

THE ACTOR IN YOU.

by John A Baron.

(The following article is taken from a lecture that was first given to the Center For Functional Research and then published by the American Society for the Alexander Technique in their professional journal.)

...I first became interested in the Alexander Technique while working as an actor in London. I had been working as an actor mainly in various Repertory Theaters and like many theater colleagues I had worked extensively with the study of voice and various movement techniques. Some theater companies would have us spend an hour each day working with movement and voice. So, I was familiar with the idea of "The body as instrument" and how essential it was for a performer to have control of their instrument. However, I had always struggled with various personal tensions that manifested in tightness in the legs, pelvis, solar plexus, etc., which were always made worse by the fact that, so I thought, actors weren't supposed to have them! So for the most part I pretended not to have them - which made for more tension – and, etc. The point being - that my own brand of tensions and the way they were embodied in my movement and expression, limited my ability to play characters that weren't as tense as I was. Furthermore, it limited my ability to study characters, as my process of study was limited to the subjective experience of a somewhat tense and rigid Self. It was only much later that I came to the realization that it was the same for an individual as it is for the actor. Namely our patterns of misuse, downward collapses, over tensions, rigid thinking, contraction, forced expansion, caricatured emotion and predictable responses limit our ability to not only play our own roles, but to actually be ourselves, as in, our true nature .

The actor's process oftentimes involves the experience of an unfamiliar part of the Self, i.e., the character the actor is attempting to play. Many hours can be spent creating a sensory / kinesthetic connection to the character. This may involve sitting in a room, as the character, creating a simple moment - reading a newspaper for example, creating imagined smells, imagined noises, looking at the characters personal objects in the room. Other actors may work through articles of clothing or explore planes and tempo in the characters general movement. Some may go through a small scene hundreds of times letting ideas come to them about their character. One famous actress would start to explore character by choosing a pair of shoes for them. Even trips to the zoo in pursuit of character are not uncommon.

Opening to the experience of another Self through the playing of a role can challenge the fixed psycho-physical identity of the individual performer. Through working on the choreography and embodiment of their character, the actor is often

transformed to realms previously not experienced. This begs the question "How?". By experiencing aspects of him / herself beyond the scope of the familiar, and the heightened awareness that can accompany this, does the actor become marginally possessed or overtaken by the character he or she is playing? Do they ascribe these phenomena to something outside themselves? Does the actor think it is mainly through the art form that this experience happens? This confusion around the separation of the character being played, from the actor himself or herself is exemplified in the following comments of the actress Dame Edith Evans, *"I seem to have an awful lot of people inside me. Do you know what I mean? If I understand them I feel terribly like them when I'm doing them.....by thinking you turn into the person, if you think strongly enough. It's quite odd sometimes, you are it for quite a bit, and then you're not."*

If, as an experiment, we were to approach the work on our own "Self" in a similar way the actor approaches work on a character, what might be the result? Would we experience dissociation or confusion as to "who is who" as Edith Evans alludes to in the previous passage? Sometimes we would be "it for a bit and then we're not"! How does our mask, or self image, or personality "fix" the Self and therefore limit our possibilities? Or how might we choreograph this change intentionally and create new experiences of the Self? How do we embody our own character and how might this limit us? When we experience the unfamiliar, do we, like the actor, rationalize it away as being outside our self? And the heightened states of awareness the actor often recounts when performing or rehearsing a role - how would we accept these energies as being a part of our own identified self? What is the glue that fixes us to the limited identified self?

As an actor preparing to play our own role consciously we would be faced with studying the myriad ways we embody our self. Our character's choreography in various activities, at movement and at rest. Just as the actor may imagine and then replicate the way their character walks around the room, how they sit, stand still, stand on their tiptoes, the many ways they might reach for an object, for example, so we may take one of these activities and explore it from various angles as a means to understanding an unfamiliar aspect of our self. How do we use our voice? When does the voice become tight, for example, or when does it reflect our authentic sound? The times we are monotone, or shrill with the voice round our ears, or resonant, downhearted, gloomy, dull, sad, or dynamic, brisk, alert, spirited - How does our voice communicate all this? Let us take the activity of standing still (incidentally the most difficult challenge for an actor). How might our

character stand? Where does our over tension or lack of tension manifest? How balanced are we - specifically? Is the weight on one side more than the other? Is our pelvis locked forward or backward or twisted to the side? Is the neck locked backwards? And how does all this affect our breathing, or even influence our digestion? Or is the choreography entirely different and if so, how?

Following from this take an ordinary simple moment from our characters' day. Our character is in his / her room and goes through the action of waving good bye. How might we analyze this activity? We might study the action in several ways. What is the stimulus or motivation? First of all we might look at the sequence! There is a thought to wave connected to an action of waving. The arm is raised - the action happens. Looking at this from a physiological perspective - which muscles are primarily involved in the action? What are the downward collapses or the upward tensions? How is this movement being supported by the whole structure? Or, we could look at what is happening more psychologically, focus on the emotional state of the character within the action. How is this emotional state expressed in the choreography of this movement? We might look at the changing posture during the motion and consider the energy that is expressed? The physical tension and balance and freedom? And what is the individual spirit, spark, humanity that is alive or lacking within this activity? Basically, how do you, the actor, intentionally express the "being" of your character will depend largely upon your kinesthetic awareness.

Many of the previous ideas I have mentioned in the context of the actor would be characterized in the Alexander Technique as "Use". What we normally break down into separate segments of movement, emotion, posture, thought, individual spirit, expression, energy, psyche, sensory, voice, gesture etc. and how this is consciously embodied, connected and choreographed in the moment, could be referred to as "Use"- The Use of the Self. This term "Use", is the study of how we intentionally "use" the Self in our life. The Self is taken to be "the whole living organism." Alexander, himself an actor in his earlier days, said, "*Talk about a man's individuality and character. It is the way he uses himself!*" Although there may be thousands of clinical and general definitions of the Self, the process of connecting to the Self via the Alexander Technique is one of letting go or "undoing", rather than directly imposing an idea of Self onto ourselves, or anyone else. Perhaps the nature of self can be less complicated if it is thought of as a way of being.

Alexander believed that good use would begin to emerge naturally if people were taught to inhibit patterns of misuse. Correct "use" blocked by habits of "misuse". For example, driving cars in rush hour with hunched shoulders, tight wrists and

curses or locking joints and clenching teeth in response to some imposed deadline are a couple of basic examples of "misuse". Simply stated "misuse" is the accidentally acquired responses that we have learned and fixed in ourselves as habit.

Unlike the actor who is studying a character, our identity is often quite fixed, not only in the image we have of ourselves but also in the limited kinesthetic sense which accompanies this image and that "feels right". The kinesthetic sense is also referred to as proprioception, motor sensory awareness, or as the 'lost sixth sense'. Let's explore this lost sixth sense a little, not just as a concept or definition that we are supposed to then agree or disagree about but rather, let's explore it kinesthetically.

Try folding your arms quickly. Now try folding them "the other way round."

At some point in the Alexander work the student will understand that their sensory awareness is in fact faulty and that this faulty awareness is based on their habits of "misuse". This understanding is of importance when we attempt to connect to experiences that are unfamiliar. The new feels wrong and the habits of misuse 'feel right' and they will be defended as such. A favorite quote of Alexander's was, *"Everyone wants to be right but nobody stops to consider if their idea of right is right."* Fixed psycho-physical patterns create inflexible identities. Wilhelm Reich wrote, *"The unarmored being perceives the self and the surrounding world in an essentially different way than does the armored organism. Since self awareness actually colors all other sensations and since sensation is the filter through which the world becomes manifest to us, the kind of sensations determines the kind of perception and judgement."*

It is difficult to fully penetrate our lives without an actual awareness of our kinesthetic connection to life. We have millions of kinesthetic memories and these memories have a wisdom that we can access but, for the most part, we are blocked from these experiences due to misuse and armoring. For example, over-contracted muscles lessen awareness of what our muscles and limbs are actually doing. If awareness is dominated primarily by intellect this limits perception. Accessing kinesthetic memories triggers a psycho-physical intelligence, the "lost 6th sense" mentioned above, which puts into perspective the narrowness of the rational conceptual mind. Kinesthetic awareness penetrates the moment while the intellect is often reduced to labeling it.

"Are we perhaps here for just saying: House

*Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit, Tree, Window,
---possibly: Pillar, Tower,?but for saying?
(Rilke)*

In order to experiment with enlivening the experience of a single moment let us turn to our actor once again and try the following exercise.

Close your eyes. Imagine yourselves as the actor onstage in, as they say, a particular time in a particular moment. In this moment you are aware of the whole of your body, how you are moving or how you are barely moving. You are aware of yourself as yourself and you are aware of the character you are playing. What you are saying and exactly how you are saying it. You are aware of your surroundings and the other actors around you. You are aware of the characters the other actors are playing and how you are relating to them all. You are aware of the moment in the Drama. You are aware of the smell of the theater, the heat of the lights, the range of vision perhaps aware of using peripheral vision. You have a sense of the audience; it's a physical bodily sense that is able to detect their connection to this moment. (Incidentally, great performers / artists have an energetic on the audience. Likewise a dull or tense performer will have a dull or tense effect.) If you are speaking you are aware of the acoustics and exactly how much energy and resonance you need vocally so all in this theater can hear. You might even be aware of simple objects like your wristwatch or shoes or other things. And this happens in one moment!

Multi dimensional awareness within a single moment is experienced by all of us from time to time. Artists, Poets and Mystics have alluded to this over the centuries. The truly startling thing about a multi-dimensional experience is that when it happens there is a quality of emotional simplicity.

*To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower.
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour. (Blake)*

The question we normally ask at this point is: "How do we connect to this level of awareness?" Implicit in the question is the idea of having to **do** something to make it happen. Alexander emphasized that his method was indirect. Through the extensive study and research that led to the evolution of his Technique, Alexander understood that efforts to control functions and response patterns **directly** were misguided. Rather, by first consciously knowing how to kinesthetically recognize

and undo faulty stimulus /response patterns and then to direct the "Use Of The Self," our functioning, health and our whole being would be indirectly influenced for the better.

Kinesthetic awareness is vital for developing and maintaining a sense of individual unity. Being centered physically requires that our muscles gently lengthen the skeletal system while joint surfaces are opening away from each other.

Concurrently, there is appropriate tension, freedom of movement, freedom of the breathing function and coordination and balance. Being centered physically and knowing how we are affecting this through conscious intent invites us to be centered in ourselves. Other cultures and traditions have long recognized this. In Japan there is the tradition of "Hara". This refers to being centered in the lower belly - speaking and acting from the lower belly which they refer to as being the "vital center of man". Karl Graf Durchein author of the book Hara writes, *"The first duty in exhalation is to let go, first in the shoulders, that is, to let go as a person and not as a muscle. We work on ourselves and not on our bodies"*.

Since we are currently relating to "The Use Of the Self" primarily as an idea, I wish to once again emphasize that, conscious control needs to be approached indirectly. (Usually when we speak of control we think of a part of us that directly takes charge - often the super ego - to control an action or an event.) The conscious control that is explored in the Alexander work takes the form of actively inhibiting stimuli and their related responses once we recognize that these psycho-physical sets continue to put us wrong. Another Alexander aphorism: "You are here to recognize a stimulus that puts you wrong and then learn how to deal with it!"

Let's look at this idea of "conscious control" by returning to our 'actor'. Over the years I have worked with many actors helping them to develop their characters. At the beginning of our work together they will often "do" their piece for me while I observe their 'use.' These actors have varying degrees of talent and their pieces can range from being largely unprepared to well developed and moving.

Regardless of their progress, I find it to be a creative exercise to apply Alexander's principles not only to their psycho-physical use but also to their interpretation. To do this, I might have them lie on a therapy table in a semi-supine position, knees in the air, the head oftentimes supported by books in order to encourage a certain connection to the head neck and back. Through the use of my hands I will gently lengthen their spine and then work to release the tensions they are unconsciously holding or to address areas that lack energy. (The use of the hands in Alexander

work is not just general manipulation. It's a highly developed kinesthetic skill, more of an Art than a Science, and needless to say, not everyone who paints turns into a great artist. The initial training for a Teacher of this method is 1600 classroom hours over a three-year period. It is my opinion that without this skill Alexander Technique is superficial!) After a while I will ask the actor to "do" their piece again, only by now they are in a different kinesthetic condition one of openness and release. At first, they may once again approach the piece in a similar way in which case the tensions, downward collapses, and the inevitable interpretation that accompanies this are dished up - perhaps not to the same degree but enough of it anyhow. I will stop this and point out how they are responding, I do this either verbally, or with my hands or both, and I ask them to repeat the line while they consciously do NOT respond in the previous way, that is, if they had tightened their neck and shoulders or flinched in the solar plexus when they said a certain line for example I ask them to Not do this. By inhibiting the immediate and mainly predictable responses we invite responses and perceptions that access less superficial layers. I may spend quite a time going through this process with them and stopping them over and over again. The stopping is not just for it's own sake or merely a technical operation. The stopping is an acquired kinesthetic intelligence that knows precisely what to stop, why and how. All this time my hands are giving kinesthetic directions (i.e. the stimulus of conscious intent) to the actor informing them of any blocks, encouraging release and showing them how to energetically direct connection and invite centeredness. After a while new perceptions emerge about their character, particularly on the emotional level, and the habit of declamation and interpretive imposition take a back seat so that the character can start to emerge. This process is an indirect way of building a character and is based on:

- 1) Recognizing a fixed interpretation
- 2) Undoing the fix
- 3) Letting the character emerge
- 4) Directing the experience into form

The ability to be kinesthetically connected impacts the actor's ability to interpret their character. Likewise an artist's interpretive clichés come from their fixed postural sets. When the actor is more consciously connected and not blocked into old habits of expression the kinesthetic channels are free to take in and assimilate new information and experiences from the role that can feed the imagination.

Using the analogy of the actor we can see that when we are kinesthetically fixed, we also fix our own character, and, like the actor, this limits our opportunity for

change. Conversely, if we choose to reawaken the kinesthetic sense, through the means of the Alexander Technique, we open the door to fundamental changes in the Self. In this way the Self can become more than just a static identity, it could even be experienced as a continuous state of becoming. Nisargadatta Maharaj puts this more clearly, "*The 'I am this' is not certain: the "I am" is!*"

The Alexander Technique can be an art form, and it can be a study in the art of living.

Whether we are actors looking to develop our craft or individuals looking to develop beyond the limitations of a fixed identity, or both, the Alexander work provides a means for connecting to this inner direction.