

## No 22 NIKOLAAS TINBERGEN (II)

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1. The last time I told you about the life of Nikolaas (Niko) Tinbergen. He was the joint winner of a Nobel Prize in 1973 for his contribution to the development of the new science of animal behaviour or “ethology”.
2. I also told you about how he had used half his acceptance speech to sing the praises of the Alexander Technique.
3. This was rather disapproved of among the scientific community but there were no riots in Stockholm and it would quickly have been forgotten if it had not been for an intervention by quite an interesting man called Edward Maisel.
4. Edward Maisel who died in 2008 was born in New York in 1937. He was a prominent writer on Tai Chi and American music. He was a director of the American Physical Fitness Research Institute and a consultant to the President’s Council on Physical Fitness.
5. He was also a big fan of the Alexander Technique and studied it intensively though he never became a teacher. Ruth Murray met him in New York and says he was certainly well-informed and devoted to the Technique.
6. He published a book about it called *The resurrection of the body* in 1967. This was republished as *The Alexander Technique* in 1995.
7. This book has a long and well-thought-out Introduction which gives a good description of what is involved in the Technique itself and at times takes a refreshingly non-hero-worshipping tone in some of its descriptions of Alexander and his little ways.
8. In addition to the introduction, it has long extracts from Alexander’s books selected and edited by Maisel. It has the Teaching Aphorisms that Ethel Webb copied down from listening to Alexander teaching during the 1930s.
9. It also reprints Dewey and Coghill’s prefaces and has an article by Frank Pierce Jones. One of the benefits of preparing these talks is that I go back over material I have among my own books and I reminded that this is as good an introductory book as any for a serious student of the Technique.
10. The surprising thing in relation to Tinbergen is that it was Maisel, the strong supporter of the Technique, rather than one of

the scientists at the Nobel ceremony, who seemed the most upset by Tinbergen's Nobel speech. He was so annoyed he contacted the *New Scientist* magazine and gave an interview to a very reputable science journalist called Roger Lewin.

11. Lewin wrote an article based on the interview which was published on 31 October 1974, almost a year after the Nobel ceremony. It was called *Did Nobelist go too far in Advocating Alexander Technique?*

12. It begins by saying:

*Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen used his Nobel Prize speech last year in an apparently unique attempt to promote an obscure body and mind improvement method. But Tinbergen has now backed down somewhat and is involved in a row with another advocate of the technique. Edward Maisel author of a recent book on the subject, **The Alexander Technique**, alleged to New Scientist that Tinbergen had failed to apply the same critical thinking to the Alexander technique as he had to the work that won him the prize.<sup>1</sup>*

13. Maisel also said that

*These dramatic public conversions have unfortunately always been part of the history of the technique, and they have always damaged sober consideration of its merits.*

14. And he felt Tinbergen's claims were "...a sad blow to the future of the technique."

15. The article goes on to quote Maisel as particularly disagreeing with Wilfred Barlow's book *The Alexander Principle* and says he accuses Barlow of serious inaccuracies and exaggerated claims for the health benefits of the Technique.

16. It was quite a fierce critique and led to an acrimonious correspondence which went on for several weeks in the *New Scientist*. Tinbergen himself wrote to say he was not backing down on his praise of the Technique and that his experience over the year since his speech had, if anything, strengthened his opinion that the AT often has beneficial effects.

17. Patrick Macdonald wrote a letter that was very critical of Tinbergen. He said that he, as "*the present senior practising*

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<sup>1</sup> Lewin (1974)p344

*teacher of the technique in this country, cannot allow Professor Tinbergen's ludicrous description of it in his Nobel address to pass without comment.*<sup>2</sup>

18. Wilfred Barlow, who had apparently been given Tinbergen's Nobel speech to check through before it was delivered, was unsurprisingly quite put out by all of this. He joined in on the other side and wrote a couple of letters of his own to the *New Scientist*.
19. He defended what he wrote in his own book and said in one of his letters that

*It is difficult to understand why any Alexander teacher should not be delighted by Professor Tinbergen's interest in their work. It can only be that they have not read his seminal study, **Study of Instinct**, and do not appreciate the subtlety of an approach that is so obviously "up their street".*<sup>3</sup>
20. It was all good fun and makes interesting reading but nothing, of course, was resolved. But it did have a beneficial effect.
21. Round that time, some people were quite pessimistic about future of the AT. During the 1960s, there had been a fall-off in public interest and in the numbers of students entering training colleges. When Irene Tasker gave the Alexander Memorial Lecture in Lansdowne Road in 1967 there was a total of forty teachers in the world. There was even some talk that the AT was beginning to fade away.
22. But Tinbergen's Nobel lecture, as well as the publicity surrounding it, together with Barlow's book which was published in 1973, were big factors in boosting public interest in the Technique. Michael Bloch, Alexander's biographer, called it a turning point
23. The next chapter in the saga was when Tinbergen gave the 1976 Alexander Memorial Lecture which was entitled *Use and Misuse in Evolutionary Perspective*. This is published in Barlow's book *More Talk of Alexander*..
24. In this lecture, Tinbergen is very modest about his knowledge of the Technique. He says that having been

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to *New Scientist* 14 November 1974

<sup>3</sup> Letter to *New Scientist* 12 December 1974

*...a pupil for no more than three years, it would be presumptuous if I were to pronounce on the Technique itself, how it works and why it works. That it can have strikingly beneficial effects I can, like many others before me, testify on the basis of changes I have observed in quite a number of my acquaintances and in myself.<sup>4</sup>*

25. Instead, of discussing the Technique itself, he looks at the whole question of misuse and how it arises. He says there are two basic views on this. One is that humans have still not fully evolved into the upright position.

26. People who hold this view

*...assume that man's evolution as an upright walking, bipedal primate has not yet been completed and that, as Alexander himself suggested conscious, rational education of our minds and bodies must "take over" from the genetic evolution which has moulded us until now.<sup>5</sup>*

27. The case for this view of unfinished evolutionary business is apparently made in a book called *Man, the tottering biped* by Philip Tobias who took over as Raymond Dart's successor in Johannesburg University. I have not been able to get this book but the title very vividly conjures up the idea of a need for further evolutionary adjustment to being in the upright position.

28. The other view of our misuse is that it is a fairly recent phenomenon, a result of the pressures that modern society places upon us. In this perspective, we are nicely adapted to life as hunter gatherers and it is the habits and pressures of modern life which are leading us to misuse ourselves.

29. In order to assess which of these views is the most plausible, Tinbergen does a quick tour of our evolutionary history. He comes very firmly down on the side that our misuse is a feature of our changing society rather unfinished genetic evolution.

30. He says that, in his view, the common belief that "*our evolution towards uprightness and bipedalism has not yet completed*"<sup>6</sup> is wrong. As he says, we have had five million years to learn how to walk properly.

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<sup>4</sup> Barlow (1978)p234

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.234

<sup>6</sup> Barlow (1978)p248

31. The important conclusion he draws from this is that our patterns of misuse have been acquired rather than genetically inherited. As Alexander teachers, we are not pushing evolution forward, as Alexander sometimes suggests, but are engaged in the more practical and immediate business of undoing acquired habits of misuse.

32. Tinbergen finishes by saying

*From what I have said it will be obvious that, once I began to pay attention to the problem of the origin of misuse, I became even more convinced than I had been on purely empirical grounds, not only of the great potential of the Alexander Technique, but also of its biological soundness and plausibility.<sup>7</sup>*

33. Unfortunately, some of those present were apparently still thinking of the Nobel Lecture and the New Scientist correspondence. I gather that Tinbergen was strongly attacked for talking about the AT as therapy rather than education.

34. Others who were there felt this was a very rude way to treat such a distinguished guest. Wilfred Barlow who chaired the meeting, apparently lost his temper completely. A couple of people, including Dilys Carrington, who were there told me they remembered it as a very awkward evening.

35. That seems to have been the end of any formal involvement by Tinbergen in the AT and I do not think he gave any other talks or wrote anything further about it.

36. He had a stroke in 1983 at the age of 76 and became quite feeble. He died in 1988.

37. In his biography, published in 2003, Tinbergen's biographer Hans Kruuk was extremely critical of his involvement with the Technique. He says of the part of the Nobel speech that dealt with it

*...one can only say that this entire section was a silly mistake on Niko's part, bad judgement at a time when obviously he had lost some of his grip. For an animal behaviour expert to devote almost half a Nobel lecture, when the world's finest were listening, to some very minimal experience with an 'alternative', non-scientific*

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<sup>7</sup> Barlow (1978)p248

*technique to improve human body posture and movement was totally out of order.*<sup>8</sup>

38. This chapter in Kruuk's book concludes with the remark that "All in all, perhaps the Nobel lecture would be best forgotten."<sup>9</sup> A review of the biography which was published in January 2004 in the leading scientific journal *Nature* refers to Tinbergen's involvement in the "rather wacky Alexander technique for improving body posture."<sup>10</sup>

39. I was quite disappointed by all of this and decided to find out what I could about it all. I was particularly curious about whether Tinbergen had been upset by the reaction to his 1973 lecture and whether this led to him losing interest in the AT.

40. I managed to track down his daughter Helen in Oxford and wrote to her and asked her if it was true that he had been upset by the reaction to his Alexander Lecture and had lost interest in the Technique as a result.

41. In her reply, she said

*My father certainly stayed interested in the technique at least until he had a stroke about 5 years before his death...I don't think that my father was particularly upset by the reception by teachers of his lecture.*

42. I had also asked her if she thought the AT fitted in with Tinbergen's work and she said

*"As for fitting in with my father's earlier work I'm afraid I haven't a clue. I'm a musician not a scientist and have no knowledge of my father's work."*

43. I had also mentioned Kruuk's negative assessment of his involvement with the Technique and she said

*I don't think Hans understood about the technique – indeed it is very hard to do so unless one has experienced it.*

44. Elisabeth Walker also says in her autobiography that far from losing interest in the AT, Tinbergen continued with it. She said that after he got the Nobel Prize

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<sup>8</sup> Kruuk (2003) p280

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.283

<sup>10</sup> John Krebs *Nature* Vol 427, 22 January 2004

*Niko continued to have lessons for another nine years, finding it of use for a time to relieve depression, from which he suffered for some time. In 1980 we stayed with them in their idyllic holiday cottage...in Westmoreland.<sup>11</sup>*

45. My own disappointment is that despite the enormous publicity he generated for the Technique, Tinbergen contributed so little to it at a scientific level. Judging from his brief observations in the Nobel Lecture it is likely he could have provided some interesting new insights.
46. But we can count the positives. He got the Nobel Prize for his ability to watch and wonder. That in itself is something we can learn from. If our work tells us anything it is the importance of opening ourselves to what is happening, observing it carefully and keeping an open mind about it.
47. We can also be grateful that what he observed in himself and his wife and daughter when they had Alexander lessons so impressed him that he was prepared to use the most important public occasion in his life to tell the world about it.
48. We know he was right and we ourselves could testify to the effects of the AT. But having it all said in a Nobel lecture carries a lot more weight.

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<sup>11</sup> Walker (2009)p138