

The Use of the Chair In Teaching

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Teaching

These reflections on the use of the chair in teaching have been in my mind for some time, but were brought to a focus by the International Congress in August last year. At the Congress I found myself viewing through American eyes what was being called the "traditional British" way of Alexander teaching with the chair. In such a context this can indeed appear to be a very limited and static device, and yet many, many teachers, from F.M. and A.R. themselves on, seem to have found it perfectly adequate.

Why that particular movement of in and out of a chair? We are told that F.M. chose it because it is a simple, everyday movement that most people perform very badly. As such, it would provide the student with frequent opportunities in the course of each day for the application of inhibition and direction. So far, so good. Very reasonable.

However, a few questions soon spring to mind. Aren't there a number of other simple, everyday movements that he could equally well have chosen, e.g. walking, climbing stairs, speaking (his own specially), grasping and manipulating objects, etc.? Given the choice of the chair as a starting point, shouldn't the teacher go on to help re-educate the student in at least a few other common movements, if not in more specialized skills?

This last seems to me to be the critical question: if we're teaching people how to sit down and stand up with inhibition, why aren't we taking them through a range of other movements as well?

Yet I've been told that F.M. seemed to find the chair quite sufficient, supplemented by 'monkey,' taking people up onto their toes, and 'whispered ah' for those with voice and breathing difficulties. (I recognize, of course, that he also assigned students for 'lying down' work with his assistants.) I also observe that a majority of the most experienced teachers appear to be content with this kind of repertoire.

I spoke about this to Peggy Williams, who trained with FM in the 1950's. She remembered him saying that going in and out of a chair involved important reflexes that we all interfered with. If we could learn how to inhibit our interference in this situation, we could work out for ourselves how to apply that experience to other activities.

It could be that what we have here is a slight disjunction between the theory, as generally explained, and the practice. Since ours is a very practical technique, evolved from experience, perhaps the theory needs adjusting to fit the practice. In other words, can we find some more satisfactory explanations for our use of the chair?

I would suggest the following..

First, the trivial ones. The use of the chair prevents the student from becoming overtired or fixed in one position. It produces movement, but keeps the student in one place so the teacher doesn't have to chase round the room following the student. It gets the student to a convenient height for the teacher to work on the neck and shoulders.

Second, and more important, it is a particularly useful movement in which to learn to apply inhibition and direction because it involves the whole coordination of back (including neck) and leg muscles. In short, all those muscles that are concerned with supporting us against gravity. It helps to program into our nervous system a pattern of neck unclenched, head freely poised, back lengthening and widening to support the trunk, and legs active, yet not stiffened at the joints of ankle, knee, and hip. These direction are programmed in a very clear way by the action of the movement itself - head and knees opposing each other so that the back stays back and expands between them. This highlights the antagonistic pulls and counterbalances we require for good use, and the experience usually carries over quite easily into other simple movements such as walking.

Third, and of deeper significance, it is not so much overt movement that we are concerned with, as the pre-movement, or primary movement of the body's response to gravity, the lengthening upthrust that

maintains our upright balance. This coordinated expansion as a response to gravity is something we all learned as babies, in the first year or two of life. Consider how the baby develops. It learns first to support its own head, then to sit upright, unsupported. From there it goes on to crawling (an activity that some teacher-training schools have found useful), and to kneeling and squatting. The baby will then spend some time, perhaps months, learning to come up from squatting to fully upright, at first holding on to things for support, then unsupported. This period, before walking begins, is one in which the baby continually rehearses the movement from squatting to standing and back again, extending and flexing the legs and often stopping part-way in the flexed attitude we call "monkey." As balance becomes more reliable, there will even be the occasional venture up onto the toes, usually with great delight.

With this picture of child development in mind, the classic Alexander lesson with the chair takes on new significance. We are recapitulating the learning of balanced, upright sitting, and trying to go from there to full extension of the limbs without disturbing the balance of head, neck, and trunk. We are, in the same process, recapitulating a part of the up and down between squatting and standing the baby repeatedly practises. With the addition of monkey (which is any position intermediate between full squat and full upright) and going on the toes, we could reasonably claim to be guiding our students consciously to repeat the early learning process that develops the anti-gravity responses of upright balance. This time, because the student is learning more consciously, he has a chance to inhibit and undo interference patterns developed since (or even during) that infant learning period.

As with any human learning process, further improvement is nearly always possible.

A final note - Human upright posture is now recognized by physical anthropologists to be the feature that first distinguished Man from his near relatives on the evolutionary scale. It seems reasonable to assume that this upright balance is closely connected to the level of self-awareness that also seems to distinguish us from other species. It is this connection that gives our work its fascination beyond the study of good body- mechanics.