

## NO 25 ALDOUS HUXLEY (II)

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1. Today, I am continuing with the story of Aldous Huxley. We had reached 1937 when the Huxleys had moved to the United States and Aldous had produced the book *Ends and Means*. This is a philosophical book about the nature of society and it was extremely successful.
2. He makes direct reference to the Technique in several places. It is worth repeating what he said in one place when he describes what he calls the system of physical education developed by F M. Alexander and says:

*Complete understanding of the system can only come with the practice of it. All I need say in this place is that I am sure, as a matter of personal experience and observation, that it gives us all the things we have been looking for in a system of physical education: relief from strain due to maladjustment, and consequent improvement in physical and mental health; increased consciousness of the physical means employed to gain the ends proposed by the will and, along with this, a general heightening of consciousness at all levels...<sup>1</sup>*

3. Meanwhile he continued to have huge problems with his eyes and in most of the photographs where you can see the right eye clearly, it looks completely blind. In 1938, he discovered the Bates Method and began to study it with Margaret Corbett, who had worked with Bates. Huxley was an immediate and enthusiastic convert.
4. Frank Pierce Jones says Huxley wrote to Alexander in 1941 looking for support for Margaret Corbett who was being sued for practising medicine without a licence in California. Alexander was quite annoyed at being included in the ranks of unorthodox practitioners and complained to Huxley about deserting the means-whereby principles in favour of “beastly exercises.”<sup>2</sup>
5. Huxley then wrote a book called *The Art of Seeing* which was published in 1943. When it came out, Michael Bloch said it confirmed Alexander’s view that the Bates exercises and other end-gaining pursuits had impaired Huxley’s general condition as well as his judgement and that he had gone off his head.<sup>3</sup>
6. In the book, Huxley describes his own Bates Method experience:

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p223

<sup>2</sup> Jones (1976)p77

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p78

*Within a couple of months I was reading without spectacles and, what was better still, without strain and fatigue. The chronic tensions, and the occasional spells of complete exhaustion, were things of the past...At the present time, my vision, though very far from normal, is about twice as good as it used to be when I wore spectacles...<sup>4</sup>*

7. Huxley was in no doubt that the Bates Method actually worked. He says

*That this method was essentially sound, is proved by its efficacy. My own case is in no way unique; thousands of other sufferers from defects of vision have benefited by following the simple rules of that Art of seeing which we owe to Bates and his followers.<sup>5</sup>*

8. The basic problem with it all is that though Huxley showed some improvement in his vision, it remained incredibly bad. One friend who had dinner with him in 1949 describes him feeling for the knife and fork like a blind person, while his wife verbally guides him.<sup>6</sup>
9. An account of him in 1951 describes him in his writing den at the end of a dark corridor with the desk piled up with books in Braille. He was wearing pinhole glasses and had completely taped over the right eye.<sup>7</sup>
10. At the end of 1956, *The People* newspaper in England published an article with the headline *HE HOAXED THE WORLD WITH AN EYESIGHT CURE* based on an episode in which Huxley was giving a lecture and pretending to read it. He got stuck in the text and to the great embarrassment of the audience brought the paper closer and closer to his eyes and eventually took out a magnifying glass to make out the words.
11. His biographer says
- It remains doubtful whether he had anything but the briefest intermission in his struggle to see adequately.<sup>8</sup>*
12. The curious thing is that Huxley, who prided himself on his intellectual rigour, seemed unable to admit, even to himself, that in his own case the Bates Method had fallen very short of the success he had claimed for it.
13. But his Bates activities and Alexander's disapproval of them did not affect his views on the AT. He did a review of the

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<sup>4</sup> Huxley (1943)preface

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. preface

<sup>6</sup> Murray (2002)p379

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p389

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p422

*Universal Constant in Living* in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1941 which Bloch says created something of a sensation in literary circles.

14. *The Saturday Review* was an influential literary periodical and it would not have published a review of such a book unless it had been written by a famous and highly-respected intellectual like Huxley. It is this review that is reprinted as Appendix J in UCL.
15. During the 1950s, the Huxleys made a decision to stay in the US and they began to build up a circle of new friends which included Christopher Isherwood, Igor Stravinsky, the astronomer Edwin Hubble, Charlie Chaplin, and Harpo Marx.
16. In the meantime, Huxley had become increasingly interested in religion and oriental philosophy. He became a follower of the fashionable Californian guru Krishnamurthi whom Dilys met and was extremely unimpressed by. He is long dead but I looked up the Krishnamurthi Foundation and I found they have actually trademarked the phrase "*Truth is a pathless land.*" So don't go round saying that without permission.
17. In 1952, Maria was diagnosed with breast cancer but responded to treatment. Huxley had now moved into experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs and under the supervision of a Canadian doctor, Humphry Osmond, he had his first mescaline trip. Mescaline is a psychedelic drug extracted from certain kinds of cactus. It was he and Osmond who coined the word psychedelic.
18. He had other mescaline trips and also tried LSD and believed that through these he was introduced to new levels of awareness. He wrote a book called *The Doors of Perception* (pub 1954) which relates his experiences. And if anyone ever asks you the connection between the AT and Jim Morrison, you can say his band got the name *The Doors* from Aldous Huxley's book.
19. If you look at the jacket of *Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* you'll see Huxley's picture towards the top left of the crowd. So there is also a connection with the Beatles.
20. He remained interested in the AT did an introduction to a to an extremely enthusiastic book on the AT by Louise Morgan which was published in 1954.

21. This tells how she discovered Alexander's books and studied them and tried to put them into practice. She says:

*Then one wonderful day I found myself walking, sitting down and getting up in a new way. It was like moving on a cloud, and indeed I felt up in the clouds altogether. The sensation is indescribably satisfying and invigorating but you will feel it yourself if you learn the technique. From that day, I made rapid progress, and I am now unable to conceive how I lived before I discovered Alexander. The struggle to learn is as nothing in the light of the results.*<sup>9</sup>

22. The book also includes the diary of an anonymous American friend of Louise Morgan's, whom she refers to as Mrs G. R. but who has been subsequently identified as Mrs Buchanan. In this she describes a course of thirty three lessons from Alexander. This is highly interesting and this section of the book has been reprinted in Barlow's book *More Talk of Alexander*.

23. Louise Morgan herself does not appear to have had any lessons but she felt she had learned enough to write a do-it-yourself book about the Technique. It is not over-burdened with rigorous scientific analysis.

24. One particular piece of advice is addressed to women whom she says are particularly given to clenching their jaws

*...when attacking difficult brain work. This is a great mistake. The jaw is not far from the brain, and a stiff jaw means a stiff brain.*<sup>10</sup>

25. She interviewed Alexander and asked him if he thought it was possible to learn the Technique from the books without having lessons.

26. His answer was:

*Depends on whether they can read!...Most people today can't read.*<sup>11</sup>

27. Huxley's introduction to her book is quite short and general – there is no hint that he actually read the book. The review was probably organised by the London publishers, Hutchinsons, but we can assume it made a significant difference to its sales.

28. But then tragedy struck the Huxleys. Maria's cancer came back and in 1955 she died. Huxley appears to have been in a state of denial about her illness and her death left him in a state of deep shock.

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<sup>9</sup> Morgan (1954)p24

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p69

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p37

29. A year later he married Laura Archera. She was forty four at the time and had been a friend of the Huxleys for some years. She had been a concert violinist and made her debut at Carnegie Hall in her teens. She later became a documentary film-maker and then a psychotherapist and had a psychotherapy session with both Maria and Aldous in 1952.
30. Huxley's biographer says there is some evidence that when Maria realised she was dying, she more or less engineered the marriage to Laura.
31. Through all this, Huxley continued his restless travelling and lecturing and was appointed to Visiting Professorships in MIT and Berkeley. And he continued to have AT lessons. Frank Pierce Jones said that Huxley had lessons from him in 1960<sup>12</sup> and that he had three letters from in 1963.
32. Huxley was now in his sixties and was diagnosed with tongue cancer in 1960 but made a recovery. In 1961, the Huxley house in California was destroyed in a bush fire with the loss of their whole collection of books, documents and letters.
33. In Laura's book there is an account of herself and Aldous wandering round the house in a kind of daze as the flames came closer. I suppose it was a state of shock. They managed to save the typescript of Huxley's last book *Island*, and Laura's Guarneri violin but all the rest was destroyed.
34. His cancer came back and in 1963, on the day President Kennedy was assassinated, he died in the presence of Laura at their house in Hollywood. He was aged 67. Laura lived on for another forty four years and died in December 2007.
35. So there we have Aldous Huxley. Frank Pierce Jones says that Alexander sometimes had doubts about whether Huxley had properly understood the Technique.<sup>13</sup> But he was very glad of the publicity and prestige, as well as the pupils, that Huxley brought to the Technique. Frank Pierce Jones himself was one of these pupils.
36. I think our own attitude can be somewhat similar. Huxley did not add significantly to our understanding of the Technique. His experience was from the viewpoint of a pupil who had benefited massively from it.

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<sup>12</sup> Jones (1976)p56

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p56

37. This, in my view, is where his importance for us lies. We can be glad that we have a man of Huxley's fame and intellectual calibre prepared to associated himself so closely with the Technique and willing to tell the world how much it did for him.

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