

# INTRODUCTION TO TALKS

7 April 2010

1. The last talk I gave, about Benjamin Libet, was number 30 and the end of the series which began about two and a half years ago.
2. What I've done in the past when I reach the end is go back to the beginning and go through them again, adding and subtracting from them as necessary.
3. But this time, I thought it would be useful to have a general look at the series and what I am trying to do with them.
4. I think this makes sense since they are all on the web now. They are there with their references, quotations in full, and other boring bits that have been skipped when I have been giving them.
5. Anyone who is interested in any of them can now look them up whenever they like. You can also point out mistakes to me or ask questions by sending me an e-mail.
6. In developing these talks, my own particular approach tends towards the scientific. But I should be clear that this says more about me than the Technique. You can be a perfectly good, indeed an absolutely amazingly good Alexander teacher, without anything but a very hazy idea of science.
7. But there is an important proviso. If we want to be taken seriously in the worlds of medicine and science, as many of us do, we need to be able to talk their language.
8. This takes us back to the early days of the Technique. Alexander himself felt the Technique belonged in the mainstream of science and medicine. He had a horror of quackery and allied himself as much as he could with the medical profession. There is no doubt he would have been appalled at some of the company we find ourselves keeping these days.
9. Alexander's great friend and supporter, John Dewey said of Alexander's work in the introduction he wrote for MSI that "*is scientific in the strictest sense of the word...(and) satisfies the most exacting demands of scientific method.*"<sup>1</sup> We have no reason to doubt that Alexander believed that firmly – otherwise it would not have been in the Introduction.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander (1923) pxviii

10. From the early days of my own involvement with the Technique, I have been interested in its scientific and engineering underpinnings. I have never felt any need for suspension of rational judgement or belief in mysterious powers. I have always felt the AT to be open to scientific analysis and argument.
11. That is one of the reasons why, right from the beginning of my training, I have felt very at home here in this training school. Walter Carrington believed that what we do is fully within the scope of science. He subscribed to *Nature* which is the primary scientific journal in the world – you can see what it is like from the copies lying round in the next room. It deals with serious science.
12. He and his wife Dilys were members of the Royal Institution and we sometimes talked about how great it would be to have the AT as the subject of one of its Friday evening Discourses.
13. But I should emphasise that in all this I am making a very clear distinction between the skills necessary for learning and applying the Technique and the underlying scientific theory. Alexander always and deliberately talked of the practice and theory of the Technique in that order.
14. Theory is our conversational bridge with the world outside the AT. For those of us who are able to use it, it is also a way of deepening our own understanding of what is happening when we apply the Technique. But all the theory in the world in itself won't make you a good Alexander teacher – which is why you come on a training course like this.
15. So much for the general background. These talks began six years ago at the beginning of 2004 when Karen Wentworth invited me to give a series of talks which we christened *Easy Engineering*. A year later, I was invited by John Brown and Walter to develop these talks for here.
16. John and I talked a lot about what I was doing and especially when I began to get into the neuroscience underlying the Technique. One of the things we discussed quite a bit was what exactly we AT people mean by “directing”.
17. Walter of course was also keen on the neuroscience and he had written the excellent paper on George Ellett Coghill in 1941 and the one of Rudolph Magnus in about 1950 when Alexander was still around.

18. Dilys also encouraged and contributed to the development of the talks when I used to sit and talk with her. She would always ask me “*And what were you talking about today?*”.
19. And of course, Ruth Murray benignly supervised the whole enterprise. I very much appreciate her watchful and patient eye, her support and her kindness in smiling at jokes she was heard many times before.
20. As I said, the talks are on the website but it is probably useful if I go very briefly through the list and highlight some of the main topics that are covered – a sort of trailer for the series.
21. I divide them into several categories. The first group are the descendents of the original *Easy Engineering*. They deal with simple mechanical ideas about force, stress, pressure, balance, centre of gravity, levers and so forth.
22. These are fundamental to how we use our bodies. I think some smattering of what they are about is useful when we are trying to understand how we use ourselves as moving balancing machines.
23. I think it is also useful to know that what Alexander meant by the term *mechanical advantage* is very different from what someone with a technical education would understand by it.
24. Quite a few of the talks are historical. Right from the beginning interesting people flit in and out of the Alexander story. We all know John Dewey wrote rather boring introductions to the books and said the AT was scientific but who was he?
25. He was actually one of the most famous philosophers and educationalists in America. He was Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, an authority on education and co-founder of the school of philosophy known as Pragmatism.
26. Not only did he bring enormous prestige to the Technique. He was a friend of Alexander for over forty years and they both had a profound influence on each other.
27. We have Margaret Naumberg who brought Dewey and Alexander together. When she was in London she was friendly with the Webbs who founded the London School of Economics. She studied with Maria Montessori and went on to be the founder of art therapy in the US.
28. Raymond Dart transformed paleoanthropology when he discovered the *Australopithecus africanus* fossil near

Johannesburg. He became the highly-regarded Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in Johannesburg University and was a supporter of the AT from the time he discovered in 1941 until his death nearly fifty years later.

29. Rudolph Magnus was a neuroscientist who produced the basic understanding of posture which is still the accepted wisdom in scientific circles. Alexander thought that what Magnus had referred to as a *central apparatus* which controls the reflex postural system was the same as what he called the *primary control* – but the story is more complicated than that. I think we learn a lot about the Technique by looking at Magnus in some detail.

30. George Ellett Coghill was an American scientist who spent his life studying the embryonic development of a tiny frog-like creature called *amblystoma*. He came upon the AT near the end of his life but was knocked out by what Alexander had discovered.

31. He and Alexander got in touch and Alexander sent him copies of his books and Coghill replied to him saying

*I am reading these with a great deal of interest and profit, amazed to see how you, years ago, discovered in human physiology and psychology the same principles which I worked out in the behaviour of lower vertebrates.<sup>2</sup>*

32. Alexander visited him in Florida and Coghill wrote to a friend after the visit saying

*Mr Alexander seems to me to be a very unusual man. He has grasped the same scientific principles through practical work with human beings that I have found through my investigations of detailed anatomy in the lower forms.<sup>3</sup>*

33. Alexander suggested Coghill write an Appreciation for UCL which he was happy to do. Walter wrote the papers on Coghill and Magnus that I mentioned earlier and were published in the form of a little book by STAT in 1994.<sup>4</sup> It is well worth studying.

34. Then we have Sir Charles Sherrington – the founder of modern neuroscience – and widely reckoned to be one the

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<sup>2</sup> Barlow (1978)p257

<sup>3</sup>Alexander (1946)p234

<sup>4</sup> Carrington (1994)

absolute top rank of world scientists. He is certainly one of my heroes.

35. Walter remembered well the excitement and pleasure it gave Alexander when Sherrington put a warm personal endorsement of Alexander into his last book. Even though he had never had an AT lesson, he reckoned that Alexander was on to something important.
36. I personally think that from the point of view of boosting the credibility of the AT in the scientific community, Sherrington's endorsement is one of the most valuable. I am also convinced that in the long march towards greater understanding of the neurological and general scientific underpinnings of the AT, there is an awful lot to be learned from Sherrington's work.
37. The list goes on. The winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine, Niko Tinbergen decided to use half his acceptance speech to praise the Technique. Remarkably, this caused a major row in the AT world.
38. Aldous Huxley the famous novelist who wrote *Brave New World* and inspired Jim Morrison to call his band *The Doors* was another big fan of the Technique.
39. He came upon it when he was in a very bad physical and mental state and completely stuck in his novel *Eyeless in Gaza*. The Technique provided him with a way of dealing with his physical and mental problems – and a way of getting on with his novel into which he introduced an Alexander-like figure called Miller.
40. Huxley fully endorsed the Technique and particularly referred to it in his philosophical book *Ends and Means*. His endorsement, like Dewey's was a major factor in publicising the Technique and making it intellectually respectable in United States.
41. From these brief mentions of the major figures who believed strongly in the Technique, it is obvious we have a rich and deep intellectual, scientific and cultural heritage. I think we all benefit from knowing about it and being able to convey something of it to our pupils.
42. Another thread in the talks is also inspired by Walter. I mentioned he took the weekly scientific journal *Nature*. When he came across something which he thought was relevant or interesting in the scientific world he used to bring it in and tell us about it.

43. I have done a little of that myself. As I told you in one of the talks, I have chased up the medical science which shows that stretching before exercise is at best useless and can do harm. I've put a little paper on it on the website. It's not a bad thing to be able to discuss with those those pupils who insist on heavy workouts in the gym in between lessons.
44. On the same lines, based on the work of the Australian sports medicine specialist and AT teacher David Garlick, I have put together a little booklet on fitness and exercise and the role played by the red and white muscle fibres and how this ties up with the AT. This is available as a download from the website or for purchase at the desk.
45. Another thing I keep trying to find time to do some serious work on is the placebo effect. As we know, something very interesting takes place when we calm people down in a way which enables their natural reflex mechanisms to kick in and organise their neuromusculature.
46. I have also been trying to follow up the postural reflexes work of Rudolph Magnus and Sherrington. This is my real baby and there is a hugely long and very technical paper I have called *Towards a neurophysiology of the AT* on the website. I have been getting the odd comment on it from people around the world. It needs a lot more work.
47. Steven Hallmark is an actor and AT teacher who qualified here in 1983. He runs a training school in Stockholm and has discovered some interesting work being carried out on the head-neck relationship by researchers the Ear-Nose-Throat Department of Lund University Hospital.
48. Although they know nothing about the AT, we have been trying to see how their work relates to what we do as AT people. We have had some contact with them and have sent them a paper summarising their work and how it fits within an AT perspective. They are happy with the way it represents their work.
49. We will be putting up the paper on the website in the near future. Our ambition is to get them to take an active interest in the Technique.
50. So you can see there is plenty of interesting stuff going on.
51. My intention is to go through the talks more or less in the same order as they are on the site. That will give us a chance to discuss them in detail.

52. And, of course, I will keep you in touch with anything new or interesting that I come across.

### **References**

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