

Published April 1994 by

STAT Books
– The books division of
The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique
20 London House
266 Fulham Road
London SW10 9EL

Directing and Ordering:
A Discussion of Working on Yourself
© Joe Armstrong 1988

Working on Breathing and Vocal Production
© Joe Armstrong 1989

ISBN 0-9519304-1-9 Paperback

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Photoset in Adobe Goudy and lay-out by Jean M. O. Fischer

Printed in Great Britain by
Creeds, Broadoak, Dorset, England

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Acknowledgement

I would like to mention my gratitude to Mr. Henry G. Pearson
for his invaluable assistance in editing these articles.

J. Armstrong
Boston, April, 1993

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Directing and Ordering: A Discussion of Working on Yourself

“Working on yourself” involves taking an extended period of time on your own solely to promote the integration of your self as a whole, as distinct from applying the principles of inhibition and direction of the primary control to specific daily activities. Of course, both processes overlap and can reinforce each other. However, working on yourself on your own is the side of the Technique which is most neglected, if not ignored completely, in both the writing and the teaching of it. Focus in teaching is usually placed on applying the principles of the Technique to the activities of daily life or upon the cumulative effects and changes brought about by a teacher’s hands during a lesson. Most pupils and even many teachers are at a real loss when it comes to the process of working on themselves. Actually, it should be one of the main things learned in a course of lessons — not to mention in a teachers’ training course. Unfortunately, much of the controversy in the past few years over group teaching vs. private teaching has obscured the subject of working on yourself even further.

In my private teaching and teacher-training classes I have tried to find better ways to articulate and clarify this facet of the Technique. In this search, I have met with a certain degree of success, but I am sure that what I have done in this realm is only a beginning. This paper, then, is basically a record of my thinking and teaching over the last fifteen years with regard to working on yourself and the ways it can be presented to pupils. I hope it can be of some use both to pupils and to teachers.

Purposes for Working on Yourself

There are at least six purposes for working on yourself. All six can be accomplished at once, though, if that is your intention.

1. To retrieve your standard of use after meeting a demand or when fatigued after a period of stress.
2. To maintain the conditions of use that you might have already achieved through lessons in combination with your own work on yourself and your application of the principles of the Technique to daily life.
3. To prepare for meeting a demand.
Several considerations come into play here. They include the length of time you may need to take in relation to the degree of the demand you have to meet and in relation to the state of your conditions when you begin this particular period of work on yourself.
4. To continue meeting the demand of an activity you have already been engaging in.
This involves taking enough time to work on yourself so that your basic standard of use is not lost while continuing to meet the demand.
5. To assimilate and continue with what you may have gained in a specific session of work with a teacher.
The time immediately following the lesson or "turn" may be the most important time for assimilating what you have received.
6. To achieve further progress on your own in improving your conditions of use and to make progress in relation to your general growth and development.

This also includes working on yourself in order to deal better with a particular immediate problem that might require careful judgment in resolving, or in order to deal more objectively and effectively with issues from the past, such as are brought to the fore in psychoanalysis.

Becoming more in touch with your reasoning (Alexander's phrase), as well as reaffirming and strengthening a particular life direction, also fit into this possibility.

Directing and Ordering

Whether working on yourself for one or all of the above purposes, the process involves what Alexander called "directing" or "ordering". He did not make a distinction between the two terms in his writings, nor do most of the senior teachers who trained with him. Sometimes teachers use the terms to refer to a silent, verbal process, and sometimes they use the terms to mean a totally non-verbal process. In my experience, while working with a number of teachers who knew Alexander personally and had extensive work from him, I have found a lot of controversy and discrepancy over the definition of these two terms and over how they should be understood and used in the teaching situation or when advising pupils on how to carry on by themselves with the Technique. Some teachers are opposed to any silent saying of the words of the directions, while others feel that it should be an integral part of learning the Technique. Later I will give examples of various perspectives on the use of "directing" or "ordering", but for purposes of clarity I would like to begin by making a distinction between the two terms.

I prefer to use the word "directing" to mean the completely non-verbal form of projecting an intention for a lengthening or freeing to occur in a certain way in a certain part of the self.

I use "ordering" to represent the silent, but verbal saying of the directions or orders to oneself. (This is distinct from the saying aloud of the orders or directions by the teacher for the pupil in a lesson.)

Direction

The purpose of either "directing" or "ordering" is to produce *direction* in one or more parts of you which can be integrated into the whole upward-going, anti-gravity response — whatever position or activity you may be involved in. Direction might be described as a certain kind of enlivened muscle tonus. However, it might even extend to effecting a change primarily on a cellular level. No-one has shown physiologi-

cally what direction actually is, but biofeedback research on the control of single cell activity appears to involve something similar to the process of directing which results in direction. The leading expert on biofeedback, Barbara Brown, describes the process in her book *Supermind* (pp. 258–259):

The mind-brain has to project what the result should be, so the goal itself should be predefined.

This is a very complex operation of mind, turning intention into action. The mind uses information to produce, effectively and efficiently, an ordered alteration of biological activity. The cells, the chemistry, the electrical traffic of the central nervous system are all directed to proceed orderly and efficiently to accomplish a predetermined objective that is still in the mind's eye. The result of this action is control, a voluntary control that changes physiologic activity in such a way that the changes are compatible not only with what the instructions call for, but also with the maximal precision the biological system is capable of — the finest possible discrimination of biological activity — changing the activity of a single cell.⁹

Alexander tried to clarify the concepts of “directing” and “direction” when he wrote of “the whole question of the direction of the use of myself” in *The Use of the Self*, p. 20:

When I employ the words “direction” and “directed” with “use” in such phrases as “direction of my use” and “I directed the use”, etc., I wish to indicate the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of the mechanisms.²

But he came even closer by distinguishing the process from the results in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, p. 122:

... he (the pupil) must learn to give the correct mental orders to the mechanisms involved, and there must be a clear differentiation in his mind between the giving of the order and the performance of the act ordered and carried out through the medium of the muscles.

Suppose I have requested the pupil to order the spine to

lengthen and the neck to relax. If, instead of merely framing and holding the desire in his mind, he attempts the physical performance of these acts, he will invariably stiffen the muscles of his neck and shorten his spine, since these are the movements habitually associated in his mind with lengthening his spine, and the muscles will contract in accordance with the old sensations. In effect it will be seen that in this, as in all other cases, stress must be laid on the point that it is the means and not the end which must be considered.¹

Directions and Orders

The terms “directions” and “orders” signify the word-phrases which refer to the parts of us that Alexander claimed we need to attend to in order to facilitate the most integrated use of ourselves. When these word-phrases are “given” or when the intention of them is projected, they constitute the process he called “the primary control”. Whether projected verbally or non-verbally, the word-phrases fall in the following sequences:

1. Neck free
2. Head forward and up
3. Back to lengthen and widen
4. Knees forward and away *

*In the 1923 edition of *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, Alexander phrases the directions:

Order the neck to relax,
the head to go forward and up to
lengthen the spine, (p. 111).

(Widening of the back appears later, p.115):

I have never heard any of the senior teachers Alexander trained, whom I know, use the phrase, “Neck to relax” for instructing a pupil or student; so I assume that he

Alexander used to say that the directions were to be projected one after the other and all together. He describes the process on p. 59 in *The Use of the Self*:

This process is analogous to the firing of a machine-gun from an airplane, where the machinery is so co-ordinated that each individual shot of the series is timed to pass between the blades of a propeller making 1,500 or more revolutions to the minute.²

There have been various ways of altering the phrases of the directions slightly so as to make them more effective. Often you hear teachers phrasing them:

Let the neck be free,

to let the head go forward and up,

must have changed the phrase to "neck free" during the years after he wrote *Constructive Conscious Control*, since all these teachers use "neck free" unanimously even though they differ in many other ways in their teaching. "Relax" and "relaxation" are usually avoided or strongly denounced as part of the teaching vocabulary because they imply "collapse" to most beginning pupils. Senior teachers also pretty consistently speak of the back "lengthening and widening" in one phrase when they teach. The word "spine" seems to have been discarded for the most part too. However, I have more recently heard teachers trained by Mr. Macdonald use the phrases "the separation between the head and neck" and "the upthrust of the spine" instead of "neck free" and "back to lengthen and widen". These teachers claim that Mr. Macdonald is uniquely able to elicit a "thrust along the spine", and they seem to find it significantly more effective than what they receive from most other teachers who focus on the "back lengthening and widening" as a whole. I have found it difficult to pin these teachers down, however, as to whether "upthrust of the spine" is merely a metaphor for "lengthening of the spine" or if it is a different phenomenon that Mr. Macdonald has developed in his own teaching.

Frank Pierce Jones' research on the "startle pattern" corroborates Alexander's choice of the particular sequence of the directions. Electromyograph readings show that most reactions start at neck level and pass down the trunk and limbs in a fraction of a second. Sometimes milder reactions happen in the neck and nowhere else. Many people seem to overlook the fact that Alexander saw his work mainly as a way of dealing with reaction, rather than as a movement technique or as "body-work". He defines it most succinctly in *The Universal Constant in Living*, p. 114:

"My technique is based on inhibition, the inhibition of undesirable, unwanted responses to stimuli, and hence it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction."

to let the back lengthen and widen,

and to let the knees go forward and away.

Following is a discussion of various views on the possible uses of the directions and orders.

Discussion

"Directing" was described to me by my first teachers as "thinking" as opposed to attempting to "do" something to achieve a result in the neck-head-back relationship. Sometimes "directing" was also explained as "wishing", but never as "imagining" or "visualizing". I find the words "attention" and "intention" or "intending" useful in my own teaching as explanations of "directing". An "act of attention *alone*" is very effective in the first lesson situation as a phrase describing the process. I usually use an illustration from my 1975 master's thesis⁵ to give beginning pupils an example of directing. I ask them to be aware of the direction one of their fingers is already pointing while their hands are resting on their lap or on the arms of a chair. Then, while leaving the hand and finger still, I ask them merely to "think of" or "imagine" that finger pointing *more* in the direction it is already pointing. They usually notice a subtle change in the resilience of the finger, without actually having "done" anything.

I was never taught the silent, verbal "ordering" in my early years of private lessons with various teachers, including Joan Murray, Walter Carrington and Frank Pierce Jones, nor was ordering taught in the teachers' training class I attended. In fact, any use of the word-phrases silently was very much frowned upon there. However, Dr. Barlow describes the use of words for teaching in his book *The Alexander Technique*, p. 172. Here is his account of it:

... information about USE is conveyed by manual adjustment on the part of the teacher, and it involves learning a new mental pattern in the form of a sequence of words which are taught to the pupil, and which he learns to associate with the new muscular use he is being taught by the manual adjustment. He learns to

project this new pattern to himself not only while he is being taught but when he is on his own.⁶

It isn't clear here whether the words should be used silently or *how* the pattern is projected while pupils are on their own. Later (p. 175) Dr. Barlow writes of a first lesson:

The teacher places both his hands at the sides of the neck and asks the pupil to say to himself the words "neck free, head forward and out" (or, if standing or sitting, "forward and up").⁶

This approach to teaching was objected to by my teachers as a form of "conditioning", and I was inclined to agree with them then. The extreme opposite approach, which was how I was taught, is simply to give pupils the experience first and wait until much later to try to get them to participate in any further way than merely leaving themselves as free as possible (i.e. "inhibiting") to be directed and moved by the teacher. In retrospect, this also seems like a form of conditioning to me. I recall my great shock several months after having my first series of lessons (nearly every day for a whole summer) when all the wonderful feeling of "up" and direction suddenly left me. I remember exactly where I was and what I was doing at that moment, and there was absolutely nothing that I knew how to do to re-establish for myself the better conditions of my use. I understood that the effect came from a certain use of my neck in relation to my head going forward and up and my back lengthening and widening, but, of course, whatever I tried to "do" with my neck, head and back only made matters worse. Finally I gave up until the following summer when I could have another series of lessons. In the first lesson of that next summer the direction quickly came back though, and I had enough lessons during that period to see me through the rigors of army life for the next three years. Somehow I had learned to "think" the directions and they maintained, to a certain degree, the condition that had been cultivated by my teacher's hands and words in the lessons.

There are only a few other written accounts of teaching besides Dr. Barlow's which give us any clues to the ways words can be used. Patrick Macdonald says something similar to Dr. Barlow in his 1967 lecture to the Alexander Society called "On Giving Directions, Doing and Non-doing":

Giving directions, then, is not and cannot be the same for a new pupil as it is for one of a few weeks, months or years experience of the Technique. For the new pupil, directions start merely as words. These should be learnt by heart, in the proper order, and they should gain in content with time, experience and the frequent application of the teacher's hands. They must progress from being merely words to a release of force, which acts in certain ways along certain paths. The words therefore, turn into acts, but acts of a very delicate and subtle kind which are not to be confused with the ordinary kind of activity commonly called "a physical act".¹⁴

Mr. Macdonald doesn't explicitly say that the directions are to be said by the pupil silently or aloud, just that, at first, they are words.

It wasn't until I began questioning Kitty Wielopolska more specifically about how she taught that I found an account of "ordering" that was more complete. Kitty had private lessons with Alexander for several years before she attended his first teachers' training course in the early 1930s, later retraining with Patrick Macdonald in the 1960s. She had often used the expression "ordering" in our conversations about the Alexander work, and I knew that she spent extended periods of time seated in front of a mirror working on herself which she called "ordering". But I always assumed that she meant the same thing by "ordering" that I had understood as the non-verbal "directing". When I asked Kitty to describe how she explains "directing" in an introductory lesson, she said:

I say the direction, or order, or request must be put into words, silent, but verbal, in the head. It must be a word. It can't be a mere thought.

I try to illustrate it by saying that when you start to get up in the morning you're sort of reviewing the day and you think, "I've got to do this, and I've got to do that; but I *must not forget to stop at the post office.*" And then *that* goes into words. *That* is important. You actually *talk* to yourself about certain things, and the rest is just a vague sort of smear. You may be making a casual list as you get dressed, in your mind, of the things you want to do, but the important thing, buying the stamps ... it is definitely put into words.

When I'm teaching a first lesson, I want to emphasize the

necessity of the word immediately, as F.M. did with me in my first lesson.

In the early part of the century there was no idea current that the body has its own intelligence. Now it's a more accepted fact. If you instruct the body, through verbal directions and give them kindly as one would to an intelligent child, the intelligence which has never been appealed to comes alive, and the creation of a psycho-physical whole commences. Several things can impede this psycho-physical growth. One is that if the pupil visualizes, it is, again, what *his* intelligence *thinks* the body should do. In reality, he has no idea how, for example, the back should "widen" at any particular time, or indeed at any time; but when left to its own intelligence, its own knowledge, it can proceed to carry out a request as it wishes. I think courtesy in instructing the body is important ... even to the point of saying, "Please ..."¹⁶

Kitty definitely presents "ordering" here in a way which distinguishes the process from the results, as Alexander does in the quote above about the clear differentiation in the pupil's mind between "the giving of the order and the performance of the act ordered and carried out through the mechanisms of the muscles".

Barbara Brown's biofeedback research seems to support all of what Kitty says about the "body's intelligence". Here is an extensive quote from her chapter of *Supermind*, "The Intellect of the Unconscious", pp. 263-264:

One of the most striking features of the biofeedback phenomenon, particularly exemplified in the learned control of nerve-muscle cells, is the consummate orderliness with which the learning is accomplished. With no more than the mechanical representation of the muscle cells' activity and an explicit or implicit command to control those cells, somehow mental mechanisms execute the instructions with remarkable precision and remarkable rapidity. The result is an *ordered* alteration of physiological activity. Through the brain's neural networks of trillions of nerve connections, exactly those nerve filaments and their chemistry and electrical behaviour are selected and directed to proceed with incredible efficiency to accomplish an objective still in the "mind's eye".

The rapidity, the specificity, and the efficiency with which this learning occurs (sometimes within two minutes or less) imply the existence of a mechanism for ordering the most molecular of the

body's physiologic activities toward a new objective conceived and defined by the mind-brain's intellectual functions. This ordering action, moreover, *takes precedence over the effects of all spontaneous or automatic activity*, and is a strong indication that the mind-brain possesses a separate function capable of evoking and putting into effect orders for physiologic activity to follow, orders specifically tailored by either the mind-brain's own resources or by another of the mind's self-governing faculties. Since the result of the ordering process is completely compatible with the intention to change the physiologic activity and even though consciously there is no knowledge of how to proceed, the result is the most precise and parsimonious use of the available physiologic mechanisms. One can now begin to think in terms of some highly developed innate qualities of the mind-brain complex, one of which could be called a sense of order.

A sense of order can be distinguished from other evolved senses that are subconsciously appreciated only. A sense of order is an awareness of the sequence of proceeding, and implies an ability to sense how things *will* fit as contrasted to a sense of continuity, or that things *do* fit, once fitted. It is also different from a sense of harmony, which is the sensation and awareness of the appropriateness of elements to a particular pattern. A sense of order implies *an innate ability to anticipate orderly sequences*.⁸

Kitty did not give me the account described above of presenting ordering until 1979. Since 1972, we had worked together often, and she would frequently say the directions, or orders, aloud while working on me. Sometimes she would even have new "special orders", as she called them, to give each time we got together — like the "eye orders" described in her lecture with Mario Passaglini for ACAT teachers and students. When Kitty spoke the orders aloud for me, something deeper happened in my conditions of use than when we were engaged in regular conversation while we worked. It also had a much deeper effect than I would receive when other experienced teachers merely asked me to "think" the directions in a lesson, or when they would murmur the orders softly, over and over, like a chant. Kitty's voice became fuller and richer than normal conversational tone when she said the orders aloud for me, and this quality of voice seemed to make it more possible for me to "receive" the effect of the direction from her hands as she worked on me. There was also an unobtrusive quality in the way she

said the “orders”, perhaps because she said them as if they were for herself as well as for me. She would say, “My neck to be free ... my head ... etc.” In a way, it was as if she were providing my own “internal” voice with reinforcement by saying the orders for me as though I were saying them silently for myself. This direct experience of her work in those earlier years greatly supported the explanation of “ordering” she gave me in 1979.

Until then, I had felt there was little value in working on myself any more extensively than by occasionally lying on the floor and “directing” or non-verbally “thinking” the directions when I was fatigued. I had carried with me such a strong effect from my training experience that my direction was a constant which manifested itself powerfully in every waking moment and even in sleep. It seemed that no kind of calamity or effort could possibly destroy this constancy. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, my confidence was unfounded.

During 1980 I began to suffer from the recurrence of a kidney problem which I thought I had overcome completely during my training. At first it only gave me periodic bouts of pain, but as the year went on there were more and more frequent occurrences. Even strong pain-killers could not stop the pain; but because I had a fairly good standard of use as a result of my training, I could recover from the initial attacks fairly quickly and resume my teaching the following day as if nothing had happened. Eventually, however, the continued recurrence of pain began to wear me down and to destroy my ability to retain better conditions of use by merely “thinking” the directions or by “wishing” them. I could “think” the directions for all I was worth, but the “thinking” just didn’t get through enough.

Since it was then difficult for me to go where I could have extensive lessons with an advanced teacher to retrieve my conditions of use, I began to experiment with the approach to ordering that Kitty had explained to me. It made a remarkable difference. No matter how destructive a bout of pain I had, by ordering I could always bring myself back to a baseline standard of use and could manage to continue my private teaching practice and training of teachers, until I could have surgery to correct the problem.

Shortly after this success with ordering, I decided to try to pass it on to my pupils in case it might help them in their own work on themselves. At first I gave it only to pupils who had had lessons for

several years and who already spent a certain amount of time working on themselves as best they could. I had been rather dissatisfied with teaching up to that time because, no matter how much pupils tried to carry through with what I taught them, they would lose more over the course of the week between lessons than I felt they should.

The results that these experienced pupils had with ordering were striking. They felt it offered them an enormous boost in organising their own work on themselves so that they could actually improve their conditions on their own at last. I soon began introducing ordering to beginning pupils in about the third or fourth lesson, and today I consider it a vital part of my teaching.

No doubt there could still be much debate on the validity of “ordering” and whether it should be used either in teaching or working on oneself. I discussed the use of silent verbal orders with Walter Carrington in 1983 after he had read Kitty Wielopolska’s explanation of ordering that I quoted above, and he was very much against having pupils use words non-vocally in this way. Walter did concede that, at times, he does use words silently when working on himself; but he didn’t describe exactly how. Likewise, in a talk on the directions which he gave in 1972 at the end of my training, he alludes to the possibility that others might sometimes, somehow, put the directions, or orders, into words. But perhaps he was referring only to those of us in the training class who had had a great deal of experience with the Technique. He said in the talk:

We have seen that we live in a gravitational field. It is essential for us, therefore, to go up against gravity. But of course gravity is operating all the time, and because this is a constant factor in our lives, we need the constant reminder to go up. So when you look at the directions, or orders, they are not just something that you remember from time to time, that are given at the critical moment, that are just applicable now and then. You don’t pronounce them all the time. You don’t necessarily put them into words all the time. It is because you understand this and the concept that they are part of your attitude to life, what you want. And when you get it to that stage, you have got it made. And until you get it to that stage, you haven’t.

With the ordinary pupil you can’t expect to get direction. You can only hope to get a little inhibition. Gradually from the

inhibition you begin to get the first taste of direction. Both inhibition and direction will be extremely intermittent and extremely precarious.¹⁰

In the same conversation with Walter about Kitty's approach to teaching ordering I asked him if he still finds it important to take special time to work on himself, even though he has had so many years of experience in the Technique. He said that he definitely does find it important to take this kind of special time, particularly because of the rigorous demands of his teaching schedule. He said that, if for some unexpected reason the time he usually sets aside for working on himself just before his afternoon teaching is cut short, then he finds it much more difficult to meet the demands of the rest of the day's work.

I also asked Walter if he knew whether F.M. needed to "work on himself" in his later years. Walter said that he certainly did, and quoted F.M. as saying, "If I weren't such an old fool, I'd spend a hell of a lot more time working on myself than I do, particularly during the holidays." Walter also mentioned then that he thought it was definitely important to allow for more time to work on ourselves as we get older. He said that he particularly likes to take extra time, for instance, before he goes out riding, to get himself going as well as possible, and that he sometimes does this while seated in a saddle on a wooden saw horse he uses for teaching the students in his training course.

Another senior teacher of mine, Peggy Williams, reinforces Walter's opinion against silent verbal ordering. In a recent interview she says, "It was only when I stopped giving the orders to myself that I really began to understand what it [the Technique] was all about. That was the day when I suddenly decided I'd give up, and it was then that I stopped making this frenzied, silent verbalizing."¹⁷ Peggy also says in the interview that she had not been taught how to use the words by Alexander himself, but that the other teachers used them and she assumed she should too.

Frank Pierce Jones, with whom I also worked extensively, didn't make much distinction between the terms "directing" and "ordering" either. He makes some interesting comments on the topic in the last chapter of his book, *Body Awareness in Action*. He writes on page 157:

My pupils learn to use conscious direction and inhibition

without verbalizing it. After they have acquired sufficient confidence in their own thinking and are able to give attention to what they are doing without end-gaining, they can use words for "keeping close track of what is going on," as John Dewey put it, "words as names certainly being the great clinchers in an operation."

I found directions (directing my neck to relax, my head to go forward and up, etc.) useful at a certain stage in learning the technique, especially when my mind wandered and I floated off in a stream of associations, or when I was distracted by some pain or discomfort and had difficulty giving my full attention to the technique. Soon, however, they took on a ritualistic quality and began to lose their effectiveness. I found that I was verbally giving directions but nothing was happening. A.R. [F.M.'s brother] made me realize that directions alone were not the equivalent of thinking in activity but that something beyond words was needed.¹¹

Of course Frank was referring here mainly to the process of applying the principles of the Technique to daily life and not to the specific practice of working on yourself. I worked with him before I trained to become a teacher and for three years afterward, and I never knew him to suggest to people to take a special extended period of time to regain or improve their conditions of use on their own. He seldom even recommended that pupils lie down on the floor in the traditional way that most other teachers do. His main concern was to demonstrate to people that the Technique could be incorporated into any activity. By this time in his teaching career he had completely dispensed with "chair work" per se, though he might work with a pupil from sitting to standing and later back to sitting again simply as one of a number of ordinary activities. Frank never did "table work" while I knew him and did not have a table where he taught in the front parlor of his apartment, which had no special Alexander teaching "arrangement" to it at all.

Summary of Discussion

Whether working on ourselves by ordering or by directing, or whether working on ourselves at all, we are still brought back to the main goal of the Technique — a "universal constant in living" — i.e. a constant

conscious direction which, if we are clear enough about the above distinctions between “directing” and “ordering”, would not and could not actually be the verbal ordering. It is our job as teachers to help pupils develop this constant conscious direction; and I see “working on yourself” as an *aid*, an important aid, to *achieving* this ability, which can include either “directing” or “ordering”, or both.

Ideally it would be preferable if we didn’t have to work on ourselves at all. I would rather not have to ask pupils and students to do so, and I believe that there is a condition of use that can be achieved which renders unnecessary and superfluous any working on yourself beyond the constant maintenance of direction, as Alexander phrased it, “in reaction to the stimulus of living.” (Preface to the 1946 edition of *The Universal Constant in Living*). Many of us have experienced this condition of use as a result of having three years of daily work in a teachers’ training course: but most of the time regular pupils, and most students in training, need all the help they can get in improving and maintaining their conditions of use, especially if they are up against a very poor standard of use in themselves or difficult external stimuli.

If pupils have frequent access to a trained teacher’s hands, they might get along fine, perhaps, without taking any special time outside lessons for working on themselves; but, after a while, when they stop having regular work from a teacher, they often lose the effect of the lessons and do not know either how to improve their conditions on their own or even how to maintain the standard they’ve gained from the lessons. Ultimately, I think pupils should be provided with a means of working on themselves whereby they could dispense forever with having work from another person’s hands.

I am not suggesting people necessarily give up *ever* having work from another person. I think that another person’s hands may always be able to offer something that people cannot provide for themselves. But the kind of dependence on work from a teacher that most pupils and many teachers still seem to be trapped by is not consistent with the ideal of “constructive control of the individual” that Alexander charged us to achieve. Perhaps a lot of this dependence comes from such emphasis on the Technique as a way of bringing about a change through the teacher’s skilled hands, which, certainly, can be a most phenomenal experience on the pupil’s part. It is often so astounding what skilled and experienced teachers can do for a pupil that there is

a great temptation just to leave the function of the Technique at that stage, whereas that experience should only be the beginning, only an exhortation to the pupil to learn ultimately how to bring him or herself to a better state without the teacher’s hands — and, perhaps, even to go far beyond what the teacher can give. Following are some suggestions for applying the skills of directing and ordering to working on yourself.

Procedure I: Ordering

To use ordering in working on yourself, I recommend that you memorize the orders just as you would the script of a Shakespeare play. Do not alter the words in any way. Give the orders while you are basically still, either lying down, seated or standing. Try not to have any distractions around, and take a period of ten to twenty minutes in which you can say the whole series of orders a number of times in an unhurried way. If you are sitting or standing, try to select a view which you can look out upon, keeping your vision alive and active so that you don’t drift inwardly into sensation or fantasy. Never focus on one object or point for very long. Try to allow for more and more of the scene before you to unfold and deepen in terms of textures, colours, light, shadow, depth, and breadth. (See Aldous Huxley’s *The Art of Seeing*.¹¹) Then say the orders silently, slowly, and non-vocally to yourself as they are written below, leaving a few seconds’ pause where the dots occur between each group of words:

My neck to be free

My head to go forward and up

My back to lengthen and widen

My knees to go forward and up to the ceiling (or, forward and away, when sitting or standing)

Go through this series several times before pausing to rest. This should be enough to produce a change in your conditions. However, I usually suggest to beginning pupils a slightly altered form of the phrasing and go into a detailed explanation so that there is a chance for the deepest possible effect. First, I have pupils sit down and write out the orders as I dictate them. Somehow it makes a difference for pupils to write out the orders themselves rather than receiving them from me already written out. I also work on pupils while I am dictating so that they can be engaged in keeping as much direction going in themselves as possible while writing. This way the words of the orders they are writing have some chance to register right at the time they are writing. I also make sure to dictate the phrases slowly enough that pupils don't have to end-gain too much in their writing. Here is the altered form of orders:

1. My neck to be free
2. For the direction to come forward
 into my face. . . . and up into the
 top of my head
3. For my whole back to lengthen
 and widen
4. For my knees to go forward and up to the
 ceiling (forward and away)

I explain that Alexander's original phrasing of the second order was "head forward and up" or "head to go forward and up", and I say that I have taken the liberty of changing this phrase so that it doesn't imply a movement of the head through space forward and up. Most beginning pupils inevitably try to do something with the head to find a "right position" when they direct or order the head "to go forward and up": so

it is worth taking special care to by-pass this tendency. Later, after pupils have had more experience through lessons, they can substitute "head to go forward and up" for "the direction to come forward into my face and up into the top of my head". I try to make it clear that an internal change is what we are looking for, not a position, right relationship, or right alignment although relationship of parts might change as a secondary effect.

Immediately after I have finished dictating the orders for pupils to write out, I take them on the table in the regular way and then proceed to explain to them how I want them to use the orders on their own. Then I actually say the orders aloud for them, asking them not to try to do anything to carry the orders out. If they like, they can repeat the orders silently after me, or simply let the words be heard and nothing more. I explain that the orders should be said in the special way that Kitty describes and not just rapidly over and over. I give the example that she gave me about getting up in the morning and putting the important thing that you must do that day into specific words that you silently say to yourself in a different way than when you "think of" other less important things more casually. You remember you have to feed the dog, bring in the newspaper, get some gas, buy a new pair of shoes, and those thoughts may remain only as images of the dog, the paper, the gas station, the shoe store; but that important letter, that has to get to the post office by eleven o'clock, is often put into a fully "voiced" inner sentence or phrase of words. Sometimes, for a musician, I say that it is like the difference between merely having a tune running through your head and actually "thinking through" or "hearing" a phrase of music that you are working on for performance just as you would like it to sound in its most perfect rendering.

The most important thing to get across to pupils is that saying the orders in this way is not to be done in a hurried or automatic and mindless repetition, like: my-neck-to-be-free-my-neck-to-be-free-my-neck-to-be-free...

When teaching pupils this way of ordering, I say the orders aloud in a clear, full voice as naturally and as pleasantly as I can, without forcing or contriving a special tone or inflection. As long as I think of saying the orders *for* the pupil, rather than to him or her, the tone of my voice usually communicates a quality that the pupil can easily go along

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with. It is not in any way a persuasive or hypnotic quality of voice, nor is it persuasive, dull or monotonous. Simply full and alive. I say the orders aloud exactly as I have written them above on page 18, and I especially remember to take time to pause between each group of words so they have the best chance to register, or "get through". Sometimes I even say "pause" aloud where the dots occur between the groups of words as they are written.

I go through the whole series by saying aloud each order five times before passing on to the following one. This also gives a better chance for each order to get through than if it is said only once. After going through the series of orders saying each order five times, I go back to the beginning and repeat the whole series again in the same way. When I have finished, I then say that this is how I'd like the pupil to work with the orders at home. I suggest stopping to rest after doing two connected series and then going on to do two more connected series, taking about twenty minutes for the whole process.

I emphasize that I don't want pupils to try to seek a one-to-one correlation between each order and the part (neck, head, back, or knees) that it pertains to. The neck may not *actually* free until you get to the knees, or until you have ordered the whole series in this way for several days, weeks or months. You are not *seeking* an immediate result, and you must not stop and say, "Let's see if this order actually made my neck any freer. I'll just move my head around a little to find out for sure." However, you are welcome to *notice* whatever might happen as a result of ordering at any time during the process. Certainly, if it is leading you to a stiffening, or holding, or into some kind of trance-like state, you want to notice that and consider how you could alter your tone, or speed, so as not to provoke such a negative reaction. (Sometimes, if pupils are extremely end-gaining, I ask them only to use the nouns of the orders and leave out the verbs so they keep themselves as far away from "doing" as possible.)

Frank Jones' comment on the use of words is significant here, even though he is not referring to a special period of working on yourself. He says (pp. 157-8):

There are two difficulties inherent in the use of words for learning the Alexander Technique. First, they can get in the way of observing and act as a substitute for thought. Feedback is an

essential part of the technique. If you are not allowing your spine to lengthen while you are making some response, there will be a decrease of freedom in your movements. In that case it is important to be aware of what is happening so that you can re-establish your control, but if you are saying directions to yourself you may miss what is happening because the directions have become an end in themselves. Second, words carry connotations with them from earlier experiences. Such words as "relax," "forward and up," "lengthen and widen," already have meanings that may get in the way and prevent you from having new experiences....

The Alexander Technique might be defined as a method for knowing simultaneously what you are not doing as well as what you are doing — knowing, for example, that you are not interfering with the "primary control" while you are talking, listening or thinking, using the term in the sense of "problem solving" or ratiocinating." ("Verbal orders" would be bound to interfere with all three of these activities.)¹²

Since I agree with this point of Frank's, I think it is important to relegate "ordering" only to "working on yourself" and not try to do it while engaging in other activities, at least not activities which require verbalized thinking or specific activity of the imagination, such as speaking, musical performance, or other creative activities. However, I do like to use ordering sometimes while I'm doing something that has a regular on-going rhythm to it, such as running, swimming and walking which don't require any other particular verbal thinking to be done well. I also find it useful to do ordering while working on specific technical aspects of playing a musical instrument, for instance while doing long bowings on a string instrument, or long tones on a wind instrument. But I exclude verbal ordering *entirely* when an expressive intention is present in the playing. That is not to say that I stop "directing" in the non-verbal way. The same use of ordering might apply for working on certain elements of dance.

To support my choice of saying the orders for the pupil with the pauses in between the subjects and verbs of the phrases, I refer here to a quote from Mario Passaglini, psychologist and neuro-physiologist, in Kitty's talk on the "eye orders" to the ACAT teachers and students I mentioned before:

You have two parts to the order. The noun tells you where the action is going to take place. It is helpful to place that action where it is to occur. You think “my eyes”. So you think where it is. Then you leave the verb [of the order: “free to widen and see from the point of vision”] alone. The verb is actually doing the work. The verb is setting in motion those natural connections that will allow that relationship between brain and muscles to flow back to where it was. Do not interpret the verb. Say the verb and let the verb work.¹⁵

“Special orders” may be useful to supplement the basic orders. Kitty and Mario claimed the “eye orders” can be useful as a preliminary to the primary orders — especially since the eyes are not usually “controlled” in the same way that we control our limbs, head and torso. I believe Kitty gave the eye orders alone at the start of a lesson for the first few weeks, before she gave a pupil any of the other orders.

Other “special orders” that Kitty worked with were more psychological or emotional in nature. For example, she might use:

Let all my stored bodily anger (or grief, etc.)

be dissipated by graduated amounts.

Or:

Let all residual tension be dissipated by graduated

amounts from my whole sacrum (or lower ribs, etc.).

Of course, she meant these special orders to be given only in context of directing the primary control, and not as ends in and of themselves. She was fond of quoting Alexander as saying, “Beware of specifics!” Sometimes I recommend that pupils devise their own special orders, particularly in conjunction with a certain life direction they may be working on or with some breakthrough they may be trying to make in psychotherapy or analysis.

Sometimes I suggest adding a word of “quality” in the phrasing of the orders, such as:

My neck with peace to be free

For the direction to come forwardwith peace

. . . . into my face and up with peace

. . . . into the top of my head, etc.

This seems to add an even greater depth to the effect of the order; however, I think that each person should choose the word of quality that works best for him or her. Someone else’s neck might “interpret” peace differently than my neck does. The word of quality may also need to be changed from time to time, if it “wears out” and ceases to have any meaning or effect.

Relationship of Ordering to Meditation

It is worth noting, at this point, the strong similarity between the process of ordering and some techniques of meditation. I have often been deeply disturbed by pupils, and even some Alexander teachers, who persist in viewing Alexander work as something mainly for the “physical self”, while they do meditation for quieting the “mind” and enriching or elevating the “spiritual self”. If ordering is understood in the way I have described here, there should be little difference between the psycho-physical effects of the two processes — that is, of course, if meditation is done within the context of directing the primary control. I must admit that I have never pursued any particular form of meditation which uses a mantra or a specific focus of attention other than the “observing” which J. Krishnamurti encourages in his talks and which is strikingly like the awareness invoked by “inhibition” in the Alexander Technique. However, these comments from *The Psychology of Meditation* by Claudio Naranjo and Robert Ornstein (pp. 5, 7, 8, 150, 151) clarify the similarity quite well:

The word “meditation” has been used to designate a variety of practices that differ enough from one another so that we may find

trouble in defining what *meditation* is.

A trait that all types of meditation have in common, even at the procedural level, gives us a clue to the attitude we are trying to describe: all meditation is a *dwelling upon* something.

While in most of one's daily life the mind flits from one subject or thought to another, and the body moves from one posture to another, meditation practices generally involve an effort to stop this merry-go-round of mental or other activity and to set our attention upon a single object, sensation, utterance, issue, mental state, or activity.

... while certain techniques emphasize mental images, others discourage paying attention to any imagery: some involve sense organs and use visual forms (mandalas) or music, and others emphasize a complete withdrawal from the senses: some call for complete inaction, and others involve action (mantra), gestures (mudra), walking or other activities. Again, some forms of meditation require the summoning up of specific feeling states, while others encourage an indifference beyond the identification with any particular illusion.

The very diversity of practices given the name "meditation" by the followers of this or that particular approach is an invitation to search for the answer of what meditation is *beyond its forms*. And if we are not content just to trace the boundaries of a particular group of related techniques, but instead search for a unity within the diversity, we may indeed recognize such a unity in an *attitude*. We may find that, *regardless of the medium* in which meditation is carried out — whether images, physical experiences, verbal utterances, etc. — the task of the meditator is essentially the same as if the many forms of practice were nothing more than different occasions for the same basic exercise.

If we take this step beyond a behavioral definition of meditations in terms of a *procedure*, external or even internal, we may be able to see that meditation cannot be equated with thinking or non-thinking, with sitting still or dancing, with withdrawing from the senses or waking up the senses: meditation is concerned with the development of a *presence*, a modality of being, which may be expressed or developed in whatever situation the individual may be involved.

This presence or mode of being transforms whatever it touches. If its medium is movement, it will turn into dance: if stillness, into living sculpture: if thinking, into the higher reaches of intuition: if

sensing, into a merging with the miracle of being: if feeling, into love: if singing, into sacred utterance: if speaking, into prayer or poetry: if doing things of ordinary life, into a ritual in the name of God or a celebration of existence. Just as the spirit of our times is technique-oriented in its dealings with the external world, it is technique-oriented in its approach to psychological or spiritual reality. Yet, while numerous schools propound this or that method as a solution of human problems, we know that it is not merely the method but *the way in which it is employed* that determines its effectiveness, whether in psychotherapy, art or education.¹³

In *More Talk of Alexander*, Dr. Barlow likens ordering to meditation, pp. 164–165:

Firstly it is useful to tell pupils that for a short period at the start of the lesson they should "give their orders and not do anything to implement them". I would call this "first-stage ordering". This period of directing at once begins to calm the mind, and such initial calming is not very different from the calming effect which might be achieved by meditation or prayer or some other repetitive mental disciplines. This effect is soon apparent to the pupil and in many disciplines the effect has been found to be so beneficial that it has seemed by persevering in such a way (and without elaboration) a sufficient "state of grace" can be achieved.⁷

Procedure II: Directing

Working on yourself solely by directing is more difficult to describe than working on yourself by ordering. And, in many ways, directing is more difficult to do without the ego trying to produce an immediate result or change. This is often why ordering can be useful in the early stages of studying the Technique, if the orders are "said" with the appropriate quality and speed. It is easier to achieve a freedom from the act of trying to gain a result if you are saying the words and allowing them to work. Of course, if you are saying the orders in a frenzied way, they obviously also will be bound-up with an end-gaining attitude. This simply contributes to more confusion and frustration, as

Peggy Williams describes above.

Directing, if not done with a gentle approach, can often result in “holding” or “stiffening”. So it is useful to consider what basis the most non-end-gaining directing can stem from. I think that “awareness” or “attention” can be the best starting point. If you simply place your attention or awareness at your neck, head, back and knees — that can be the beginning. (If you can sustain that awareness — even only at neck level — through an activity, it is a great step towards acquiring skill at inhibiting and directing.) Even if you don’t actually succeed in altering any habitual patterns of tension as you maintain that awareness, you actually *have* altered the “psychological” part of the psychophysical pattern just by sustaining the awareness. The most habitual tendency in poor use is, when reacting and responding, to shift awareness away from your primary control to some other field of focus and to cut off from proprioception and kinaesthetic perception entirely. This is the “mind-body dichotomy” in actual operation. We “split” ourselves then and there in the shift of attention.

“Intention”, or further clarity in directing, can then be based upon this “awareness” or “attention”. The clarity of intention comes mainly from knowing more and more about what excessive tension, interference and pulling down you *don’t* want. Then identifying or acknowledging where UP is in relation to the center of the earth, or gravity’s pull, is a good starting point from which to establish an “intention” to free yourself and to direct or “go up” in order to further an integration of the mechanisms of the primary control, *whatever position* you are in. The current debate on chair work vs. table work vs. application work misses the point that even invalids, e.g. people who are paralyzed from a stroke, should be able to direct and work on themselves according to the principle of the primary control, although they may not be able to achieve the total reflex integration that can be elicited by a teacher in the sit-stand-squat dimension of chair work. Just because you are not in possession of the total reflex integration, the process of directing towards it is not invalidated. As long as a person is at least in possession of consciousness, direction *towards* integration and wholeness should be possible. In fact, I would think that the most crucial thing for invalids or injured people might be directing and working on themselves. Finally, some aspects of this kind of self care

are being addressed by medical people now such as Oliver Sacks who wrote *A Leg to Stand On* and Bernie Siegel who wrote *Love, Medicine and Miracles*.*

“Intending” for your neck to be free, your head to go forward and up, your back to lengthen and widen, and your knees to go forward and away — all together and sequentially — can happen in a split second. Continued projection of these intentions can easily lead to the category of “working on yourself” we are addressing here. Unlike ordering, this procedure can happen while you are engaged in other activities, although it is often hard to do then. I often work on myself by directing when I am reading the newspaper, looking in a shop window, or waiting in a checkout line. There is a limit to how successful this directing can be, depending upon the demand of the particular activity or upon the strength of the stimuli around me. If the demand or stress of the situation is too great, then directing merely for the sake of preserving a basic standard of integration and “up” is all I can muster. At least that is better than not directing at all, and it is *constant* and *constructive*. When I can get some distance from the demand or stress of the situation though, this minimal directing I have been doing promotes a much more immediate return to improving the integration of my use.

Extended and exclusive working on yourself occurs best when you are relatively quiet and in a reasonably good mechanical advantage for your conditions at that particular time. There are times when lying on the floor might not be as useful as it could be until you have worked at directing for a while in sitting or standing or, for instance, in one of the Dart positions. (See *The Attainment of Poise* and *An Anatomist’s Tribute to F.M. Alexander*, etc. by Raymond Dart.) Whatever position, you are manifesting the “intentions” of the directions of the primary control with an attitude towards change by leaving your whole self available to these intentions instead of actually making the change occur directly.

*If you are an invalid or in a “patient” situation — particularly in a hospital setting — people who are in charge of your care and treatment (doctors, nurses, staff, etc.) frequently domineer the situation in such a way that causes you to relinquish almost all responsibility and inclination to take part in the healing or maintenance of the best possible conditions for healing. Often it’s made impossible to find any time for an effective period of working on yourself, even if you have the skill to do so.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, working on yourself still involves making the clear distinction between achieving an improvement in the use of yourself only by either directing or ordering, instead of resorting to making motions to achieve the change or improvement. Even skills gained from movement disciplines, such as Physiosynthesis or Yoga might be transformed into direction if a clear differentiation is kept between directing (or ordering) and doing.

I suspect that we shall find that “image” and “imagination” will also have to be taken more into account in understanding this aspect of the Technique, even though F.M. and most other teachers have been so dead set against “visualizing”. If ordering is effective in any way at all, surely the words of the orders (as most words do) also produce images in our imagination which may be indirectly a significant part of the process of improving our conditions of use. Directing, non-verbally, may also not be so far removed from using some kind of active imagining, even though we can still question seriously the value of picturing our heads as helium-filled balloons or pumpkins on the ends of poles. “Imagining” our heads as *our heads* going forward and up surely is not that far away from “thinking” or “wishing” our heads forward and up. If “thinking” and “wishing” don’t involve *some* function of the imagination, it would be very surprising.

Some recent writings and research on the function of imagery do suggest that the words we say to ourselves may only be transformed into physiological events through the operation of the images that the words produce in our imagination. Obviously, this transformation process would need to take a certain amount of time in which to occur effectively (in terms of seconds or even minutes); and the length of time might even vary according to the psychophysical make-up and the general condition of each person at the particular moment this process is attempted. Therefore, the extended and unhurried quality of time I’ve suggested above for ordering would be more likely to insure this change-over from words to images that could then lead into actual direction. (The requirements of this transformational process might also explain why some people haven’t found their attempts at ordering to be particularly effective as a means of working on themselves.)

At some point soon I hope to examine in writing this issue of working on yourself through imagery and imagination, particularly with reference to the work of Luigi Bonpensiere, who has long been a source of revelation to me in teaching the Alexander Technique to musicians. His insights into “ideo-kinetic facilitation” were regarded very highly by Aldous Huxley who wrote a foreword to Bonpensiere’s book⁸ and also pointed out there the difficulty in receiving the full benefits of any special method without having first secured the knowledge of a good use of the self as a whole. Since Bonpensiere’s time, literature and research on the function of imagery and imagination have obviously developed enormously. I don’t think we can afford much longer to ignore their potential relevance to the teaching and learning of the Alexander Technique — especially when medicine and psychotherapy are utilizing imagery techniques more and more in healing processes. At the very least, it behooves us to try to see how knowledge of the Alexander Technique can fit into or enhance these other approaches.

I hope these thoughts and descriptions are of some use. They certainly deserve serious consideration in the current examination of teaching approaches, particularly the ones which seem to consider the Alexander Technique only as a movement technique. In recent years, many people involved in the Technique have seized upon one of Alexander’s earliest phrases, “true and primary movement” to support their view of the Technique as only having to do with movement. They ignore the fact that Alexander later substituted the term “primary control” for “true and primary movement in each and every act”. As he saw more clearly that an improvement in the use of the self came about best by directing instead of doing, his work evolved along the lines of further sophistication in the non-doing realm instead of the doing realm. To advance with this sophistication it behooves us to explore and understand fully the basic properties of both directing and ordering.

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