

Spreading our Wings and Keeping our Heart

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Can we as Alexander teachers incorporate understandings from other modalities into our work without losing the essence of what we are and what we do? There does recently seem to be a greater willingness among teachers to think about what we do more widely, and to consider the integration of insights and practices from more overtly therapeutic body-mind traditions. This movement has been going on for a while (see, for example, Brigitta Mowat's 2006 study) but it seems that recently more and more teachers are finding they can no longer function authentically within the limits the Alexander community traditionally set for itself. In particular, there's been a realisation for many that the laissez-faire 'hope-for-the-best' approach that the Technique's early practitioners adopted towards emotional and relational matters is no longer adequate to meet either current understandings of human functioning nor the increasingly sophisticated expectations of clients who have been exposed to other forms of psychophysical work and who take it for granted that such approaches will be able to encompass, hold, and deal with the full range of human feeling and experience

There are still many who object to widening what we do, and certainly there are potential pitfalls to consider. At the same time, some of the objections that were once raised no longer hold the force they did. For example, the view that hands-on contact is incompatible with therapeutic contact due to boundary problems and other issues feels increasingly less relevant as body-psychotherapeutic and body-focussed trauma-resolution techniques have become more mainstream. Many people have experienced safe and effective emotionally-focussed work of one sort or another in which hands-on contact is not only unproblematic but enormously helpful, while many of the

issues around hands-on contact specific to Alexander work have been addressed in recent years (e.g. Mowat, 2006, 2008).

Another objection, which we should take more seriously, is the concern that if we allow insights from other modalities in, the Technique will degenerate into a vapid form of bodywork or quasi-therapy in which its particular essence and unique offering is lost among a sea of other practices and viewpoints. This really is a real danger, and care is needed as we open up to include more possibilities that we don't let go of what makes the Alexander Technique unique.

Established Ways of Working

Let's look at a couple of examples of how Alexander teachers have recommended dealing with emotional issues which are broadly representative of how many of us still work. For example Tim Soar (2010) writes:

In addition to the generally calming quality of the Technique, some people experience quite powerful cathartic reactions to Alexander work. These may take any form from fits of the giggles or unexpected crying during or following a lesson, to excessive sleepiness or disturbed eating patterns. Occasionally these events may be accompanied by the "resurfacing" of forgotten events from the past, traumatic or otherwise. Most people say that this Alexander induced catharsis is accompanied by a profound sense of relief and comes at a time when they are 'ready to deal with it'.

While Pedro de Alcantara (2009) suggests:

a teacher cannot be all things to all students; a good teacher avoids becoming a parent figure, confessor or therapist.

There's a degree of contradiction between these positions. On the one hand, the possibility of releasing emotionally charged material through Alexander work is being suggested. On the other, the teacher is being forbidden, if they are to be a 'good' teacher, from moving to a therapeutic position within the teacher role. The contradiction lies in the fact that the depth with which a person is able to effectively release and process emotional material from the past depends a great deal on the ability of the person who is witnessing (in this case the teacher) to be there with them and to see and hold what is being

released. The kind of healing pointed to by Soar is impossible without temporarily abandoning—at least to some extent—the teacher role for a more therapeutically present and open one.

The traditional attitude towards working with emotions in Alexander lessons can result in emotional patterns that could be easily and simply resolved as they come up remaining unprocessed (Rebenfeld, 1992) because the teacher does not have the appropriate training or experience to temporarily shelve their teacher persona and be what the student actually needs them to be in the moment. Here's a personal example from my (generally lovely and much cherished) Alexander training some twenty years ago. A teacher was giving me a 'table turn'. As she worked I felt a muscular release, accompanied by a welling up of emotion, memory and tearfulness. What I wanted to do at that moment was to talk about it and let go into the feeling. However, I knew there were real—though largely unspoken—limits on what was welcome in terms of emotional expression and sharing of personal history, so I bottled it up and the lesson carried on.

I ended up working through those feelings in another context some years later. The point is, though, I had actually, as Soar puts it, been 'ready to deal with it' *right there and then*, but the too rigidly defined roles in the situation prevented that from happening. Prescribed roles were maintained but at the expense of what was most in my interest at the time. Often, the moment emotional material arises is the best time to work with it. There's no guarantee that, in taking the advice to 'go to a therapist' instead, we will meet the same material and be able to process it in different circumstances with a different person.

Emotional Bypassing

There's a danger lurking here specific to the Alexander Technique. Because Alexander practice can leave repressed emotions in place while, at the same time, giving us access to an experience of psychophysical mastery, it can enable us to bypass or put off inner work, allowing us to prematurely embody a somatic sense of 'togetherness' which may not reflect the reality of how we are functioning in a broader sense. Shortly after I qualified as an Alexander teacher, for example, I started teaching group classes, and I was delighted

with the way my training enabled me to embody and project a sense of confidence and authority, rooted in the secure feeling in my back. I found I could operate with a great deal more authority and presence than I had been used to up till then, and hold the attention and respect of the room in a new way. What an exciting discovery! But I realised fairly soon that what I was projecting was not a completely honest reflection of who I was, or of how I was functioning in my life at that time. It took some years of inner work with other disciplines before the outer presentation started to more fully reflect the inner reality.

The ability the Technique can give us to regulate emotional arousal and project authority can allow us to bypass necessary inner work. This bypassed material can then seep out, resulting in unhealthy power dynamics that can be unhelpful—or even actively harmful—to students.

The Therapeutic Reality

An additional problem with the traditional Alexander approach to emotional and relational matters is it often misses or denies what is actually happening in the room. Mowat (2008) points out that, regardless of our intentions, the hands-on work we give to students and the quiet accepting space we offer often *is* experienced therapeutically and has a therapeutic effect. To deny or minimise this reality can be damaging. If we're not willing to be conscious and honest about the actual role we are playing for students, we either fail to meet them in the way they need, or end up playing the role unconsciously in a sphere where, more than any other, consciousness is needed. There are consequences to acting in a way that causes someone to open up physically and emotionally and then refusing to be there to fully welcome and allow what may be released by that process. At best we may push the material back under the surface where it might be more difficult to access next time. At worst, such a rejection of vulnerable parts of the self can be humiliating and traumatising.

Given the above, is it safe enough to mix roles in an Alexander setting? Mowat's study (2006) certainly suggests so, and indicates that students enjoy the difference. In real life, I think, most of us realise it is normal and healthy to show some flexibility towards the various roles we play so long as it is done

with care. What most of us need primarily from a helping other is not, first and foremost, either a teacher *or* a therapist, but a *human being* with the wisdom and clarity to see what is appropriate at a given moment, and the courage to offer it.

I'm not arguing in favour of the abandonment of our primary orientation towards holding a teacher-student relationship. It's important to keep a hold of the value of what we do. But if we are to let the student have the full benefit of what we could offer we also need to let go of a rigidity which forbids a person from playing other subsidiary roles alongside their main role as appropriate. I don't believe worries about a widening of roles should stand in the way of the changes necessary to make the Technique more useful and widely applicable in the increasingly sophisticated psychophysical company it finds itself in the 21st century.

References

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