there were two tables for “lying down” work placed on opposite sides of the room, a collection of various chairs for “chair work” randomly scattered in the room, a bookcase, a sawhorse, a mirror to be used as an aid for objective observation, and in the far end corner of the room a grand piano. I remember witnessing a recital that was given during the autumn term of 1967 by Betty Rajna and her piano accompanist to whom I was then giving some Alexander lessons. At the front end of the room overlooking the road was a huge old-framed window. As always, Walter gave his daily talk, or reading from F.M. books, sitting with his back turned against this

window while the rest of us were seated in a semi-circle at some distance from him, and those most needful of resting their backs were listening while lying on the two tables. At the very opposite end was a glass partition separating the big room from a small room equipped with a table which was being used for private teaching after class. Further out in this direction lay the small house garden where we had our lunch in the summer. Adjoining this small garden was a big luscious Square Garden where we took strolls or even practiced running. Actually, I remember one time Paul Collins, who had been a marathon runner, running by my side, helping me with his right hand on the back of my neck to keep the direction of my head.

My first impression ever of the CTC was of a big roar of laughter emanating from the classroom. That was a while before I joined the training course. Jeanne Day (Haahr), who had introduced me to the technique, was also introducing me one day to the premises at Lansdowne Road. It was during her third year of training, and while she was in the classroom that day I was waiting for her in the flat on the first floor, where Denise Walls was then staying. Bewildered I asked Jeanne later what kind of class that was since the floor I stood on was almost shaking by the repeated roars of laughter that had been reaching me through the ceiling. Later, after having joined the training course I understood that Walter's must have been the most prevalent of these roars.

Having fun helped loosen up the atmosphere from becoming overly serious. Our teachers tried to inculcate in us an attitude of "careless care". Over-concentration, trying too hard, trying to be right were/are stumbling blocks to the learning process and had to be addressed. Also the pains and aches in our bodies accompanying improvements in the functioning of the "primary control" in many cases affected our mood. "It's just change, dear" the teachers would say encouragingly. Environment plays an important role in training; the best environment of course being a steady, caring and accepting one, and Walter and Dilys were able to provide such an environment. I think Walter remained a paternal figure all the way through my training, as well as when the class got much bigger. I can't imagine though what the environment really was like in later years when the class had reached the number of 30 or so students. Walter maintained that the students got a better all-round training in later years, but some of the qualities of the more intimate class environment were surely lost.

Definitely lost, if I may count my own impression of the class environment from later visits to the class on occasions such as participating in Walter's summer refresher courses.



Walter working on a student in front of the mirror.
In the 1960s, a grand piano stood in the corner just behind where Walter stands. ■ photo clipped from the 2-DVD set "Walter and Dilys Carrington Demonstrate the Alexander Technique". Filmed at Lansdowne Road, 1985-1986.

Acquaintance with Dart

The atmosphere in the class was especially lively when Alex was still training. Even now, I can see him bantering in a very entertaining ping-pong fashion with Brian Campbell while Walter was working on him freeing his flautist ribs. Endowed with an inquisitive mind, he unearthed one day in 1967 from Walter's piles of dormant material (later archived by Jean Fischer and now known as the "Walter Carrington Archives") three extremely enlightening articles on anatomy written by Professor Raymond Dart [3]. This happened in connection with a meeting Alex would soon be having with Dart in place of Walter who was unable to go. Dart was around the age of 73 then, and after a brief stopover in London he was heading for the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Philadelphia, USA where he was a visiting lecturer and adviser.

Our acquaintance with these articles marked—at least for me—a breakthrough in my understanding of anatomy, even of neuroanatomy. Until then, Walter had introduced us to basic anatomy using the Royal Airforce Principles of Anatomy & Physiology for Physical Training Instructors—stemming from the time when Walter was an Air Force pilot—the illustrations of which he projected onto a screen while he delivered the lecture. Although basic stuff, Walter was a master in turning it into meaningful and very relevant material in terms of the work we were doing in the class. For example, I can relate in passing the understandings that Walter was trying to impart to us regarding the function of the musculature and especially the muscles of the back in response to gravity, and the role of the Alexander work in optimizing this antigravity response. It is commonly held that the skeleton carries the weight of the body, but Walter would be commenting that the way the weight was being carried by the skeleton depended on how the musculature functioned in relation to gravity. He was pointing out that the primary function of muscle was to keep the framework supported, and that in doing so it simultaneously operated as a suspension system like the air in the tires of a car; if a puncture occurred, the weight of the car would automatically become a dead weight and the car would no longer run smoothly and efficiently. Similarly, when muscle tone throughout the body was not distributed optimally—due to flaccidities in some parts and tightnesses in others—the support mechanism would be lacking and the body weight would tend to become more of a dead and burdensome weight; the subjective feeling being that of heaviness in contrast to that of a lightness which would otherwise be the result if the musculature throughout was suitably tuned in its response to gravity. I remember Walter comparing the strings of a tennis racket to the muscles of the back, the frame of the racket corresponding to the frame of the bony structures when these are “directed”—as it is in the case of the technique—away from each other. Walter did, of course, not mean that the muscles of the back should be as taut as the strings of the tennis racket; obviously, the level of tautness of the strings of the racket are adjusted to counteract the impact of the forceful stroke of the ball. As is also the case with the strings of the violin that also need to be suitably “stretched”—but not overstretched—to produce a pleasant sound. Likewise, muscle consisting of elastic fibrous material also requires the stimulus of a suitable pull on its fibres to bring it into a state of “tone”, readiness for action; to energise it, so to speak, for work—work to provide skeletal support in the first place before any other activity can take place; actually, gravity itself exerts

involuntary “stretch” on muscle when one is up and about. Under the umbrella of the general support mechanism just described, other aspects of anatomy of main interest for our training were examined such as, for example, the function of the vocal and breathing mechanisms (relevant to the vocal/breathing exercise of the “Wispered Ah” that was part of the classical procedures developed by Alexander to be practiced along the way of kinaesthetic re-education). Walter did also acquaint us with F.P. Jones’s pilot studies of the startle pattern and the force platform. But what was fascinating about Dart’s approach was that he viewed anatomy from an evolutionary perspective.

Thrilled by Dart’s findings, Alex embarked on a study of those articles, and, closely following Dart’s exposition in “The Attainment of Poise”, he soon demonstrated in the class the evolutionary/developmental stages from prone to the fully erect—a fascinating journey into the past, which helped unfold unexploited potential for the benefit of the present. So, going through the procedures was no less a lesson in anthropology than in functional anatomy.

Walter must surely have been well acquainted with Dart’s anatomy articles, but had obviously never explored them as systematically as Alex had done, neither had he, as far as I know, ever attempted to introduce them to the class except through the standard Alexander “position of mechanical advantage”, which in effect is one of the phases of the semi-erect, a fact that was brought home to me after my acquaintance with Dart’s perspective.





Alex and Joan 88 yrs old in their home in Urbana, Illinois ■ photo spring 2017 ■ courtesy of Philip-Johnston

Out of a need to anchor the memoir to the present moment of writing, spring 2017, I ventured to ask Alex and Joan to send me a fresh photo of them from spring 2017 to include in the memoir. This is because of the special reference I make to them in the memoir and in order to emphasize in one more way their significant contribution to the training course that they imparted in an exuberantly inspirational and rejuvenating way. My colleague Joe Armstrong with whom I share the same appreciation for them wrote to me in this connection: “Those early years were also fuelled by their [the Murray’s] sense of discovery, their veneration for Walter, and their enthusiasm for the importance of the Technique itself. And that was very contagious to all around.” Notwithstanding their old age, Alex and Joan are still teaching and running a training course to this day, which is an amazing feat. [4]

The influence of Dart on the training course

So picking up the threads of Alex’s research on Dart—Alex and Joan would soon be leaving for the States—Walter went on to elaborate on three of those procedures, which he incorporated—I don’t know for how long—in his growing list of the so called “games” obviously because of their most direct relevance to the Alexander work in class:

- a) The pronograde, the position on all four limbs. For example: the student would be guided from the erect (the orthograde) to the pronograde position, the head-neck-back relationship being the Alexander constant in the process. In the pronograde position, the antigravity responses which trigger the muscular support mechanisms would be given renewed attention. Achieving the necessary support of the limbs without stiffening

and fixing would be the effect wished for. Likewise, attention would be given to the support of the back. Adhering to the Alexander direction of “back back”, the student would be achieving the proper support of the back, thus eliminating any tendency of sagging around the area of the neck and lower back. In this complex process of co-ordination, attention would also be given to the weight-bearing surfaces. The weight of the torso on the fore limbs should not be pressed down on the palm of the hand. Coming up from the carpal eminences was important. Also, exercising shifting the weight from ulnar to radial eminence without narrowing across the front was a detail that added to one’s understanding. If you supported the fore limbs with the elbow slightly bent, the weight would predominantly fall on the ulnar eminence. If you extended the arms (avoiding overstretching) the weight would shift to the radial eminence. We also explored the knuckles as weight-bearing areas, both at the metacarpophalangeal and the interphalangeal joints. Besides, we would experiment raising one limb off the ground taking care to re-distribute the weight on the other three limbs so that there was no collapse on the side of the lifted limb or distortion of body balance on the other three limbs (corresponding to taking one limb off the ground in the upright position). Especially instructive was shifting the weight from hind to fore limbs. You had to keep the direction of “up” constant in both the limbs and the back (“back back”) while at the same time allowing the head to lead to bring about a lengthening of the spine. In the end, when all the preparatory stages for the act of locomotion were duly attended to, you would be ready to set the limbs in motion to move yourself forward through space. It is important here to note that it is the momentum of the torso as it moves forward on the limbs that sets the limbs in motion and not vice versa. That was a revelation to me. I could see that the same thing applied to moving in space in the upright position and it was what Walter meant by momentum and energy released through the act of falling. Then, if you had managed to initiate the movement successfully the teacher would help you continue to release the head forward and out as you were moving forward—or even backward—in space.

A variation of this procedure would involve two students on all four connecting with each other head-to-head like two train wagons, a similar procedure to sitting on a chair back-to-back.

Returning to the upright, I personally was surprised by the benefits I had reaped from my exposure to the quadrupedal, feeling much more ... “grounded”, to put it in a modish jargon. It also brought home to me the following correlation: lengthening of the spine in the quadrupedal coincides with the direction of one’s movement in space, which is horizontal. In contrast, lengthening of the spine in the upright position inevitably has to take place along the vertical and it is a direction that you need to refurbish—“back and up”—as you take a step forward so that you do not fall forward and down as you move.

The second example also refers to Dart’s article “The Attainment of Poise”.

- b) lying prone on the table, head resting on the forehead, the two arms lying straight by the sides, also the legs lying extended. A small pillow was usually placed under the belly. Walter would then take the head, turn it and place it to the side. Afterwards, he would bend at the elbow the arm lying on the same side as the head. Likewise, he would take the leg lying at the same side, free it at the hip joint and rotate it outwards with the knee bent. Then, the same was repeated on the other side of the body. Going through this procedure prone on the table demonstrated in slow motion the pattern of the crawl. The rotational movement of the legs at the hip joint, alternating between phases of outward and inward rotation enhanced one’s understanding of the muscular dynamics between the pelvic region and the legs.

This brought to mind the work that I had seen earlier—before the Dart period—done on the legs of Jane Aaronson while she was seated on a saddle mounted on a sawhorse with her feet placed in the stirrups. Jane was born with spina bifida. She was around 14-15 years old when I was training, and I remember she was brought to the CTC for weekly work on her, which took place in the classroom after class. She wore a corset to support her torso and walked with crutches. She was very bright and lively and good-humoured. I observed her being worked on several times. As mentioned, the work was done on her seated in a saddle. The corset was taken off and three teachers would be working on her at the same time. Two of them worked in unison with the area of the head, neck and back to improve the muscular support conditions in the torso while the third would be doing work on the legs. The three teachers were Walter Carrington, Peggy

Williams and Joan Murray. It was then that I first saw work being done on the legs. Walter was usually the one who worked on the legs. He would lift the leg while lengthening it out of the hip joint, and while still holding it in a slightly lifted position he would facilitate further freeing of the hip by turning the thigh outwards and then inwards ending by placing the leg on the saddle in a state of inward rotation, which is the muscular condition of the leg in normal horse riding.

Rotational movement is the central theme of the next and last illustration of a Dart procedure that I will be describing in the context of this essay. It relates to Dart's other article "Voluntary Musculature in the Human Body: The Double-Spiral Arrangement". Due to the layering of the musculature, two spiral pulls act on the body, both proceeding from the head (the mastoid processes) in a downward direction. The muscular spirals envelop the whole torso and are traceable down to the legs. So, besides the linear arrangement of the muscular pulls that enable bending and stretching, the double spiral enables the body to make rotational movements. To put it in Alexander terms, habitual "pulling down" does not only consist of linear muscular pulls but of rotational ones as well, both tending to compress the body and spine into less space. For a decompressing process to take place in a most effective way, a release of the habitual rotational pulls need to be addressed as well.

The procedure was as follows:

- c) standing in the fully erect, you were asked to direct the eyes, let us say first to the left, inhibiting all other movements of the body in the same direction. It is the eyes that activate the spirals and that is why you were asked to first direct the eyes to the side. Eyes leading, you were then allowed to let the head turn. The teacher's hands were assisting you in the process of freeing and decompressing while you turned. Continuing with the eyes leading further to the left, you were asked to allow the shoulders and ribcage to turn to the left while inhibiting any movement yet of the pelvis and the legs. Then, you were asked to allow the pelvis and the legs to turn while the feet stayed put. Having completed the full rotation, you were helped to return to the original forward-facing position. The same procedure was repeated turning to the right. In the end, you were allowed to activate the spiral on each side at one fell swoop. Working with the

spirals in this way also revealed possible imbalances between the spirals and made you aware of which spiral was the dominant one.

Illustration of other practical procedures

I have deliberately given a detailed description of the way the Dart procedures were approached in class to illustrate that we brought to them the same kind of attention and Alexander awareness that we would apply to any of the procedures of the classical repertoire—those that F.M. originated: “chair work”, “hands on the back of the chair”, “whispered Ah”, “position of mechanical advantage”, “lying down in the semi-supine”, “going up on the toes”. Having pointed that out, I need have no scruples about giving a much less detailed illustration of another sample of practical procedures representative of training at CTC. These procedures were used by way of extending the understandings we had derived from our repeated contact with the principal ones.

- standing and shifting the weight sideways from one foot to the other, or from the rear foot to the one placed in front, which eventually could lead to making the “lunge”.

- freeing the legs while standing: shifting the weight infinitesimally to one leg while releasing the other in a forward movement through sending the knee forward and out though without taking the whole foot off the ground, but only the heel. The process would be repeated slowly with the other leg, and when this was done successfully with no “pulling down” a number of times, we would then be allowed to alternate between the two legs in continuous succession. This procedure gave a very clear understanding of the reflexes operating on the legs in walking. While going through the procedure, the student would be supervised and helped by a teacher who would usually have his/her hands at the back of the student’s ribcage.

- bringing the body weight on the toes: Instead of initiating a forward movement of ourselves, we would be asked to come back to the teacher’s hands as a whole from our ankles. The teacher would be providing a steady support with his hands placed at the back of our ribcage, the two opposing forces resulting in the student going up on the balls of the feet. Going up on the toes would also be attempted while the student was in a “monkey” (position of mechanical advantage”).

Moving up over the toes in this way provided a stretch throughout the body and made you realize that if you were to move up on the toes on your own without any help at the back of the ribcage from the teacher, you had to maintain within yourself a very strong direction of “back” and “up” in your torso and legs in order to continue with the lengthening (the stretching of the musculature throughout) while moving forward and up over your toes.

– from sitting to standing in a manner similar to coming up on the toes: in guiding the student from sitting to standing the teacher requests the student to think of allowing his back to come back to the teacher’s hands that are placed at the back of the student’s ribcage. The teacher’s hands provide a steady support so that the student can experience moving from sitting to standing by staying back and refraining from inclining forward at the hip joints. For this to be carried out successfully the student will have to keep on directing the neck to be free for the head to release forward and up, and the back to lengthen and widen. The student has also to keep in mind not to stiffen at the hip joint and press with the legs. The experience of being moved from sitting to standing in this way by the teacher is very useful and demonstrates in a most convincing way that it is possible to move the weight of the torso over the feet with surprisingly less effort if the supportive mechanisms of the torso and legs are facilitated. In his scientific explorations, Frank Pierce Jones called these manoeuvres guided by the teacher “reflex standing” and “reflex sitting”.

“Games”

All the above procedures, as well as those of the standard repertoire mentioned above, progressively became stored in Walter’s expanding repository of “games”. “Games” was the lighthearted name given to a specific hour in the afternoon where the class would divide into groups of two or three students (according to the number of students in the class) and one supervising teacher for the purpose of focusing on a practical procedure or single facet of using the hands in teaching. The particular procedure of the day would be described beforehand in a very detailed demonstration by Walter as he carried it out on one of the students while the other teachers and students observed. Then Walter would divide the students into groups and assign each group to a particular teacher who would take them individually through the procedure with careful

guidance and direction so as to ensure the student's best use as a whole throughout.

The particular procedure of the day might involve the movement from sitting to standing or vice versa. For example, with the student (recipient) standing in front of the chair, the teacher would be helping the second student put hands on the key area of head-neck (of the recipient student) to elicit the freedom necessary for the head to be directed "forward and up" and a lengthening of the spine to take place preparatory to guiding the "recipient" from one position to another. The third student might be looking on or having hands on at the other side of the "recipient" without interfering, but only registering and following what was taking place while primarily attending to his or her own use.

While guiding with the hands, the student would also make sure to train the eyes to follow closely what was taking place so that tactile sense and eyesight worked hand in hand. Likewise, the student who was being worked on would be reminded to keep the eyes open and to look out without staring "fixedly" or "vacantly". In this way, the re-education of "feeling", as it is often called in F.M.'s writings, that was taking place during training would be addressing the sensory-motor antigravity response in its totality (proprioception, vestibular apparatus, eyesight).

To be able to manage to keep one's own directions going while guiding another person from sitting to standing was a complex undertaking that only an advanced student could maintain full control over concurrently with being fully cognizant of what was taking place in both him or herself and the other person who was being guided. In the first year of training, however, not much more was possible for students than merely attending to their own inhibiting and directing while putting their hands on someone. Expecting the student to register at one and the same time what took place both within him or herself and within the person he or she was guiding would be making far too much of a demand on the student's ability to attend. Progressively, the student was called upon to also assess what the hands registered. It took a surprising length of time to span the gap between registering and assessing with any clarity—it took almost the whole of the training period! The ability develops slowly over time through repeated experience. In fact, it keeps on developing after qualification through regular teaching and constant work on oneself. I am reminded of Walter's remark on the

day he handed our teaching certificates to me and a couple of the other students. He said: “.... and don’t you think that you have achieved anything, you are just ready to begin!”

On the whole “games” offered the opportunity of studying different aspects of co-ordination and of practicing the use of the hands under the supervision of a teacher. In using the hands, the most important thing was to learn to use them in a “non-doing” way. To get rid of “end-gaining”. To establish contact with the hands without any intention to “do” and “control”. To convey, in other words, the experience of improved co-ordination to another person through the means of inhibiting and directing one’s own improved use.

Let me conclude the subject of “games” with a curious flashback that can help date the beginnings of formalized use of “games”. The flashback relates to a couple of occasions during the afternoon class session when Walter would clap his hands and say amusedly “ALLE SKIFTER”—a Danish expression meaning “all change”—to signal that the students in the groups should now change position in relation to each other. It is an expression that he must have picked up from the two Danes in the class, Grethe Laub and Vera Cavling, which would date the episodes to 1966 because Grethe and Vera were at that point still around in the class, and obviously the assemblage was big enough then to allow a division into groups for the practical procedure of the day.

The use of the mirror and faulty “sensory appreciation”

As already mentioned, class was 11:30-13:00 and after the lunch break 14:00-15:30, when “games” were scheduled. The morning class began with Walter giving a half-hour talk on various aspects of the Alexander work, alternately he would read from Alexander’s books and comment on the passage. In the remaining hour, “turns” would be given to the students by the teachers present so that each one of us received a turn from Walter and two or three additional turns from the other teachers. When you were not worked on, you would be watching the work done on others or you might also work silently on yourself. This could include using the mirror as an objective means of information, just as F.M. had done. So, just standing in front of the mirror observing, without “end-gaining” to put anything right, was very instructive training.

As F.M. showed, “sensory appreciation” or “feeling”, in other words the information we get from the part of the sensory system that deals with kinaesthesia and proprioception (awareness of the position and movement of the parts of the body by means of sensory organs in the muscles and joints) cannot be totally relied on if the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive mechanisms are at fault because of habitual wrong use. Therefore, the sensory impression you may have of your total state of balance in relation to gravity, and the position of the body parts in relation to each other, may differ from what you see, when you look in the mirror.

Talking about trustworthiness of feeling, it would be relevant to also mention a certain attitude to “feeling” that was expressed by the phrase “feeling it out” that still was in current use during my training, but which to all appearances slowly vanished from Alexander terminology in later years. It was again one of those puzzling Alexander expressions that you could only come to understand on the basis of experience. You were not supposed to try to “feel it out”. This “command” was even more tenaciously observed in Alexander’s training course than at CTC. The expression had somewhat of a reproaching tinge but it was well intentioned, however it could easily be misinterpreted as meaning that you should not “feel”, which you discovered was not the case. On the contrary, your actual experience was of “feeling” becoming ever more pronounced and acutely present in your consciousness through exposure to the technique. You gradually discovered that the expression simply meant that you should not cast doubt on whether the mental “order” or “direction” that you had, for example, given for the neck to be free had in actual fact been effectuated, and you should therefore not try to seek verification by “feeling it out”. You should trust that the “order” would be executed in like manner as when you set out to walk: the body faithfully executes your intention. What mattered most was to learn how to give the guiding “orders” in a “non-doing” way—only by means of “directing”—and with clarity of intention so that you did not confuse the nervous system. Seeing that “feeling” and muscle tone are related like two sides of the same coin, it is only feasible to restore trustworthiness to “feeling” by means of restoring—through a process of re-directing, as indicated above—muscle tone throughout the entire muscular mechanism as it functions in relation to gravity.

I will close this section on "sensory appreciation" ("feeling") with an F.M. aphorism, a kind of koan, so as to give the careful reader a new incentive to reflect on the subject: "As a matter of fact, feeling is much more use than what they call 'mind'".

Attitude to prospective students

In concluding this section about The Training Course, I think I should not omit to mention Walter's very responsible attitude towards his students which comes across very well in the following letter to Grethe Laub. Grethe was a prospective student then and joined the training course in September 1962. I think it is worth submitting the letter in the context of these memoirs (the letter figures in the Appendix of the book "How are we living our lives?" by Grethe Laub, Interview and Talks 1982-1988, Novis publications, printed edition 2006, eBook 2016).

12th June 1962

Dear Grethe,

Thank you for your letter of 1st June. I am hoping to come to the school on Thursday 28th June with Edward [Gellatly -ed.] so perhaps we can arrange to have a talk then. Meanwhile, I want you to think over the questions that I am going to set out here so that we can discuss the answers together.

So far as I am concerned, you could come into the Training Course any time from now on. It does not matter a bit when you start. You would do a probationary period of 3 months and the normal period of training is 3 years. The total fee is £500 and is payable at the rate of £55.11s per term (3 terms a year). If more time is required than the 3 years it is paid for pro rata but of course in case of hardship special arrangements can be made. At the end of the course a year of practical teaching under supervision is desirable before a new teacher sets up in practice alone. Naturally, I cannot hold out any definite promise of employment to new teachers because this must always depend on the amount of work available but of course I do my best to help them. After training, the successful establishment of a teacher depends on individual ability and initiative, and since our work is still so much in the pioneering stage one has to be prepared to stand on one's own feet.

The questions that I should like you to consider are these:

- 1) Where are you going to live and what are you going to live on while you take the training?*
- 2) Will you be able to pay the fees without incurring a burden of debt?*
- 3) If, for any reason, you could not continue after the probationary period, what then?*
- 4) If it takes longer to train than 3 years, will you be able to continue?*
- 5) Will you be able to make provision to spend a year teaching under*

supervision, during which time you may not earn very much?

6) If you fail to qualify as a teacher after 3 or more years, what will you do then and how will you be situated financially?

7) If you do qualify successfully, do you think that you will be able to build up your own teaching practice and stand on your own feet if necessary?

Please do not misunderstand my reason for asking all these questions. It is not that I want to discourage you or that I do not want you to join us. I want you to come with your eyes open. I can never promise to be successful in training anyone as a teacher, nor can I promise that they will be able to make a living as a teacher afterwards. These are risks that have to be taken in every case, but obviously I feel a greater responsibility for anyone like yourself than for someone at the threshold of life. The difficulties resulting from failure would be much more serious in your case than in the case of someone who enjoyed greater security. It is for this reason that I must be satisfied that all these problems have been thought of and faced before I permit you to join us.

I think that I may have told you that Dilys and I and one or two of the boys are hoping to spend a holiday in Denmark this summer. I am just writing to tell Sue [Sue Laub, Grethe's aunt -ed.] about it although I think that she will probably be away on holiday herself then. I think that I had better also tell her what I have said to you about the Course.

I shall look forward to seeing you on the 28th.

Yours ever,

Walter

Likewise, I was asked to a short private informative session with Walter before being admitted to the training course, where he put forward the terms for joining in much the same way—genuinely although not so overly solemnly—so that one entered the training “with one's eyes open”.

Epilogue

by way of tribute to Walter Carrington

Thinking back on the 1960's, what also comes to mind is the pivotal role of the teachers of that period for the future development of the technique. Especially those who undertook to train teachers (apart from their personal ambitions) must surely have felt a special responsibility, "the burden of message", so to speak. This brings to mind an occasion where I heard Walter Carrington airing in passing something about the "subversive" nature of the technique. I cannot quite recollect on which occasion this was said, all I remember is the remark because I found it very thought-provoking and puzzling—something to muse on. Mulling over it, I came to think that it must have been a reference to F.M.'s provoking utterance "Belief is a matter of muscle tension." On account of its very nature, the technique indeed challenges firmly established beliefs in society because of the change it can bring about in the fixed habitual patterns of muscular use of the individual. As pointed out by Walter on another occasion, teaching experience had again and again shown him that as people begin to let go of their old patterns of tension, they readily abandon views that they so strongly held before their exposure to the lessons.

There is another of Walter's remarks that I found thought-provoking. That was a remark he made in one of his talks. He was referring to a priest he had heard on the radio earlier in the morning who spoke about repenting. Walter remarked that it suddenly occurred to him—that he had "a glimpse of the obvious", as he often expressed it—that "repenting" really was a case of "changing one's standpoint".

"Changing one's standpoint"—taken in the literal sense of changing one's position from which to view a situation—was obviously a thought that occupied Walter because I heard him express the same about growing old. As one grows old, one inevitably changes position in relation to time so growing old is again a case of changing standpoint. Having now reached an advanced age myself, I am often reminded of Walter's wise remark.

The reader will by now have noticed that all the references to Walter in the epilogue have a philosophical slant. I have deliberately chosen to conclude my general portrayal of training at CTC in the 1960s in a tone akin to Walter's philosophical cast of mind. I have always appreciated this side of him and his special ability to so masterly relate the various aspects of the technique to the broad sphere of living, where the technique after all belongs.

Postscript

After qualifying in July 1967, I stayed on for another term and kept coming into class daily while I was given the opportunity to practice at the same time as a teacher in the class, but also in other contexts. Walter was still running evening classes at that time so he asked me to join as a teacher. That was very helpful because I began to teach not entirely on my own but in a congenial and protective environment. The evening class took place once a week.

One day, Walter asked me if I would give a private lesson to a pupil who could not be accommodated in his teaching schedule. The pupil was a big opera singer. I was awed by her size and she by mine that was less imposing so she thought that I wouldn't be able to cope with her. We somehow got over the initial problem of trust and I carried the lesson through, something which from my point of view was an accomplishment, but I was unsure of what she got out of the lesson. So when Walter asked me later how the lesson went, I replied that I didn't think that I had done anything of value for her to which he retorted that you really never know because years later you may experience that the person in a new encounter with you will remember back to that lesson and say to you how helpful it was. That was very encouraging.

During the last year of my training, I had the good fortune of staying in the flat on the first floor at 18 Lansdowne Road, Holland Park—the address of the premises where the school was housed then—doing secretarial work in return for paying no rent. Thus I had on a variety of occasions the opportunity of overhearing Walter making casual remarks. For instance, I remember him sauntering in the classroom while waiting for a private pupil to come, and realizing after some time that the pupil would not be turning up, he exclaimed in a mischievous and nonchalant manner, his face beaming with amusement “Well, I love my pupils the most when they don't turn up!” Secretarial work included answering the phone and noting down appointments for lessons with Walter, letting pupils in, preparing the afternoon tea for Walter in the kitchen on the second floor where Walter and Dilys had their private living space, doing some cleaning, writing on the type-writer once a month the outstanding bills that were to be sent to the pupils. Dilys was the “boss” and I could always turn to her if I was in doubt or encountered any problem. There are many impressions stored in my memory from that year when I studied, worked and lived in the same house

as the Carringtons, but all this is a story that lies outside the scope of the present memoirs.

As requested, I will also relate my personal story of how I got interested in the Alexander Technique and decided to train. Well, briefly, it all came about as the unexpected outcome of an accidental meeting with Jeanne Day (Haahr) in Athens back in the summer of 1962—a matter of chance. At that time, Jeanne was working freelance for a travel bureau in London and visiting its branch in Athens (Greece) where I also happened to work right after finishing high school (having by means of a scholarship completed the last two years of high school at Pierce: The American College for girls, Athens, Greece, a high-ranking private school with a curriculum equivalent to the Greek public school system. This bi-cultural education seemed to be destined to serve as a prelude to my closer involvement with the Anglo-Saxon world in the years to come). It so happened that during that year of working at the travel bureau I came to win a sum of money from a lottery ticket—a matter of luck—which gave me the financial means to embark on a train journey through Europe to London, something that I had been dreaming of for a long time and that was spurred on by my father's interest in sending me abroad for further studies and by my own youthful drive to experience a world beyond my known boundaries. So, in September 1963, “off I went into the wide blue yonder” and arrived in Victoria Station with just one piece of luggage and a couple of addresses in my hand but nothing else prearranged as to studies or where I might stay, nevertheless I found my way around and soon enrolled in courses for the General Certificate of Education that was the requirement for enrolment at a British university. It was during that time that Jeanne often invited me to come and spend a weekend in Guildford at her parents' place where she lived then. So it happened one day, while we were having tea in front of the fireplace, that Jeanne asked me if I could be her Alexander “guinea pig” and I consented. I stood in front of a chair and had my first Alexander experience that affected me very much. I felt a new life dimension was opening up and I instantly knew I wanted to find out more about the process involved. Sometimes, Jeanne was supervised by Winifred Dussek—who lived in the same area—while Jeanne worked on me on the table as I lay in the “semi-supine” resting position. In the ensuing months, I had weekly lessons from Jeanne in my lodgings at Lancaster Gate, and the lessons took place in connection with her daily trips to London to attend the teacher training. By summer 1964, I was ready to join the training course and arrangements were

made for the introductory appointment with Walter that I mentioned earlier in the memoir. So, I did not come to the technique because of any specific problem but because of a general awareness of shortcomings that I could see I could be helped to overcome through the technique.

Footnotes

[1] John Dewey (1859-1952) was an American philosopher—often referred to as “the father of American Education”. Dewey wrote introductions to three of F.M. Alexander’s books and made specific references to Alexander in his book *Human Nature and Conduct*, in the chapter “Habit and Will”. He met Alexander during World War I in New York and had his first lesson then at the age of fifty. He continued his involvement with the Alexander Technique until he died. An interesting thesis from 1958 with the title “Frederick Matthias Alexander and John Dewey: A Neglected Influence” by Eric David McCormack can be downloaded from the internet. Interesting reading are also Dewey’s article “A Sick World”, published in *The New Republic*, 1923 and his lecture “Preoccupation with the Disconnected” given to the New York Academy of Medicine, 1928.

[2] Frank Pierce Jones (1905-1975) began his career as a classical scholar but, after training in 1941-1944 with F.M. Alexander and F.M.'s brother A.R. Alexander, he followed a path, along with teaching the Technique, as a scientific researcher setting up pilot research studies at the Institute for Applied Psychology at Tufts University, Boston, Mass. to examine the physiological correlates of the kinaesthetic effects of lessons in Alexander's technique. His first paper was published in 1949, and he continued his research until his death. He published more than twenty scientific papers most of which are found in the volume *F.P. Jones: Collected Writings on the Alexander Technique*. He is also author of the book *Freedom to Change*, which is a comprehensive introduction to the Alexander Technique.

[3] Raymond Dart (1893-1988) was a renowned palaeoanthropologist and anatomy professor at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1922-1958. Motivated by lessons he had in Johannesburg from Alexander Technique teacher Irene Tasker in connection with a neck injury he incurred in a diving accident, he wrote the following three articles on anatomy that are much valued in the Alexander community of teachers and have given rise to the so called "Dart procedures":

- a) The Attainment of Poise
- b) Voluntary Musculature in the Human Body: The Double-Spiral Arrangement
- c) The Postural Aspect of Mal-occlusion

[4] Alex and Joan Murray have been running a training course at The Alexander Technique Center in Urbana, Illinois since 1977. During the same period Alex worked as professor of flute at the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana from where he retired in 2002. His exploration of the Alexander Technique has lasted ever since his first acquaintance with it, and he has written books and articles on it as well as on Raymond Dart's influence. For more information see: www.atcu.us

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I would like to thank Alex and Joan Murray for reading through the memoir and reporting back as to the accuracy of the information I am giving about Alex and his involvement with Dart. Besides their endorsement of the accuracy of that particular information, I was heartened to read that the memoir had indeed made them “relive those fertile years” at CTC. I should not miss this opportunity to say how much I appreciated Joan’s teaching in the class in those years: each “turn” from her was precious and a treat.

Many thanks also to my colleague and friend Joe Armstrong from Boston for lending an ear to my various considerations regarding the memoir. He trained a couple of years later than me at CTC and has therefore got a clear understanding of what those years signified. I also want to thank him for his editing suggestions.

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About the author

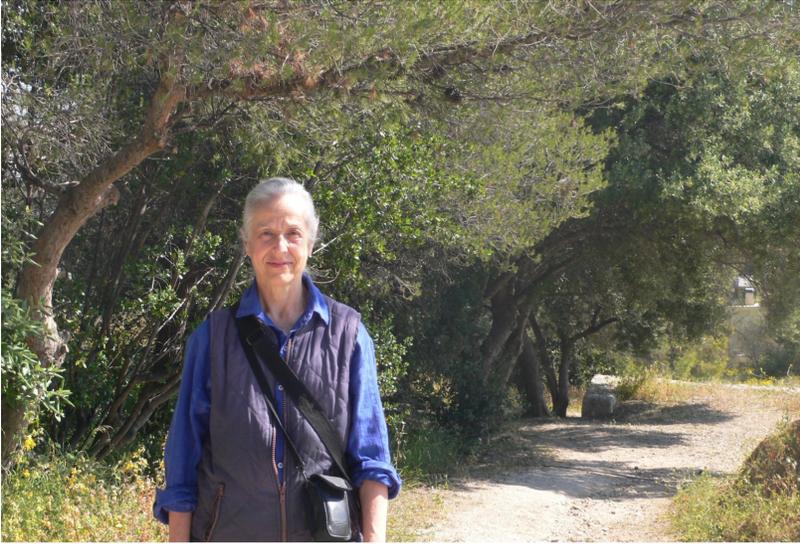


photo spring 2017 ■ Athens (Greece)

Chariclia Gounaris qualified as a teacher of the Alexander Technique from CTC in 1967.

- taught the technique in Denmark for forty consecutive years
- ran teacher training courses in Denmark between 1979-1993
- founded Novis Publications in Denmark in 1995
- prime mover in setting up the Danish Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (DFLAT) in the 1980s

Presently, she does much less teaching, enjoys living and still works on publishing projects.

Colophon

Alexander Teacher Training in the 1960s at the Constructive Teaching Centre in London.

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