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Alexander Technique Review 8.16.12

Reviews

Review by Walter Carrington

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Moshe Feldenkrais was a remarkable man. His work has interested Alexander Teachers ever since the appearance of his first book, *Body & Mature Behaviour* (London; Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd) in 1949. His last book, published posthumously, is also of interest because in it he elaborates his original theme, the causes and consequences of “improper use of oneself” and details the exercises that he recommends as a means of self-help.

Dr. Feldenkrais was born in Russia in 1904, the year that Alexander first came to England from Australia. Feldenkrais gained a doctorate in physics at the Sorbonne, was a black belt Judo master and a founder of the French Judo Club and an assiduous student and collector of scientific information. He was particularly interested in, human anatomy, physiology, bio-mechanics, and neuro-physiology. Out of the great mass of material that he acquired, he sought to develop practical methods for teaching people how to function in an easier and more efficient manner. As he writes in *The Potent Self*, “A healthy way of use of oneself is necessary to make use of any faculty”, and, “in learning new ways of directing oneself it is essential to bring about optimal conditions for success.”

His practical work was of two kinds: one he

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called “Awareness through Movement”, group work in which the students were encouraged to increase their awareness and functioning through following verbally-directed movement sequences; the other, “Functional Integration”, a form of private teaching in which “The practitioner’s hands gently guide the individual towards enhanced functioning”.

It was in 1949 that Dr. Feldenkrais first came to Alexander’s teaching rooms, at 16 Ashley Place, to arrange for lessons in the Alexander Technique. I presume he had an initial interview with Alexander because that was customary in those days, but I cannot say so with certainty; however, he was certainly allocated to me as a pupil and I started to give him a series of lessons. At that point I did not know who he was or indeed anything about him, except that he was suffering from a vocal problem: having temporarily lost his voice he was talking in a hoarse whisper. He had a very strong pull down the front of his neck and I subsequently attributed this to the performance of an exercise described in his book which consisted of lying flat on the floor and lifting the head off the ground a number of times in order to stretch the neck muscles. The purpose of this was said to be “to bring the head into such a position as to establish its normal relation to space and gravity”. In fact, it tends to generate such powerful pulls in front of the neck that loss of voice is almost an inevitable consequence.

Things progressed unremarkably until one evening, when he had had about seven or eight lessons, he came in and I noticed that he put a new book down on top of his briefcase.

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This was *Body and Mature Behaviour*. He did not make any comment about it, so neither did I, but the next day I came across a pile of copies in our local bookshop. It proved to be a fascinating compilation, obviously derived from the work of a large number of different people. Some parts of it bore a striking resemblance to the views of Alexander himself, but mostly it was without specific attributions or a comprehensive index of sources.

I showed the book to Alexander and, after he had read it, he said that he wanted to see Feldenkrais the next time he came in for a lesson. A day or two later the meeting took place.

Alexander was always sensitive about anything that could be regarded as plagiarism of his work. He was justified in this respect by a number of sad experiences when former friends and pupils, carried away by their enthusiasm, had misrepresented and misappropriated his teaching as their own. It was not so much that he was jealous of his reputation (indeed, he stated more than once that he looked forward to the day when his ideas would be taken up universally), but he held very strongly to the view that knowledge must be gained by practical experience: by the employment of an appropriate technique and the proper application of the scientific method. The belief that practice can be derived from theory, that theoretical knowledge, however sound and accurate, can generate reliable techniques and practical procedures was contrary to all his conviction. He regarded the proponent of such a view with hostility and suspicion.

So, Alexander wanted to know what Feldenkrais's motivation was and, in particular, why he had elected to come for lessons when he had already developed methods of his own. F.M. said that if Feldenkrais could not give him some satisfactory explanation he would not permit him to have any more lessons. Feldenkrais could not, and did not. It was the only occasion on which I ever saw Feldenkrais nonplused.

That might have been the end of the story, but there was more to it than that. Feldenkrais could have no more lessons from me, but at about this time he met Charles Neal, who had originally been trained by Alexander. Neal had broken away from F.M. and was then teaching his own idiosyncratic version of the Alexander Technique. Neal and Feldenkrais worked together for quite a long while and subsequently, when David Ben-Gurion, the famous Israeli Prime Minister, was suffering from severe back pains, they worked together on him with most satisfactory results. Somewhere there is a delightful press photograph showing Ben-Gurion standing on his head with Charles Neal and Moshe Feldenkrais on each side of him, rather like two fishermen who had landed the largest tuna fish ever caught.

In 1959 there was an international conference in Copenhagen called "The Release of Tension and the Re-education of Muscular Movement". This was under the auspices of the Danish Ministry of Education and at the instance of Gerda Alexander who had developed a teaching method of her own

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called “Eutony”. She was no relation to F.M. Alexander, the name was just a coincidence; however, she worked extensively with Charles Neal, and he with her.

They were to lead the conference together. There was to be a week of lectures followed by a week of practical demonstrations and workshops. Charles Neal died before the conference took place, but Feldenkrais, and many others, gave lectures and workshops. Frank Pierce Jones gave a lecture on the F. Matthias Alexander Technique. I was present by invitation and so met Feldenkrais again, listened to his lectures with great interest, took part in his workshops and saw his demonstrations.

Thus there can be no doubt that Feldenkrais knew quite a lot about the Alexander Technique and that his own work was influenced by it not a little. In fact, therein lies much of the value of his writing. Nobody else has ever brought together all the heterogeneous material on human behavior in the way that he did, nor given a more fascinating account of the scientific evidence in support of the need for a technique for a more effective use of oneself.

Unfortunately, Feldenkrais did not have what Alexander would have considered to be a satisfactory, efficient and practical technique. His technique, as described in *The Potent Self*, amounted to what teaching techniques usually amount to: that is to say, explaining to people, showing them what is desirable, even making them aware of what is needed, what is required, but then inviting them to try and do it for themselves. This is learning by doing,

learning by trial and error. It is the usual way in which most things are taught. As for the exercises, these are “doing” *par excellence*, and can only be beneficial when carried out correctly. Most people find that the most difficult task of all is to “get it right”.

This was not at all Alexander’s way. When he first began to evolve his technique in the years before 1894, much of the scientific work that Feldenkrais describes in his books had not yet been done. Alexander had little knowledge or information to go on beyond what he could derive from self-observation and experiment. Scientific knowledge cannot of itself generate effective practical methods. What is needed is the experience to be gained by methodical confrontation of specific problems. The technique that he devised was the outcome of rigorous testing and revision. It did not develop out of an attempt to implement and validate a theory, but to meet the exigencies of a situation: his loss of voice. As John Dewey testified, the Technique satisfied all the demands of the scientific method.

The fundamental difference between this approach and others lies in the actual manner of “doing”. Here you are not attempting find out what is the right thing to do, and then seeing to it that you get it right. You are seeking to identify what not to do, what mistakes to avoid, what must on no account occur if it can possibly be prevented. So the whole focus of attention, as you perform any action, is on seeing that the wrong thing does not happen. This is instead of trying to make something happen that you conceive to be right. (Such an approach really excluded the possibility of usefully performing exercises.)

Alexander always used to insist that, with the proper exercise of conscious guidance and control, “the right thing does itself”.

Feldenkrais, has clearly defined a need; but Alexander has evolved a Technique, a way of working that is universally applicable in all areas of human activity. Whether predominantly physical or predominantly mental, it is a way to mobilize and direct all individual capacity and capability, the whole of oneself, on the tasks and problems of daily life. This is a unique achievement, but the true significance of it is impossible for anyone to grasp unless they test it out for themselves. As the old Chinese proverb says: “He who tastes, knows.”

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