new thoughts on the Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique attempts to achieve balance in physical structure and movements very much like that which is the goal of Structural Integration. Unlike Structural Integration, however, the Alexander Technique seeks to achieve this balance not by realigning the body structure directly, but rather by evoking appropriate patterns of movement through the use of imagery and the direction of a teacher's hands. Several articles on the Alexander Technique have appeared in previous issues of the Bulletin. In the following article, a teacher of the Alexander Technique is interviewed about a series of innovations she has made. The interview is in two parts. In Part I, the focus is on her belief that students should be taught not to ignore their kinaesthetic sensations, but rather learn to use them appropriately. In Part II, she discusses more briefly some of her ideas concerning the "stiffness" attributed to some Alexander students, and the possible adaptation of the Technique for teaching groups of several people at once.

Rolfers will be particularly interested in Ringdahl's belief (which parallels Dr. Rolf's thinking) that most corrective exercise works too locally to be of much help to the total body system, and will be intrigued by the possibilities implicit in her ideas for "homework" they might give people between rolfing sessions. (Ed.)

Joyce Suskind Ringdahl began to study the Alexander Technique in 1943 with Alma Frank. She is on the faculty of the New School for Social Research, trains teachers, gives workshops for advanced students, and leads groups at Aureon Institute and Awosting Retreat. A professional singer, oboist, pianist, and composer, she now teaches singing in conjunction with Alexander. She has also taught at the American Conservatory Theater (ACT) and the American Shakespeare Festival at Stratford, Conn. Address further inquiries to: The Alexander Technique, 50 East 78th Street, New York City 10021.

Frank Clease, like Alexander, started his career in Australia. He later moved to Canada, where he did research in anatomy and physiology at McGill University. He is now training as an Alexander teacher with Joyce Ringdahl.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOYCE SUSKIND RINGDAHL

by Frank Clease

For the past eighty years, the F. Matthias Alexander Technique has been taught as a means of postural re-education. Much scientific knowledge has been made available since Alexander's death in 1955. We know more about the human body and its needs. The study of kinesiology has grown. Gestalt Therapy plays an important part in the development of the human potential. Joyce Ringdahl began studying in 1943 and has recently developed new concepts and new techniques that make the Alexander experience more exciting and stimulating. The following interview was taped earlier this year and broadcast in Canada.

Part I

Q. Alexander said that people had "faulty sensory appreciation" and could not rely on their kinesthetic sense. What is your view?

A. First, let's define what we mean by kinesthesia. It is the proprioceptive sense, the muscle sense, the position of your body in relation to space. It depends on various sensing organs - the vestibular apparatus, the muscle spindles, the visual receptors, the auditory receptors, and so on.

In the Alexander Technique, kinesthesia has to be stressed more. When I was taught, feeling came about in and of itself. It was haphazard. I wasn't actually given any exercises in sensing. In fact, I was taught not to rely on my kinesthetic sense. I found, however, that as I went on, I had to depend on it. The only way I was able to develop as a student was to depend on my kinesthetic memory. I decided to teach my students how to feel and train the kinesthetic sense to that it is dependable. My approach is more organized and specific in that it teaches the student to depend on his muscles, his spatial sense, and his optical reflexes. If the student "feels funny" when he is getting length and width in his back, the teacher may say "don't feel it" or "suspend your judgement." I would never tell a student not to feel. I would be more apt to say, "don't focus on your body." Or I would say, "don't act upon the sensation that you have; the feeling you have is a result of a particular change in your body, the result of an altered state of consciousness, and it will not remain with you; it is only the initial change that gives you such a vivid kinesthetic experience." We must bring the student to to the point where he <u>can</u> rely on his kinesthetic sense because no matter what one says, he must and will depend on it.

Q. So you believe that the kinesthetic sense is reliable?
A. No sense is one hundred percent reliable. That is why we use instruments as extensions of our own senses. All the human senses are notoriously unreliable. But I do not think that the kinesthetic sense is the stepchild of the senses. All the senses have a certain reliability that is subject to change due to emotional disturbance, metabolic change, lack of sleep, etc. What we try to do with the Alexander student is make his kinesthetic sense more reliable than it was before. We give instructions in kinesthetics.

If your feelings are incorrect to begin with, you have to be taught to feel. It shouldn't be an accident. "Anesthetized" areas of the human body have to be rediscovered and reawakened by the teacher and the student. You have to remove blocks in physical sensation.

Q. If the experience does not stay with you, how can you practice kinesthetic memory from the lesson?
A. The student can remember the experience though he may not be able successfully to reproduce it. He may try to reproduce physically, by self-manipulation, that feeling he thought he got from the teacher at the lesson. This is

where the danger comes in, because he will try to push himself into place. He has to remember the sensation without reproducing it; if he is unable to get the feeling, he must leave himself alone. This is quite difficult and requires a good deal of control on the part of the student. We all want something to happen.

Q. What part is played by the words (directive order) taught to the student?
A. We know that words, as a symbol of the actual experience, have within them a certain content which will excite the muscles. This has been shown electromyographically. If an electrode is put on the right arm of a person and he just says the words "I am going to throw the ball" without doing anything physical, there will be a change in muscle tone in that throwing arm. He may be unaware of doing anything; in fact he did nothing. The word alone was sufficient to excite the muscle and that is precisely what happens away from the Alexander lesson. The words are representations of the kinesthetic experience and although the student may be unaware of changes in muscle tone as a result of saying the words, these changes actually do take place.

Q. Obviously, the student can't go around saying the words all the time. You can't have two verbal lines of thought going on simultaneously. The student has to rely on something other than words.
A. That is where the person has to "turn on" and "tune in" to his kinesthetic sense, his relationship to space and the awareness of himself within that space. My own teacher had told me to direct all the time, even when reading. When you read, you have a linguistic flow of words. If you try to read and have this other language series going on, it is impossible. You fluctuate from one to the other. When I used to direct verbally while reading, I was quite uncomfortable. I was always being stopped. I decided to give up the verbal line and feel. I teach my students to use the kinesthetic sense while they have a line of thought going on so that they work on Alexander through feeling only, not through verbal direction.

Part II
Q. People comment that some Alexander students look stiff. Is this a lack of communication between the teacher and the student, or is there some basic error that results in this incorrect idea?
A. At the Alexander lesson, the vocabulary of movement is extremely limited - to hip joint flexion and extension and moving from a vertical plane in the trunk towards an angular plane by bending forward from the hips. Torsion and lateral flexion are rarely used.

In Man's Supreme Inheritance, Alexander said that when you bend forward from the hips, there should be no change in the torso above the hips. This means you are not bending the spine. (Many people bend the spine too much or don't bend from the hips at all. They bend from the waist.) This look you talk about is the result of rigidity of the spine. Many teachers pay lip service to the idea of not being rigid; the appearance of stiffness, however, is due to spinal inflexibility.

Dissatisfaction with this inflexibility has led teachers toward what I call the "new Alexander stereotype." We don't want to limit movement; we want to explore the flexibility of the spine and the full range of movement patterns.

Q. People working with the Alexander Technique often experience a "state of consciousness" they had not noted before. Is the state of consciousness created by the Alexander experience similar to a discipline such as Zen meditation?
A. Yes; you can think when you are directing verbally or feel when you are more actively "kinesthetizing." A third way of directing is through the use of the imagination. Though it is the most limited form, it enables the student who tends to intellectualize or tries to feel too much to get away from his body temporarily. He might be asked to direct the body of another person. Or he might feel water running over his body, or think of himself as a rubber band. Whatever he does with his imagination, he must ultimately be able to return to the here-and-now, the reality of himself within a given environment, a total field of awareness.

Q. Alexander was opposed to exercise. How do you feel about this?
A. Alexander said that if you had a tremendous kinesthetic delusion, even if exercise made you feel better, you were probably wrong. It wasn't making you feel better. In his time, people said if you could sit rather than stand, you should do so, and if you could lie down rather than sit, you should do so. They had a restful approach to the human body. Based on knowledge gained since Alexander's time, we know that for the prevention of heart disease and cardiac cases, exercise is important to stimulate the pulmonary, vascular, and cardiac systems. This is popularly called aerobic exercise. We know that isometric exercise is good for building up muscle tone, if needed. Then there is exercise for pleasure. We have to keep our souls going.

Alexander was against corrective exercise, and with this I am in agreement. Giving someone exercise to correct round shoulders will not work because the total neuromuscular pattern is not considered. Even so, in conjunction with the Alexander Technique, it might help to give exercise just to tone up stiff and unused muscles.

Q. Though the technique is designed primarily for use with individuals, it could be adapted to groups. Have you been able to arrive at any successful way of dealing with large numbers of people?
A. Yes; I am now teaching with Judith Propper at the New School for Social Research. After much consideration, we have modified the approach. You can't teach a group as if it were an individual. If you do that, you fail to reach all the people. Putting a group into a room and working on them one by one is just giving private lessons in public.

We have devised ways of working in which there is more responsibility for independent work placed on the student. Instead of depending on the teacher's hands, he has to depend on his kinesthetic sense. He gets the direct experience from the teacher and then, at the lesson (instead of away from the lesson), he uses his kinesthetic memory. Judith Propper made this valuable contribution to the group experience. I had always told my students to remember my hands and recall kinesthetically. She introduced the idea of having the person recall the experience immediately, at the lesson. It gives the student sensory material he can work on all the time.

In addition, group awareness, kinesthetic sensing, movement pattern exploration, and supplementary physical exercises when needed have made the group experience much richer for the Alexander student who might ordinarily receive only three or four minutes of the teacher's time.

Q. With all these changes that you have introduced, and with others I know you are considering, can you still call this the Alexander Technique?
A. Yes. I would, in reply to that, like to quote from Alexander, to show you that this man was amenable to change. He said, in Man's Supreme Inheritance"

> I do not profess to offer a finally perfected theory . . . We are only at the beginnings of understanding, and my own wish is to keep my theory as simple as possible, to avoid any dogma . . . I should not be true to my own principles if I were not willing to accept amendments, even perhaps to alter one or other of my premises, should new facts tend to show that I have made a false assumption in any particular.