

# Embodying an attitude

Reporting on the teachers workshop with John Nicholls, Melbourne, April 10-13, 2015

By Kate Barnett

Pictures: Jane Refshauge

*It needs to open up from the inside.  
You can't do it from the outside.  
(John Nicholls)*

What a treat! Ten teachers from across the continent gathered for four days in Jane Refshauge's beautiful Fitzroy studio, exploring with John Nicholls some of the distillations from his 40 years of teaching.

A condensed version of a series of professional development weekends he offers for teachers in the US, what John gave us was a sophisticated back-to-basics journey through some of the classic Alexander 'procedures'. Monkey, hands on the back of a chair, the whispered ah, coming in and out of a chair, coming up onto the toes, and the principles of tablework were interwoven with a simplicity that brought a quality of ongoing 'ah-ha moments' to the four days.

## **Anchoring in the lineage**

John taught for many years on Walter Carrington's training course and sustains a creative and dynamic relationship with the Carrington tradition as foundational to his work. There is a clearly articulated intention motivating the nature of his offering now. Amidst the increasing diversification of the Alexander world, what are the core elements that we would like to keep alive in this work? How can we relate these core elements to a coherent rationale for the Alexander Technique and what we do as Alexander teachers? In what ways, and using what language, might we communicate this rationale to other disciplines?



These questions were elaborated in the context of a rich oral history process that is very much part of this way of learning. It felt a bit like an Alexander version of going on walkabout. As we moved between different activities, we were travelling through source stories of first-generation Alexander teachers as well as more recent stories from John's experiences teaching in the US. With teachers present who trained with John and his then-wife Carolyn in Melbourne nearly 30 years ago, we also gained insights into the changes, continuities and developments in John's own understandings and teaching. As the student of his students, it was a unique professional development experience for me to be with my teachers and my teachers' teacher in this way. Together, we were walking powerful ground, active members of a community of learning, resourced and resourcing.

## **Considering our language**

One of the things I appreciate about John is the consideration he gives to language, and the effect of some of the language embedded in Alexander

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Technique history. He is not the first person to comment on the challenges FM's language posed for the generations that came after him. I found illuminating and strategically useful his suggestion, via modern cognitive science and philosophy, that considering our language in terms of statement categories (1<sup>st</sup> person, 2<sup>nd</sup> person, 3<sup>rd</sup> person) can help with both clarity and flexibility in communicating.

A first-person statement is based in personal experience: what something is like for me. 'I feel as if I have no legs, I'm a body with feet on the ground.' A second-person statement is that of the teacher or coach: one aimed at producing a particular effect. 'Imagine that your legs are open channels to the ground.' A third-person statement is that which is closest to being objectively true. 'The musculature of the legs is continuous with that of the head, neck and back.'

Sometimes we can mix up our categories, for instance, and use a first-person statement in what is really a second or third-person context. This can cause confusion, and possibly obscure the usefulness of the statement in some contexts. John suggested that it might be helpful for us to consider whether the classic directions for primary control developed by Alexander are a first-person statement that has been transposed to second and third-person contexts. For the ongoing success of Alexander Technique as a discipline, we need fluid and flexible ways of talking about primary control for different contexts.

Over the course of the workshop and incorporated as part of teaching with his hands, John demonstrated some different ways we could talk about what we are doing, such as: "we are asking for structural integrity and stability through the spine ... an elastic, dynamic stability that allows the mobility of the

ribs and diaphragm", and "when we grip the musculature that attaches to the back of the head between the ears, we lock the head into the neck and back... and when the big muscles of the back are gripped, then we can't let the ribs move easily to breathe".



## Articulating a rationale

The way that John was working with us grew out of, and fed back into, a coherent rationale. Here is my own paraphrasing of what he was saying, cobbled from my (inevitably incomplete) note-taking.

The Alexander Technique is about postural support, breathing, and movement and how they integrate. It is about priming the mechanism so that everything is available to flexibly respond to our intentions. As humans, we often try to support ourselves by gripping in some parts while collapsing in others. We are particularly prone to grip where the limbs root into the torso: legs with pelvis, arms with shoulders, head with neck and back. When we have these kinds of interferences with our postural support and movement availability, our capacity to breathe is profoundly compromised. What we want is an integrated, elastic, whole body response to the ground, rather

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than a reliance on partial or artificial ways of holding ourselves up.

In combination, the procedures of monkey, hands on the back of a chair, the whispered ah, and coming in and out of a chair provide a vehicle for undoing the chronic contractions that accumulate from our habits of gripping and collapsing, and promoting an even spread of elastic supportive tone throughout the entirety of the body musculature.

*Monkey* promotes an expansive back line from the crown of the head through the back of the torso and backs of the legs to the heels and soles of the feet, so that we can have an elastic uplift through the spine without trying to hold the whole body up with our legs. It's also a toning exercise for the musculature of the back, enabling the spine to support the thorax so that we don't need to grip the thorax with the superficial trunk muscles in an effort to support the spine.

*Hands on the back of a chair* is a paradigm for doing voluntary activity with the upper limbs without interfering with the postural support response and breathing ... We can achieve tone in our hands without gripping anywhere else, particularly where the arms and shoulders connect to the upper body. It promotes complete openness of the upper body and with it increased thoracic capacity for a fuller longer breath.

The *whispered ah* frees and organises the head, neck and back from the inside. As a controlled exhalation practice, the 'ah' sound gives a balance between length and width in the shape of the back of the mouth and throat. It is both the best indicator and the best release strategy for any postural habits that might be interfering with our organisation for breathing and voice use.

*Coming in and out of a chair* was a teaching practice that FM used to teach inhibition and direction and also to develop tone and elasticity in the musculature. John argues that it is not simply one of many everyday movements that could be chosen as the focus of a lesson, but that there is something about the movement *itself* that promotes the elasticity of the whole system. It recapitulates the learning experience of the incipient toddler as it rehearses unfolding from full squat to fully upright at about 10-12 months. Crucial to the process is subordination of the legs to the need for optimum spinal springiness (length), free poise of the head (forward and up) and mobility of the ribs through the back and sides for breathing (back widening).

Limbs must not be allowed to overwhelm the support of the central column of the body (primary control).





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## Enjoying some extra 'ah-ha's

The thing about 'Ah-ha moments' is that one is usually having rather than writing them, but here are more ideas and phrases that sang for me:

*The head needs to be supported by the entire body, not just the neck. This can help us to understand what is meant by 'free the neck'.*

*As part of coming up from the chair, or a monkey, we can pause, breathe, organise legs (knees), lower back and head direction, and then continue coming up... We can pause again, breathe and organise, and then continue coming up... It's the coming up that's important to being able to sustain dynamic integrated tone.*

*We don't need to include the smile component of the directions for whispered ah... It can be counter-productive for many students. The intention is to get a lightening up inside, and a lightening through the cheeks... We can just ask for that! What can be very powerful is the interest in communicating... Our desire to communicate and connect livens up the eyes and the back of the mouth.*

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Again and again, John emphasised that the way we are attending to our own embodiment needs to be the organising principle of the way we use our hands in teaching. Rather than go too much into the detail of what is going on for our student, we can 'give them our hands', and offer an invitation for unified integration. We can 'embody an attitude of invitation'.

After four days of such invitation, I'm happy to share that there is good medicine in these procedures! And there is extra good medicine in having done them accompanied by John's teaching hands. As a relatively new teacher synthesising a teaching practice from a number



of different styles, it was an absolute delight to spend time anchoring into the lineage in this way. As I continue to integrate my experience during the workshop, I understand more about my human design and the possibilities of a unifying quality of tone. I understand something more of what I need for whole body integration and for using my hands as an Alexander Technique teacher. I experience myself clarifying, energising, and inspired into more breath-and-movement potential.

In an organic moment of synthesis towards the end of the first day, John told us that he likes to think of the Alexander Technique as a continual exploration of human potential. An attitude I would like to embody, again and again.

*Thanks to John for assisting with points of clarification in my writing, and for the sustained generosity of his teaching attention.*

*Thanks to Jane Refshaug for her extraordinary organisational generosity. And a general thank you to the group as a whole – we had a great time together!*