

John Nicholls Workshop – October 5th 2002

Widening

John gave a very interesting, informative, enjoyable and clearly structured workshop to a wide variety of students from many different training courses and at all different stages of their training.

The theme of the workshop was widening and John spoke of the fact that although it sometimes seems to take a secondary and lesser role in relation to lengthening, widening in fact takes the effort, the stiffening and doing, out of lengthening.

FM only defines widening once, which is in the chapter in CCC where he is talking about hands on the back of the chair and is in fact where he defines the other directions. He says 'what really occurs is that there is brought about a very marked change in the position of the bony structures of the thorax – particularly noticeable if the posterior view is taken – also a permanent enlargement of the thoracic cavity, with a striking increase in thoracic mobility and a minimum muscle tension of the whole of the mechanism involved'. However he freely admits the inadequacy of these descriptions in that they can only really be explained experientially.

Widening focuses on the thorax and thoracic cavity, which is why it is so crucial to breathing. FM believed it to be of the utmost importance and said, 'all physical tension causes rigidity of the thorax'. He also said in addition to the directions "Allow the neck to be free so that the head can go forward and up, the back lengthens and widens, the hips back and then the knees away... and also the ribs to move and contract". John said that although the instruction to allow the ribs to contract seemed odd, he thought it may come from the idea that when FM put hands on people and brought about huge lengthening and widening, the pupil would often feel that suddenly they could breathe so much more than before and feel as though they had a huge balloon in their chest and back. This of course would be so wonderful there would be an enormous desire to hold onto it in some way and the pupil may stiffen in this newly expanded state. So the direction 'allow the ribs to contract' was in fact encouragement to allow the breathing process to take its natural course and the ribs to move in and out freely.

FM also added 'don't stiffen arms and legs' on to his set of directions '...neck free to allow head...' and Walter has said that statement in itself is a complete set of instructions.

We then did the first of many 'practical experiments' which John guided us through during the course of the afternoon, which enabled us to

experience and explore the various aspects of widening discussed. We worked in pairs, one person sitting on a chair, the other at the side with one hand on the top of the head, the other between or just below the shoulder blades. The direction to the person in the chair was to think between the two hands and hopefully gain some lengthening and widening and for both people to observe the effects of this. Then the person in the chair was to 'do' lengthening by pushing their head into the other's hand and "do" widening by pushing the lower back into the other hand. 'Doing' lengthening produced tension and a narrowing of the back and 'doing' widening resulted in slumping and a loss of stature. A clear demonstration of widening at the expense of lengthening and vice versa.

We then did a similar thing again working in pairs but this time in the horizontal, looking at the support structure of the head, neck and back. Working in this way shows the links between 2 and 4-legged creatures and also problems experienced in the vertical are often amplified in the horizontal. So one person got on all fours on the floor and the other kneeling at their side placed their hands again on the top of the head and lower end of the rib cage. The person on all fours was then asked to drop their head and back so disrupting the balance of the head, neck and back, and then to "right" themselves by lifting the head and pulling it forward and lifting up the collapsed back. This was another demonstration of the 'doing' of the directions 'allow the head to be free, head to go forward and up...'

We then talked about and tried out the idea that even though sometimes we find ourselves in a less than ideal body posture, benefits can still be gained from giving our directions a general enlivening and lightening of the body and an ease of breathing. This can be useful when very "upright" body language is not appropriate.

The next practical experiment we did was very like the first in that we were asked to slump in a chair another's hands on the back of the neck and under the chin and then 'right' ourselves. But this time instead of 'doing' the 'straightening' in our usual way, which would probably involve old habits like pulling the head up and forward or backward and narrowing in the back, we were asked to inhibit these tendencies and give our directions. The experience of returning to a nicely balanced place on the chair was very different, the other person's hands giving useful feedback to them and you.

FM said 'often, stiffening of the neck is a result of stiffening in other areas of the back' and 'stiffening of the neck is often a result of the neck trying to do the job of other parts of the body in particular the back.' So John went on to talk about the fact that the head-neck-back relationships can be interfered with in many ways and the balance and freedom of movement which we desire, cannot be brought about solely

by the directions 'allow the neck to be free...' and that we must be aware of other areas of tension in our bodies.

The next thing we tried was to sit in a chair and lean forward sufficiently to rest the arms on the legs with a partner's hand on the top of the head and lower back. The person sitting was then asked to give their directions and for both to observe the effects of the lengthening and widening.

We then looked at the influence of the limbs on the widening process beginning with the legs. Working in pairs, one person went in monkey and the other placed a hand on the person's sacrum. The person in monkey then gripped the muscles of the thighs and it was possible for both people to observe how this restricted the breathing, the muscles of the thighs being connected to the thoracic region via the gluteus muscles and across the sacrum. When the person released their thigh muscles again, thinking of a widening in the pelvis and between the knees, ease of breathing was restored.

We then tried to maintain our widening whilst coming up out of monkey, noticing how easy it was to tighten around the sacrum, resulting in a narrowing of the back and again a restriction of the breathing.

The consideration of the effects of the use of the arms on widening, came in the context of a wider discussion on 'hands at the back of the chair'

FM said 'hands on the back of the chair gives you all the experiences you need for working with a person' and Walter said that that statement was a great guiding principle to him when he was thinking about how to continue Alexander's training course after he had died.

We worked on this whilst sitting and John explained that the positioning of the hands was crucial because in bending the fingers from the first knuckle, the intrinsic muscles of the palm of the hand are employed, rather than those of the forearms, which are used and in fact over-used when we hold and grip things with our fingers and thumbs bending towards each other. So practicing hands on the back of the chair helps us develop the desired muscle tone of 'elastic expansion', not rigid or floppy or 'butterfly hands'. FM's hands were described as 'soft as butter, strong as steel'.

John explained that the softening and widening of the hands comes about through the softening and widening of the whole body and that we should not be too discouraged if we think the amount of information we receive through our hands is initially quite limited. He said we'd gradually become aware of small amounts of feedback and in time if we attended to these they would magnify.

He compared the use of the hands in the Alexander Technique to that in osteopathy where there is a distinctive division between placing

the hands on a patient to observe the difficulties and then using the hands in a completely different way to 'give the treatment'. In our work the hands are placed on the pupil to observe and in order to do that and bring about change simultaneously, the nature of the touch remains the same and the response is the same i.e. to give your directions.

We then talked about the nature of the directions we can give whilst working on hands on the back of the chair, and these brought about very specific changes in widening.

The hands are to be directed 'up and apart' and the 'apart' widens the front and the armpits. The angle of the wrist in relation to the hand will vary from person to person and depend on the height of the chair, John thought there weren't necessarily any 'rules' about this, but it is significant that the wrists are angled slightly inward (ulnar deviation) in that you're inhibiting tendency to pull them outward.

You want to direct the palm of the hand to widen, which widens the back and allow space and widening in the arch made by fingers and thumb which releases the armpits.

The elbows should be directed '...in the direction they're pointing' i.e. out and slightly down. This prevents squeezing of the biceps and pectorals, gives a connection between the outer arms and the back and brings about widening. It also encourages release of the flexor muscles of the forearms, upper arm and into the neck. Walter said that FM's elbows went out only as far as was necessary for the positioning of his hands.

So, a very valuable afternoon which too quickly came to a close. I especially enjoyed the fact that we had a chance to experience all the points discussed, there is of course no better way to explore something. I am delighted that John was able to spare the time to come up to London to give the workshop before he leaves for America.

Fiona Bryan
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