Where Are We Going?
F.M. Alexander Memorial Address, June 6, 2005

by John Nicholls

In writing this talk I discovered anew the value of the theme of this conference: From the Ground Up. The talk started life at a very rarified philosophical level, but it had to come firmly down to the ground as I realized that "up there" doesn't work without some "down here" attached to it. I needed to meld some more grounded material with some of the philosophical ideas. You can judge whether it's been successfully put together or not.

It is truly a privilege and an honor to be standing here delivering the AmSAT Alexander Memorial Address to you, and to be one of only a few people who've delivered the STAT Alexander Memorial Address in the U.K., and the AmSAT Memorial Address here in the U.S. I delivered the STAT lecture in 1986 which was the year of the first International Congress of Alexander teachers. In 1985, as the Chair of STAT, I'd come to the realization that we were spending so much time exhausting ourselves dealing with issues in many other countries, that we had no time at all to deal with anything happening in our own country. I therefore wrote and circulated a paper suggesting it was time that STAT devolved into a series of national societies. So it's especially a great pleasure to find myself now a member of one of those devolved, affiliated societies. In fact, it was fascinating at the 1986 Congress to be there as Chair of STAT and to have the privilege of sitting in on some of those meetings that led to the formation of NASTAT, which is of course now AmSAT. At that time, I was planning to leave the U.K. to go and live in Australia; I had no idea I would one day be living in the U.S.

In the talk I gave 19 years ago, I made an attempt to place the Technique in the larger context of other disciplines or practices that had been developing over the same time span as FM's work. I'd roughly say that 20 years ago there seemed to be a cutting edge interest in many practices that could be said to involve increasing consciousness in psychophysical ways. Building on the late 19th-century developments of psychoanalysis and depth psychology, we had humanistic psychology in the 50s, 60s and 70s keenly exploring the physical aspects of psychological dynamics. Many of you will have heard the phrase "muscular armoring." That phrase comes from Wilhelm Reich and was very current 20 years ago.

> *"When an investigation comes to be made, it will be found that every single thing we are doing in the Work is exactly what is being done in Nature where the conditions are right, the difference being that we are learning to do it consciously."*
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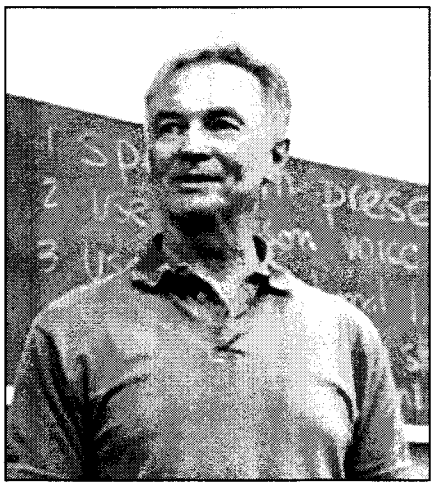
> —F.M. Alexander, *Articles and Lectures,* (London: Mouritz, 1995), p. 199



John Nicholls

There was also growing Western interest in Eastern religions, and all the psychophysical spiritual practices that stem from that. So I was inspired to try to elaborate themes that these many disciplines have in common, and to show how our work shared those themes. At the same time, I wanted to stress that we needed to have a double vision: I spoke about it as being like bifocal lenses in your spectacles. We needed to be able to see, through the distance lens, all the things we shared, that we had in common, with many practices that aim to raise consciousness of behavior and change habitual patterns of activity. But we needed to simultaneously see with the close-up lens what makes our work special, what is unique to us, what we bring to the picture that no one else does. Blurring everything together into that 60s hippie, mushy soup of "it's all one, man. All roads lead to the same truth," ignores the richness of diversity and complexity. But denying that we have anything in common with many of these other disciplines leads to a sense of isolation and alienation.

At that time, I had an encouraging sense that there was a tide going with us. I remember saying that in Jungian terms, it seemed to be a key project of the collective 20th-century Western psyche to explore the boundaries of conscious and subconscious, mind and body, mind and matter, consciousness and the material world. Sadly the general cultural ethos now strikes me as actually less in tune with what we're doing. Claire Creese, speaking from the chair on Friday, expressed it very well. She said: "As we venture more and more into the public arena, how do we promote the Technique in a world of declining literacy and visual impatience? How do we speak of sensory re-education in a world filled with sensationalism? How do we speak of indirect procedures in a world of the 'quick fix'? How do we speak of inhibition in a society awash in sentimentality?" I think that was beautifully expressed by Claire.

Personally, having lived in the U.S. now for two and a half years, I notice two particular trends at the moment. You've probably seen one of them often. You walk around a big city, and you see health clubs and gymnasiums with big plate glass windows onto the street. You look through the windows and look at the rows of people on exercise bicycles. They've got funny little white things stuffed into their ears; those little white things have a lead attached to them, and the lead comes down and terminates in the iconic rectangle of the Apple iPod. The idea seems to be to occupy the mind while the body toils. You remember John Lennon sang "Turn off your mind and float downstream"? This has now become "Turn off your mind and pedal uphill." So although having more and more people looking after themselves by taking exercise might seem to predispose them in our direction, mindless exercise is exactly one of those things that FM hated.

The other cultural trend that I think particularly militates against us is what I would call "pumping up" psychologically as well as physically. When you watch TV reality shows and popular movies you see that a constantly repeated message is "You've got to *want* it! And if you want it *more* than anyone else in the game, you'll get it. You've got to *believe* in yourself, *totally,* to the exclusion of everything else. And if you believe *totally*...you *will* succeed." That kind of pumping up psychologically seems to me to go with a dumbing-down and a numbing-down psychophysically, a decrease of conscious awareness and psychophysical sensitivity.

Now one of the things that perhaps, makes it harder for us to weather periods when the cultural climate is less favorable, is that I've often thought the Alexander Technique is, in a way, a method in search of a philosophy.

When FM wrote his books he certainly didn't hesitate to tackle philosophy; he certainly didn't restrict himself to just the practical aspects of his work. The whole of Part One of *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* shows him trying to place the Technique at a pivotal moment in human development. Briefly, as you all know, he was saying that evolution has produced these human creatures who are so ingenious that we've managed to initiate tremendous changes in our environment, from agrarian communities to the modern industrial world. Such changes demand rapid and flexible changes in our behavior to adapt to the new environments, but FM says that our subconscious instincts do not adapt quickly enough. The result is inadequate adaptation leading to poor use, etc. So in FM's world-view, nature itself, or the process of evolution itself, is propelling humanity into greater consciousness, not just intellectually, but psychophysically.

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Unfortunately, in the 21st century, the majority of modern scientists and philosophers tend to completely reject that kind of view of evolution. They actually have a word for it: it's called *teleological*, which is a Greek word meaning "having purpose." Any view of evolution that implies it has a purposeful direction is rejected these days. So what we have now in that field, in the intellectual landscape here in the U.S., is a split between the neo-Darwinian scientists saying the only purposeful element allowed is survival of the fittest (or reproductively fittest), polarized against those espousing fundamentalist religious views. Hence we end up having big arguments about what our children should be taught in schools about evolution.

I think this polarization illustrates the obvious fact that the 21st-century Western world has no common world view, no common philosophy, no shared or accepted idea of what life is about and what it is to be a human being. You all know this, of course; you've read articles about this, I'm sure. For centuries science has challenged the certainties of Western religions, until now it seems as if scientific reductionism is the new religion. But scientific reductionism, materialist reductionism, is a world-view in which our presence within the world as conscious observers seems like an accident, an accidental by-product, a freak occurrence of no significance. That's not a world-view that gives a lot of nourishment, psychologically and spiritually to many people.

So why am I bringing up such a big issue at a Memorial Lecture for FM Alexander? Because I think it's relevant to our future. If you look at the wide range of psychophysical disciplines in Eastern cultures, you can see that they all emerge from an established philosophical framework. If you study yoga seriously, not just as stretching exercises, this leads you into a system that links the physical body, via the subtle energies of prana and the chakra system, to more and more subtle subjective states of consciousness. There's a framework that makes sense of the inner and the outer, the mind and the body, consciousness and the material world. And there's a context that gives value and meaning to the pursuit of psychophysical development. Something similar can be said of the disciplines and practices coming from the Far East, particularly China and Japan. If you practice aikido or kendo, t'ai chi, or calligraphy, it's not just to practice a sport or a recreation, it's to participate in an attempt to grow at all levels of your being; and there's an accepted, shared philosophical framework to make sense of that. But although we know that FM believed passionately in the unity of mind and body, our entire Western culture doesn't yet have a framework to make sense of what that means.

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Now this is the point where, as I was writing this talk, I felt I was getting way "up there," and I had to get my feet back on the ground. So, before we go any further, I want to step back and step down to take a quick look at how well our work, the Alexander Technique, is embedded and embodied in our psychophysical nature.

Many of you will know that we have transcripts taken from shorthand of two public talks that FM gave in the 1930s. If you've ever thought when faced with having to give a public talk on the Technique, "Hey, I wonder what FM would have said if he'd been in this situation," well, wonder no more. Buy the book called *Articles and Lectures*, published by Mouritz Press, and you can read what he said. There are two full lectures given in the 1930s; I have a preference for the one he gave to an institution called the Bedford Physical Training College in London because I think it's much more coherent than the other one. Many of you will know that in Zen Buddhist literature there's a famous book called *The Three Pillars of Zen*. In the Bedford College lecture, FM, I think, clearly lays out what you could call the three pillars of the Alexander Technique: primary control, inhibition, and direction; and he even lays them out in that precise order. For the Technique to make sense, for the Technique to work, these three pillars are totally interdependent. I know we can probably find elements of them in other practices, but it was genius on FM's part to put them all together, to see how each one of the three required the others to make a practical technique.

Walter Carrington wrote a paper in 1970 called "A Means of Understanding Man." In that paper, he writes of the primary control as "a concerted way of using all the parts of the individual so that the anti-gravity mechanism is facilitated to the maximum."[1] FM in the Bedford College lecture, says "a certain control of the use of my neck and head in relation to my back brought about a more satisfactory working of the musculature."[2] So we're hearing "anti-gravity mechanism," and we're hearing "control of the use of my neck and head in relation to my back."

One of the things I love about Alexander's work is how grounded it is in biological reality, in functional anatomy and functional physiology. And something I find very helpful to illustrate this is the parallel between what we do with ourselves and with our students, and the understanding and skill that's been developed over millennia by humans working with horses. In fact, Margaret Goldie, in a lesson I had with her at one point, was telling me that FM told her he'd learned a lot from the observation of animals, and particularly horses.

When I was in my first year of training at Lansdowne Road in London, Walter Carrington, who as some of you will know is a very enthusiastic equestrian (horse rider), particularly in the field of dressage, would frequently talk to us about this

subject. And I would frequently drift off into a cloud of daydreams, thinking to myself, "What's the point of this horsey stuff?"

Well, we all grow up a little and learn a little, and I find myself now extremely interested in all this horsey stuff in a secondhand way, because when you've taken a horse from the wild, and you've broken it in and persuaded it to carry a rider on its back, you are likely to have seriously disturbed its coordination You've interfered with what you might call the *primary co-ordination* of postural support, movement and breathing. Those three things that should harmonize and synergize with each other will now be all fighting against each other as the horse tries to move with the rider on its back. What you usually end up with is a horse with a hollow back, a neck that's either collapsed or rigid, a head locked back on the end of the neck, and legs that don't coordinate with the back or with the breathing.

However, it's been understood for centuries, indeed for more than two thousand years, that you can do something about that. You can re-educate the horse. You re-educate it by focusing on the coordination of its neck, head and back. You need to help it to coordinate itself so that the support musculature allows the back to be long and wide, so that the ribs which are just under the saddle are nicely opened and flexibly able to move as the horse breathes, even with the rider on it; and the horse's neck of course needs to be lengthening up out of the shoulder area. A horse has a long neck that sticks out way beyond its front legs, and can therefore greatly influence the balance of its whole body. The neck and head must be free to adjust to the horse's gait, but the base of the neck should be coming up to help the back stay up and wide under the saddle. This requires some muscular work.

The trick is, the horse has got to find a way to bring about the muscular activity of supporting its neck and back without gripping its head on the top joint, the one we call the atlanto-occipital joint. In the horse world, they recognize the importance of the atlanto-occipital joint so much that they even have their own word for it: they call it the *poll*. It's also important to notice that for good use in a horse the coordinations of neck, head, back, and ribs are interdependent. They have to happen simultaneously—one after the other and all at the same time—just as FM said about the primary control in humans.

On the subject of primary control, many of you will know a letter that's become quite famous around the Alexander world, a letter that FM wrote to Frank Pierce Jones in 1945 containing a sentence that says, "There really isn't a primary control as such. It becomes a something in the sphere of relativity." Well, when you quote that in isolation, the primary control seems to be disappearing in wisps of ever-wispier relativity, until it fades away into the stratosphere.

However, if you read the rest of that letter, you find something else he mentions to Frank Jones, "I don't see how they can misunderstand the head and neck relationship. People understand the effect of different positions and, for instance, that with the horse the fixed reins interfere harmfully with its efficiency in going up a hill in particular. We always use the head and neck relationship when explaining to outsiders and find that it works."

In fact, if you have ever read the story of *Black Beauty*, you will have learned about the fixed reins called bearing reins, which they used to put on carriage horses. These reins pulled the horse's neck up artificially high so the horse would look very proud, very elegant, very aristocratic. But when these proud aristocratic carriage horses reached a hill, they couldn't pull the carriage up the hill because their neck-back coordination was so disturbed by the artificial attitude of the neck, that they couldn't get the power from the back and the hind legs. *Black Beauty*'s author describes how a kind carriage driver would stop, get down, take off the bearing reins, and let the horse use itself properly to get the carriage up the hill, and then he'd put the bearing reins back on.

So I personally very much like this connection with horses, and I see it as a demonstration of how much what we do is rooted in functional anatomy and physiology. It's rooted in the natural world, not just of ourselves as humans, but of other vertebrate creatures. FM's genius is to bring this up into consciousness.

The same thing applies to inhibition. Like many, I used to really dislike that word because "inhibition" can suggest being repressed, being awkward, being self-conscious in a difficult, nervous kind of way. Why on earth didn't FM have the sense to choose another word? You know that John Dewey is supposed to have crossed the continent by train to try and persuade FM not to use the word. Dewey failed, and I'm finally happy that Dewey failed. I actually now like the fact that FM stuck with the word "inhibition."

The twenty-five years before FM was born (in 1869) was the crucial period of scientific study that discovered the presence of inhibition as a vital mechanism in the nervous system. The main studies were done from 1845 onwards in Germany and Russia, but by 1870, the year after FM was born, a book by a British writer on the subject, David Ferrier, was even claiming that inhibition was the foundation of all thought, the foundation of the power of the mind to frame thoughts.

David Ferrier put it like this: "We think of form by initiating, and then inhibiting, the movements of the eyes or hands through which the idea of form has been gained."[3] Now what he meant by that was, if you think of a table, how do you think of a table? He believed that the power of inhibition was such that you were able to have the concept of "table" because in your brain you initiated the hand movements or eye movements that would give you the shape of the table, but you inhibited acting on them; and that would give you that internal representation without overt movement.

I don't know what modern-day neuroscience would make of that, but it really illustrates how excited people were about this discovery of inhibition. Some years later, Sir Charles Sherrington, the Nobel Prize winning neuroscientist who was a great supporter of FM's work, brought the scientific study of inhibition to its most refined level. Sherrington actually dedicated his key book on the subject to David Ferrier, the writer quoted above.[4] So there was a great ferment of scientific study of inhibition.

In addition, there was in popular literature in the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a tremendous excitement about the discovery that inhibition was a faculty embedded in the nervous system. Because, of course, in that late Victorian period, people thought this discovery really showed how we could exercise an inhibitory power of moderation over all those excessive appetites and uncivilized behaviors that we needed to control. So in FM's early days, inhibition was absolutely in the air, both at a psychological level and as a physiological function. Just as FM could see the biological reality of primary control in horses as well as humans, and make the leap of asking us to bring it up to consciousness, he is also asking us to raise the neurological power of inhibition to a conscious level.

In the literature of neurophysiology, the opposite of inhibition in the late 19th century was called "excitation," or "volition." In fact at the end of the 19th century one philosopher, C. Lloyd Morgan, wrote, "When physiologists have solved the problem of inhibition, they'll be in a

position to consider the problem of volition."[5] So if FM stuck to the word "inhibition" on the one side, why didn't he use the word "excitation" or "volition" instead of "direction" on the other side?

In the Bedford College lecture, he actually does use an expression like that. He says, "Give the directions or orders in the form of a wish, as it were, and keep the wish going all through the activity." But you can see he has a difficulty here, because if he simply called it "volition" or "excitation," that generally implies an overt act, a doing process. Direction is in a way the reverse side of inhibition, but not in the sense that excitation is. Direction, which FM also referred to as "guiding orders," is not a direct action, but rather a subtle combination of intention and inhibition, encouraging the largely automatic or reflex processes of upright support while inhibiting excessive muscular engagement.

That raises the question: how do you know when there's excessive muscular engagement? Who's going to decide that? Why, your Alexander teacher, of course! How does your Alexander teacher decide that? Well, the answer is that there's excessive muscular engagement when you're locking the head on the top of the neck, pressing down through the spine, and restricting the ribs for breathing. In other words, pulling the head back and down and shortening and narrowing. So the primary control becomes the criterion of good use, just as it is in horses.

There's a beautiful expression in Patrick Macdonald's book *The Alexander Technique As I See It.* Mr. Macdonald differentiates what he calls muscular movements from the process of directing; and do you know what he calls directing? He calls it "actionless activity."[6] I think that's a beautiful term: actionless activity—stillness and activity at the same time. Walter Carrington often used to talk about direction as having the wish to go up—there's the volition element—but the wish had to be expressed by muscular release rather than muscular effort.[7] So different to that pumping up idea of "If you want it enough!" That's volition really expressed by muscular effort. We want volition expressed by muscular release, or as FM himself is quoted as saying, the basic directions are primarily preventive or inhibitory.[8] Once again FM is careful to state that directing is simply using a faculty that we already have, a faculty that's been present already subconsciously, that's a built-in part of our neurophysiology. He's only asking us to employ it more consciously.

In the chapter "Projection of Orders" in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual,* FM writes of a student who complains (and you've all heard people say this) that it's too difficult to direct because he can't keep so many things in mind at once. FM says: "This represents a delusion on his part; of course he's been bringing his mind to bear on several things at once subconsciously all his life, else he could not have carried out the simplest of his daily activities." A little later in the same section, FM writes: "It will be clear during the process of subconscious development that the human creature has developed the ability to sustain continuous projection of orders." And he continues "...insistence on the importance of this in our work is based not upon a new, but upon a very old and fundamental principle in human development."[9] Again, as with inhibition and primary control, he is asking you to raise an existing sub-conscious faculty to a more conscious level.

"If mind and body are a unity, where does consciousness come into it and where does it come from?"

Now, this is where we're going to move up a level. What is this conscious level we're talking about? What is consciousness? If mind and body are a unity, where does consciousness come into it and where does it come from? Let's just say for the moment that consciousness is our direct experience of being ourselves. I experience myself standing here talking to you; you, each one of you, uniquely, experiences yourself sitting there listening to me, or not listening to me, as the case may be. We talk about mind-body unity, but what does that mean? We each have an inner world, my inner world and your inner world, because each inner world is a unique window on the world. Each inner world is a unique standpoint. (Isn't that a very interesting psychophysical word: a *standpoint*?)

In these inner worlds, the practice of the Alexander Technique gives me, and I hope you, greater awareness of myself in the outer world, and a greater sense of freedom of choice in how I act in the world. The conscious direction "up," while staying grounded so the "up" happens in a natural, unforced way, seems itself to be an aspiration towards greater consciousness, towards higher levels of consciousness. The integration of head, neck, and back, primary control, seems like a physical level analogue of better integration and wholeness at other levels of being. But what other levels of being? And what is the consciousness that can be aware of them?

The conclusion of John Nicholls' talk will appear in the Winter 2005 issue of AmSAT News.

References:

1. W.H.M. Carrington, *A Means of Understanding Man*, (London: Sheildrake Press, 1970), p. 5.

2. F.M. Alexander, *Articles and Lectures*, (London: Mouritz, 1995), p. 164.

3. Roger Smith, *Inhibition: History and Meaning in the Sciences of Mind and Brain*, (University of California: California Press, 1992), p.120.

4. *Ibid.*, p.186.

5. *Ibid.*, p.18.

6. Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, (Brighton: Rahula Books, 1989), pp. 64 and 82.

7. See, for example, Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud*, Jerry Sontag, ed. (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1994), p. 36 and Walter Carrington, *The Act of Living, Jerry Sontag, ed.* (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1999), pp. 85 and 131.

8. Marjory Barlow and Trevor Allan Davies, *An Examined Life: Marjory Barlow and The Alexander Technique in Conversation with Trevor Allan Davies,* (Berkeley: Mornum Time Press, 2002), p.293.

9. F. Matthias Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual,* (New York: IRDEAT, 1997), p. 369.

John Nicholls trained in London from 1973–76 with Walter and Dilys Carrington and stayed on for eleven years, assisting the Carringtons on their teacher training course. He subsequently directed Alexander Teacher training programs in Melbourne, Australia and Brighton, England. His book, The Alexander Technique: In Conversation with John Nicholls and Sean Carey, *was published in 1991. During the last fifteen years, he has run post-graduate courses for teachers and seminars for the public in the United States, Europe, and Australia. John currently teaches in New York City. He is the Head of Alexander Teacher Training at the Dimon Institute in Manhattan.*

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