

Lecture for the 8th International Alexander Congress Lugano by Brigitta Mowat

THE USE OF TOUCH IN THE AT CONTEXT: A DEVELOPMENTAL AND THERAPEUTIC PERSPECTIVE

Part 1: Personal and theoretical considerations on integrating emotions

In the first part of the lecture I want to explore theories that link muscular tension patterns with emotions; in the second part of the lecture I want to explore the issue of touch. I would like to begin by reflecting on some personal discoveries I made in both disciplines, Psychotherapy and the Alexander Technique.

In the early nineties I suffered from depression and I observed that giving my Alexander directions did not lift my mood. Giving directions felt exhausting and pointless, and teaching pupils was difficult. After all, what would they think of me if they knew I was depressed? You can sense the guilt and conflict I carried with me. It didn't feel safe to reveal what was really going on. My father had drummed it into me that depression was just a sign of laziness, of being work-shy. Gestalt Psychotherapy labels the ability to survive the kind of psychological pain I was in as *creative adjustment*. I found this empowering way of viewing what I was going through immensely helpful. So apparently I was lazy, and I was having difficulties giving Alexander directions. I was rebelling on a number of fronts – but that was all right, at least for a while.

Allowing myself to be in a place of 'not knowing' was very disconcerting, yet I felt that in choosing to be there, I was managing to address a deeply engrained habit of mine – that of ignoring my negative feelings. In my collapse, I sensed a lot of chronic tension around my pelvis, lower back and neck. Since my early teens I had been suffering from back pain which, despite swimming, physiotherapy and Alexander training, was still not resolved.

That pricked my curiosity: which aspects of the Alexander Technique were not bringing about the longed-for releases? Was it simply because the relationships with my various Alexander teachers post qualification did not feel safe enough for me to work through the negative emotions? Or was I asking for something that an Alexander teacher is not trained to provide? And was the role of the Alexander teacher restricted to teaching ‘non-doing’ and ‘good use’?

Crucially – how did Alexander teachers cope with emotions that re-emerge as a result of muscular releases?

An Alexander friend who knew of my depression referred me to a psychotherapist. The Alexander side of me questioned whether I could trust someone who wasn’t directly working with the body. After all, psychotherapy was not something that F.M. himself approved of. All I believed at that point was that psychotherapists worked with the mind and left the body out, a mantra I repeatedly heard during my Alexander training. But it was not like that at all – at least, not in my case. My integrative therapist turned out to have specialised in body psychotherapy. Right from the start we addressed the trust issue and the negative feelings I was holding back in my body. My therapist encouraged me to express my feelings in a variety of ways. For example she would encourage me to express my emotions through sounds, movements and imagery, rather than just describing them verbally.

In time I learned to understand that *chronic tension patterns begin to ease if negative feelings are welcomed in a relationship*. This was a revelation. This was what real psychophysical integration was all about. It was carrying on the process at the very point where the Alexander Technique stopped.

My experience teaches me that the Alexander Technique is missing two vital components:

- **The concept of the *therapeutic relationship***
- **A theoretical and practical understanding of *how to integrate emotions when they surface as a result of hands-on work***

I was fired up – keen to learn how to work with emotions and the therapeutic relationship. I also wanted to find a way of taking to the next level the explorative talking that had always been part of my personal teaching style. This is what spurred me on to train as a psychological counsellor, and then as a psychotherapist. Admittedly, I was caught in a dilemma: *at what point did the talking cease to be part of the Alexander experience and venture into the psychotherapeutic domain?* I was also aware that if I discouraged a pupil from exploring an emotional issue in an Alexander lesson (on the grounds that this was uncharted territory in the AT), this interfered with true psychophysical integration. This showed me that:

We need to define a framework whereby we can allow explorative talking to be part of the AT's re-educational process. This would involve following basic therapeutic principles.

As an Alexander teacher and now a trainee psychotherapist, I became aware of the *value of processing painful affective states that can emerge as a result of hands-on work*. John Nicholls, my first Alexander teacher and a teacher at London's Constructive Teaching Centre under Walter Carrington, articulates this dilemma in an interview with Sean Carey:

“Of course, if we believe in psychophysical unity, then we also have to allow for the fact that the gradual release of chronic muscular restriction encouraged by the Technique will bring about change in the psyche. Blocked-off feelings may emerge, and here also we may need to look to psychology for a map of the territory, for there is nothing in that body of knowledge called the Alexander Technique that explains how feelings can get repressed and how they can be consciously integrated when they re-emerge”. *The Alexander Technique. In Conversation with John Nicholls and Sean Carey, 1991, p. 32.*

One of Freud and Breuer’s (1893-95) pioneering projects on hysteria explored how feelings get blocked or repressed and reside in the unconscious. For Freud and Breuer, there was a clear link between repressed emotions and hysterical symptoms. They found that the majority of their patients suffered from repressed grief. It is perhaps not well known that Freud in his early work used touch in the form of massaging his patients’ necks or a light touching of the head – the intention being to help a patient release muscular tension and embedded, long-forgotten memories. However, he abandoned touch quite early in his career, under pressure of his peers, who feared that touch would stimulate sexual feelings. To this day, psychoanalysis adheres, at least in theory, to a non-touch policy. It is well known that Alexander was critical of psychoanalysis. He saw it as a technique that re-enforced the body-mind dichotomy (Alexander, 1987, 1923).

In the 1930’s Wilhelm Reich, a disciple of Freud, reversed the non-touch policy. Reich went back to the hands-on technique and brought the body back into treatment. Reich’s emphasis on the body in relation to the mind might have been more in line with Alexander’s thinking, although Alexander makes no mention of Reich’s work. I find very helpful Reich’s theory on emotional repression and how this is held in the body:

He asserts that body tensions are frequently exhibited as *armouring* in the form of physiological rigidities – i.e. barriers against the stimulation of emotions (Reich, 1997, 1933)

We can see that Reich's theory provides a framework within which it is possible to resolve the dilemma articulated by Nicholls. If we take Reich's assertion that habitual muscular rigidities get in the way of working with emotions, then we understand the mechanism of suppression and repression. Alexander teachers could usefully adopt this theory as background knowledge.

Fritz Perls, another prominent figure in the field of psychotherapy and co-author of *Gestalt Therapy*, first published in 1951, provides further insight into shortcomings of the Alexander Technique, which he arrived at through hands-on experience of the Alexander Technique in the 1940s. In *Ego, Hunger, and Aggression* (1947) he describes many beneficial aspects of the Alexander Technique. However, Perls suggests that Alexander's concept of inhibition, and Freud's method of analysing the mind in psychoanalysis, both cause "unnecessary frustrations in the process of unlearning habits". Perls states:

“Alexander’s methods of “inhibiting the wrong attitude” and concentrating on the correct one is as insufficient and one-sided as is Freud’s approach, which concentrates mainly on the analysis of undesirable attitudes. (...) In this respect, Freud’s technique resembles that of Alexander, in that it carries out treatment under frustration – a very “active” technique strongly interfering with the patient’s spontaneous impulses. *Ego, Hunger and Aggression, Fritz Perls, 1947, p. 181.*

I include Perls's quote here to illustrate a common misunderstanding of F.M.'s concept of inhibition. It would appear that Perls was interpreting inhibition in the Freudian sense of suppressing emotional expression. I say "common" misunderstanding, because – crucially – it seems to me that many Alexander Teachers have not grasped what F.M. actually expressed about inhibition. His inhibition is body-based and directly relates to the nervous system. Inhibition in an Alexander lesson is used to induce calmness via hands-on work. The purpose of Alexander's inhibition is to create a space whereby thinking and feeling can join up, thus allowing us to make informed choices.

The following quote from Alexander highlights how inhibition can liberate the expression of spontaneous impulses:

“The stimulus to inhibit (...) comes from within, and the process of inhibition is not forced upon the pupil. This means that the pupil’s desire or desires will be satisfied, not thwarted, and that there will be present desirable emotional and other psycho-physical conditions which do not make for what is known as suppression in any form” *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual, F.M. Alexander, cited in Alexander Journal 21 (2006, p. 23).*

We can see that F.M.’s application of inhibition goes far deeper than just stopping wrong attitudes and concentrating on the right ones, as Perls contended. My belief is that successive generations of teachers have overlooked or misinterpreted this. However, Nicholl’s critique about the Technique lacking a theoretical underpinning still stands.

With regard to the meaning of muscular tension, Perls’s view is similar to that of Freud and Reich. They all see it as the body’s way of stopping spontaneous impulses. It follows that spontaneity can be restored by relieving excessive tension in the body. However, the process of restoring spontaneity can be painful. For a young child, the impulse to reach out for contact can become blocked by an unresponsive environment. Perls coined the term ‘retroflexion’, which describes the result of a blocked impulse – a withdrawal from contact, as a result of which the impulse is turned inwards against the self.

We know from Alexander’s writings that he disapproved of relaxation techniques, which he saw as tackling the symptoms of tension, not the causes. Perls makes an interesting comparison between a relaxation technique promulgated by Jacobson, a contemporary of Alexander, and the Alexander Technique:

Though you might be able to relax if you concentrate on relaxation, in any state of excitement the ‘muscular armour’ is bound to return. Moreover, Jacobson, like F.M. Alexander, neglects the meaning of contraction as repressors” *Ego, Hunger and Aggression, Fritz Perls, 1947, pp. 229-230.*

Perls held the view that the content of what has caused excessive tension patterns needs to be understood by the individual to ensure a more lasting change. That was certainly my experience with regard to my own chronic muscular tension. I personally had to identify the truncated feelings that stemmed from my childhood, though this may not be necessary with every tension pattern.

How can we use Reich and Perls's theories to ensure a more lasting change in our hands-on work? One possibility is to adopt an integrative approach to the Alexander Technique as suggested by Glen Park (2000, 1989). She draws on the ancient Chakra system, which she correlates with a map of human development from birth to adulthood. This is an effective way of shedding light on the meaning of specific muscular holding patterns. Such blocks can be observed and palpated in specific areas of the body and understood in developmental terms that relate to the seven chakra energy centres. For example, when I suffered from depression I noticed a block in my lower back and abdomen, which, according to the chakra map, correlates with the sacral or second chakra – in other words, childhood. With regard to this particular block, Glen Park states:

“If the (sacral) chakra is blocked and under-active, there might be a holding back of emotional experiencing, or a loss of appetite for food or sex, possibly a rather depressed state. (...) The digestive system may be affected, as may the general energy of the person, because he or she is using the energy of the chakra to hold down negative emotions”. *The Art of Changing, Glen Park, 2000, p. 208.*

Each chakra provides a language for emotional processing which, like the concept of the therapeutic relationship, could be used as background knowledge in an Alexander lesson.

To conclude this part of the lecture, I feel that the overall benefits I gained from counselling and psychotherapy reflect a trend in the Alexander community, which is looking for ways of working with emotions in a lesson. In 2001 a group of Alexander teachers conducted a survey, which explored attitudes within the Alexander Technique profession towards counselling and psychotherapy (Atkinson et al., 2001):

Results revealed that 93.2 per cent of the respondents believed that counselling and psychotherapy were not in conflict with the Alexander principle of psychophysical unity. This marks a noticeable shift away from F.M. Alexander's assumption that emotional changes would occur automatically as a result of learning his method and that explicit psychological interventions were therefore unnecessary. *Attitudes within the Alexander Technique Profession towards Counselling and Psychotherapy, Atkinson, Kohler, Mowat & Saunderson, 2001, p. 6.*

Furthermore, we found that 69 per cent of respondents in our survey considered that the Alexander Technique would be enhanced by knowledge of basic counselling skills. These results spurred me on to undertake another research project that looked at the impact of counselling and psychotherapy skills on the practice of the Alexander Technique (Mowat, 2006). If this large percentage were indicative of the Alexander community as a whole, it would suggest that basic counselling skills would need to be implemented in the training of Alexander teachers. I find it extraordinary that it is not – hence this lecture.

Part 2: The implications of touch in the Alexander context

Touch or hands-on work is a vital part of an AT lesson, but as my psychological awareness grew, I became aware that the psychological impact of touch is scarcely discussed in the Alexander community. This is in stark contrast to psychotherapy, where touch has been a hot topic since Freud, and where innovative ways of using touch in psychoanalytic treatment have emerged.

One reason why people are drawn to and later get hooked on the AT relates to a need for gentle and warm touch. This was what attracted the writer and psychoanalyst Frances Sommer Anderson to the Technique. She had lessons on a weekly basis for three years. This is what she had to say about her lessons:

“Two-thirds of each one-hour session was spent standing, turning, and bending, very slowly, with keen attention to doing it correctly. I quickly suppressed my feelings that this exercise was tedious, boring, and to my surprise, infuriating. (...) The last part of the session, I lay on my back on a massage table, fully clothed, with my head off the table, supported only by my teacher’s hands. This posture was absolutely wonderful. I had never experienced anything like it. Her supporting my head was blissful and soothing. For about three years I went for a class once a week, enduring the first part in order to get to the second part so that I could experience her holding my head. I had no idea why that was so important, and I never asked for the rationale for that part of the lesson”. *Bodies in Treatment, edited by Frances Sommer Anderson, 2008, pp. 4-5.*

Anderson's account illustrates Perls's observation of the Alexander Technique and psychoanalysis, namely, that both methods can potentially lead to frustration, caused by techniques that interfere with spontaneous impulses. With regard to the relationship with the teacher, Anderson comments that she did not feel safe enough to express her frustration and feelings of boredom with the technique. This raises a number of issues for us as Alexander teachers, such as whether we are seeking an open dialogue with our pupils, and whether we create a safe and non-judgmental space. How can we communicate that negative feelings are welcomed in the relationship to help ease chronic tension patterns?

Anderson saw the lying-down part in an Alexander lesson as inviting regression. Perhaps she associated it with lying on a couch in psychoanalysis. Amongst other things, psychoanalysis differs from the Technique in relation to touch and to the importance accorded to the therapist-client relationship. The Technique can be much more than a series of directions and inhibitions and so on: our hands-on work – the sensation of being held – might be helping an individual to process and integrate experiences that have been missing from early life. Anderson concludes her lying down experiences as follows:

“These self-states, accessed first through “hands-on” body treatment, would prove to be fundamental in my process of integration and self-healing. Neither my analyst nor I understood the significance of these self-states”. Anderson, 2008, p. 5.

We can see that the hands-on work in an Alexander lesson may play a fundamental role in integrating experiences that otherwise cannot be accessed directly in talking therapies, thus promoting the healing of developmental trauma at a visceral and affective level. If we relate Anderson's longing to be held and soothed to the chakra map, we might see it as a root or first chakra issue, which relates to the infant and addresses survival and safety issues.

Working with a pupil like Anderson challenges the concept of the Alexander Technique as primarily concerned with teaching inhibition and direction. It would be beneficial to gain an understanding of the relational teacher-pupil dynamic that arises from semi-supine and hands-on work. Such therapeutic skills would need to be taught on Alexander training courses.

My MSc research has shown that the combination of lying down, touch and close proximity changes the relational dynamics in the teacher-pupil relationship. The supine position in an AT lesson puts the teacher in a position of power, possibly making the pupil feel vulnerable and regressed. Furthermore, touch may elicit a strong transference, a psychoanalytic concept that relates to feelings from past significant relationships that are projected onto the other. An Alexander teacher needs to be aware of these relational dynamics.

One of the participants in my research commented on the varied responses touch can elicit in a pupil:

“I think one needs to be constantly aware of the possibility that people may not be experiencing the touch in a way we think they are, and touch can also have such an impact (...) I put my hand around the back of his neck to touch him for the first time and he just burst into tears (...) it was probably someone who had so little touch in his life (...) it was really touching into so much pain”. *The Impact of Counselling and Psychotherapy Skills on the Practice of the Alexander Technique. MSc Dissertation, Brigitta Mowat, 2003.*

This account again highlights how the lying-down, hands-on work in an Alexander lesson can elicit early developmental issues. Such situations may, if handled sensitively by the teacher, create a space for integration and healing at the nonverbal level, which, as Anderson pointed out, is difficult to access in talking therapies.

The Body Psychotherapist Joen Fagan talks poetically about the developmental aspect of touch:

“Touch is necessary to assist us in becoming human beings. Touch is the first language we learn – the one that defines our relationship to our mothers, provides pleasure, helps calm the storm of infancy. From the ways we were touched, our body egos develop – that is, our feelings about and perceptions of our bodies, and our comfort with touching and being touched. Absent or angry touch during our first years has dire effects”. *Touch in Psychotherapy, Joen Fagan, Thoughts on using touch in psychotherapy, in E.W.L. Smith et al. (eds) 1998, p. 148.*

The concept that the ego develops through loving and soothing touch goes back to Freud. He states:

“The ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body”. *The Ego and the Id, Sigmund Freud, 1923- 1925, p. 16.*

I wonder to what extent Freud as well as Alexander knew about the importance of human touch in terms of human growth and development. Today we know that hands-on work in an Alexander lesson induces the ‘calm and connection’ system, a term I came across in Kerstin Uvnas Moberg’s book *The Oxytocin Factor (2003)*. Moberg’s research shows that pleasant touch and warmth releases the hormone oxytocin, which then activates the ‘calm and connection’ system. This may explain why so many people feel calmer and better connected with themselves and the Alexander teacher after an Alexander lesson. Moberg contrasts the ‘calm and connection’ system with adrenalin-based ‘fight and flight’ system, which is triggered for example when touch inflicts pain. We can see how any form of abuse can potentially trigger the ‘fight and flight’ response. If the energy cannot be discharged, the body goes into a freeze response or dissociation. Freezing and dissociation are natural responses to physical and emotional trauma.

In this second and last part of my lecture, I have explored the power and meaning of touch and I find it surprising that there is so little discussion around this topic in the Alexander community. The question is what to do about it – what tools do we have to deal with the psychological consequences of touch? How do our teaching principles cope with emotions that inevitably arise? In my MSc research I reached the conclusion that Alexander teachers need to learn how to engage therapeutically with a pupil, as well as learn how to process emotions that emerge as a result of the hands-on work. I would like to conclude with a quote by Glen Park:

“The Alexander Technique has the potential to offer much more than a series of considerations which will replace ‘bad use’ with ‘good use’. This type of definition puts it on a par with exercise regimes like Pilates. The sensitive hands-on work that Alexander Teachers have been trained in has the potential to encourage emotional as well as physical integration and balance. It would appear that many teachers have been working in this way intuitively and somewhat unconsciously in their lessons. Sadly, other teachers have been unable to meet the emotional responses of pupils with sensitivity and skill and this has given the Alexander Technique a bad reputation in some quarters.

“If trainee teachers could be taught the skills of working in a therapeutic relationship as part of their training, and graduates could be offered similar training through professional development courses, how much more holistic and powerful the Alexander Technique would become. I am not talking about us all becoming therapists or counsellors – that is a long talk-based training. But we need to have sufficiently honed communication skills and a sufficiently conscious understanding of the relational dynamics of the teaching situation. With these teachers would be entering the delicate arena of psychophysical re-education with understanding and maturity.”

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Further reading:

Use of touch in psychotherapy: *Touch Papers – Dialogues on Touch in the Psychoanalytic Space* edited by Graeme Galton, 2006; *Body in Treatment: The Unspoken Dimension* edited by Frances Sommer-Anderson, 2008.

Biography:

Brigitta Mowat trained with Walter and Dylis Carrington at the CTC in London and has been teaching the Alexander Technique for twenty years. Between 1996 and 1998 she organised the STAT Spring Seminars which explored psychological issues of the Technique. She has an MA in Integrative Psychotherapy (UKCP reg.) and has been practising as a counsellor and psychotherapist for nine years. For her MSc in Counselling and Psychotherapy in Health and Social Care she examined emotional and relational aspects in the AT teacher-pupil relationship. She has recently been appointed as a visiting Lecturer at University of Hertfordshire. Brigitta is married and has two grown-up children.

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