

I Stand Corrected: Interview with Giora Pinkas

by Giora Pinkas, Ruth Rootberg, and Michaela Hauser-Wagner

The wish to learn more about Giora Pinkas sprang from our week of continuing education in January 2012 at The Alexander Education Center in Berkeley, California. The interviews were conducted first via e-mail, then live at the ACGM in New York City in 2012, and continued further via e-mail.

Background and Early Alexander Technique Experience

Michaela Hauser-Wagner & Ruth Rootberg: What was your first experience with the Alexander Technique? Did you immediately become “hooked” or did your interest grow gradually?

Giora Pinkas: During the summer of 1962, I went to see Shmuel Nelken in Tel Aviv about a back problem that began five years earlier—when I was 19 years old, I was injured in a parachuting accident while serving in the army. Soon after the accident, I became acutely aware of the *non-physical* effect of this physical trauma. Not only was my coordination affected, but also my *joy of living*. I had been very active: had won distinction in the army, been a champion sprinter and an accomplished folk and modern dancer, so this jolt proved to be especially traumatic. Gone was the easy coordination I had always taken for granted. To make things more complex, this physical event happened to coincide with an existential crisis I experienced as a young man searching for meaning. A background for this statement might help:

My youth was marked by political idealism, which was shattered by sobering events in the world and by the reality around me. I left the kibbutz, which was supposed to be the happy “actualization” of many years of indoctrination in a Socialist youth-movement. Leaving the kibbutz felt like tearing off a part of myself. Yet I was desperate to find life that was more meaningful and truer to myself, so I summoned the courage to leave the past behind and step into the unknown.

During these years of inner searching, I remember clearly a thought presenting itself to me while I was driving alone after midnight on a deserted city street: There must be a *conscious method* for helping people to live. Time passed and I forgot about this thought. It is important to mention I was not satisfied with other career choices I had considered up to this point.

RR & MHW: What were they?

GP: Modern dance was one. I had already become a dancer, deriving a lot of joy out of moving freely, being fit and alive. I admired my dance teacher as a person and a professional. A former gymnast in Europe, he became a member of Martha Graham’s company when he was already in his 40s! His own approach to dance and to teaching, however, was vastly healthier than Graham’s. I was inspired to work on myself day and night. He was impressed with my fast progress, but when he offered me a teaching position, I could not see myself doing it. I lacked confidence. It was one thing to work

very hard and progress, but I had no life experience, no knowledge, and no real perspective.

Philosophy was another possibility. I was intrigued by what I had read and wished to know more. Having also read Freud’s early lectures, I was drawn to psychology, for its promise of self-knowledge through delving into the unconscious. Alas, I had intimate friends who studied psychology—brilliant intellectuals who underwent psychoanalysis—and I was unimpressed with the results. It became clear that it was not what I was looking for.

Then my father suddenly passed away and my life took a sudden detour.

To support my mother, I stepped into my father’s professional shoes: owning and operating heavy machinery as part of a cooperative. That was hard work which, ironically, my father had been determined to spare me from! We built roads in the desert, irrigation canals, cleared spaces for new towns, etc. It was a different world indeed, populated by older folk, yet it provided me an opportunity to learn and grow up a little. I had to master technically and physically demanding skills. It took collaborative effort and no-nonsense responsibility. It was important to prove to

myself that I could do this, but, gratifying (and lucrative) as it was, I could not see myself doing it for very long. Also, there was a price I paid: a complete collapse of my “dancer form.” After two years in this job, I was a mess, again. It was time to pick up where I had left off.

I enrolled in a two-year progressive physical education course based on Elsa Gindler’s (1885–1961) method, known in the United States as Sensory Awareness, in order to prepare for teaching dance. I hoped to quickly regain my good form; after all, I danced so well before. But, for the life of me, I could not find the way to replicate what I had done when I first discovered dance! Imagine the frustration and disappointment. My restlessness became obvious to my friends. Finally, the director of the course, aware of my dilemma, suggested that I consult a man who just recently returned from London, where he had learned a new technique....

When I finally experienced the dramatic results of my first lessons with Shmuel Nelken, it was a case of *instant recognition*, and a great relief, too. Not only did Shmuel manage to “put Humpty Dumpty together again” rather quickly, but the work *resonated* in me, and I knew that this would be a good path to pursue. Because of my background, my response to the lessons was akin to revelation. I felt whole and happy again and *wanted to have what he had*. By the way, though I was clear about studying the Alexander Technique from that



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point on, I did finish my physical education course before heading for London.

RR & MHW: Who initiated the idea that you become a teacher, you or Shmuel?

GP: Oh, I did. I asked myself, “I wonder how he did what he did?” I wanted to know what he knew. Conscious Control: that is what I wanted.

Leaving Israel for England and Macdonald’s Course

RR & MHW: What did it take to leave Israel? Can you talk about family, visa, etc.?

GP: It was uncommon for Israelis to travel abroad in the 1960s, for a number of reasons, among them a steep travel tax. Fortunately, I had money saved from my days of hard labor. I obtained a student visa from the British Embassy with help of a letter from Mr. Macdonald. Leaving my isolated little country for the first time ever at the age of 26 was a big deal. I traveled by ship from Haifa to Venice (wow!), then by train to Frankfurt and on to Amsterdam (wowie!!), and finally arrived in London.

It so happened that at that time my mother was having treatment for a heart condition near Frankfurt. We met when I stopped there for what turned out to be our last time together. She passed away a few months later, when I was in London.

RR & MHW: Moving between continents is such a life-changing event, and more so with your personal loss. Once you settled in, what was it like to live in England?

GP: Living in London in the swinging 60s was an eye-opener—an education. That huge metropolis was fascinating. And what a shock it was being spoken to in Cockney! Especially when the situation demanded that one pretend to understand.

Macdonald’s class was a good place to learn English. There were more than 10 Israelis around, but he did not appreciate when we spoke Hebrew in class! Changing a deep cultural habit was good for us, though. You may find it hard to believe, but by the time I left London—four years later—I spoke English with a semi-British accent.

The Beatles recorded in my neighborhood. I was into classical music, but I did buy a book at a shop called Apple they owned on Baker Street. (Steve Jobs, where were you then?!) Distracting fashion trends emerged in the form of miniskirts for ladies and long hair for men—fascinating! We Israelis were a bit older and not exactly participating—just keen observers.

A tiny attic in Belsize Park became my nest, and I took a part-time job at the Israeli Embassy, working evenings and overnights. By the way, contrary to what is printed in various Alexander Technique publications, we all paid our way. Not one of us was supported by the Israeli government. False rumors circulated because, like me, other Israeli trainees found jobs at the Embassy. It must have been hard to explain why so many of us (18 of whom went on to become training directors) studied with Macdonald. It was therefore assumed that the government must have helped. The real reason for this small migration from the Middle East was different. It was a testimony to the skills and enthusiasm of Patrick’s trainees Shmuel Nelken and Rivka Cohen, who, upon their return to Israel, stimulated vast interest in the Alexander Technique.

RR & MHW: Tell us about working at the Embassy.

GP: I had saved money for tuition plus I had a little surplus, but needed to meet my living expenses, so I worked throughout my four-year stay. Working for the Embassy presented unexpected perks, like getting a glimpse of a glamorous life—a life one typically sees only in movies. For example, I attended posh diplomatic parties (as wardrobe attendant, alas) and acted—for real—as bodyguard to visiting prime ministers and presidents such as Ben-Gurion, Abba Eban, and Golda Meir. The body-guarding business had us collaborating with Scotland Yard. I swear these good ol’ chaps actually look like one expects them to look, trench coats and all. The dignitaries stayed at the finest hotels in town, which meant that we did, too! I would literally rub shoulders with heads of state, royalty, movie stars, and the super rich (Onassis’ suite was around the corner). One day in the Dorchester Hotel’s elevator I bumped into James Bond (Roger Moore).

You can imagine what a heady experience it was for someone who had to borrow a jacket to do his job. I thought of it as practical application and learned to roll with the punches. But it also created tension, and sometimes I needed help.

I remember well rushing to 16 Ashley Place after a long and tense shift at Claridge’s, the most luxurious and exclusive hotel in London, desperately looking for someone to give me a lesson. I was not used to wearing a tie and it was killing me. Mr. Scott happened to be free, and when I asked for a lesson, he quipped: “I don’t know about a lesson, but I can make you *feel* better.” Thankfully, he did. What I inferred *between the lines* was: A lesson is something more serious; it takes longer and there is a charge for it, so let’s not call it a lesson. But you look like you need emergency help, so I will make you feel better in the short time I have between lessons. It turned out to be a memorable lesson (or whatever it was) after all.

RR & MHW: Did you engage in non-Alexander Technique related activities while on Macdonald’s course, other than your job?

GP: As a child I played the piano and sang at home with my mother and sister. Singing and folk dancing were also a big part of the youth movement (age 10–18). Later I joined a semi-professional choir consisting of Jews singing Bach Cantatas in a church during Easter...in an Arab village! We later joined real professionals for the first (now famous) Israel Festival, with Leonard Bernstein conducting.

I had hoped to study voice in London. It did not happen, but I did join two choirs, both led by men connected to the Alexander Technique. Other than the choirs, with work, occasional theater, and my girlfriend, there was no time left.

RR & MHW: Can you tell us something about Mr. Macdonald, before we delve into his teaching?

GP: Macdonald lived in Lewes, a village near Brighton. He went for an early swim each morning in the sea (!) before taking the train to London and then traveled back to Lewes in the late afternoon. He and his elegant wife Alison, who also trained with the Alexander brothers but did not teach much, owned an originally-designed house, aptly named “Cattle Gate,” which was situated among dairy farms in the outskirts of Lewes. It

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included an aviary, an organic vegetable and flower garden as well as a tubful of (dangerously potent) home-brewed beer. I joined him on his customary long nature walk when I visited them, crossing fields and climbing a steep hill. We also drove to the coast, where he made me take a swim in the ocean. It was bloody freezing!

RR & MHW: What are some of your overall impressions of learning the Alexander Technique with Mr. Macdonald?

GP: If you wish to understand Patrick Macdonald's method of teaching, it is important to keep in mind the following: F.M. Alexander was known to be quoted at one stage (I am paraphrasing): "Now I can do it *in spite* of them!" I take it to mean that he had arrived at a level of skill that allowed him to impart his teaching and improve his students' use without needing their intellectual understanding. He could just give it to them through the delicate and forceful directions he produced.

From my perspective, Patrick Macdonald worked *from the same "place,"* i.e., he only needed your cooperation by not resisting his hands. *He did it for us*—meaning he changed our use for the better without needing more than our availability. Then, after we were on a higher level of use, he explained more and broke the procedures down into detail, so as to make them as clear as possible. Confidence comes from having experienced and practiced something consistently and deeply enough until it becomes a part of you.

RR & MHW: How was Mr. Macdonald's teacher training course set up?

GP: The course ran Monday–Friday from 2–5 pm. There were about 15 students on average. Barring unusual circumstances, we all arrived a little *ahead* of time, and when Mister Macdonald, as we called him, energetically entered the room, we were ready. (Current trainees, take note!) He wore a tailored suit, a tie, and often had a flower in his lapel. He gave you the impression of someone who can't wait to show you what he knows. He loved amusing stories and jokes. His oft-repeated motto was: "This work is too serious...to be 'serious' about." To be sure, he was a

serious person, interested in and knowledgeable about spiritual things. When I showed interest in the subject, he gave me books by Ouspensky (1878–1947) and Gurdjieff (1866–1949). He told me that his mother was a Quaker and that when he was a boy he accompanied her and loved their way of worshipping in silence.

Macdonald loved to teach and was a tireless worker. Every day, he gave each of us trainees two chair turns and an extra one if time allowed. We could request a table turn, too. When it was your turn, he would organize you, up...up...and then take you in and out of the chair, maintaining the organization. You learned to go with the flow, leaving yourself alone. The experience was uniquely satisfying.

Mr. Macdonald was such a wiz at *movement*. Not one of the teachers he trained can do it as he did! It was his unique gift and, I might add, a boon to us. He could "play your body" like nobody's business. You had little choice but to learn to play Ginger to his Fred. All that up and down, mind you, was informed by Inhibition. His ability to move fast without losing his poise was a result of decades of dedicated study (his first lesson with F.M. was at age 10) and his daily life-long practice of sitting still and directing.

After about four to six months, we started to use our hands as Macdonald's "partner," while working on another trainee or a guest. When you were the "teacher," he would stand facing you, gently putting his hand on your shoulder, which signaled making a smooth dip into Monkey position. He would place your hands on the "student," deftly guiding your wrists. Together Macdonald and "teacher" would move the "student" back and forth, sideways, up and down. It took focus to follow his lead: he taught us to be flexible and to get out of his way.

As Mr. Macdonald would explain it, first the trainee learns to get out of the teacher's way...then out of his own way...then out of "Its" way. The "It" is the Primary Control working naturally and well. In this last stage you no longer analyze or hesitate, because the natural coordination is reclaimed. It reminds me of Isaac Stern, to whom I introduced the Alexander Technique in Israel, telling me that a musician no longer thinks about *technique* while performing, but rather about *expressing* what's in the music. Similarly, when we teach the Alexander Technique at our best, when we are "in the zone," it is like beautiful music flowing.

With Mr. Macdonald's help, most trainees learned how to get out of the way in the first few months. Learning to get out of the teacher's way does not mean being pushed around. It was more like the tango, where you are responsive to the lead and both move in harmony. It's not that difficult if you set aside the ego. You learned to be grounded in Monkey so that you couldn't be pushed off balance. Then you were in a position to follow as an equal and to collaborate.

In the next stage of training, we worked on fellow trainees (who could give feedback) and later on "bodies" by ourselves. It was inevitable that we emulated the teacher. We did a lot of that, in fact. Some even adopted Macdonald's mannerisms. We joked about it later. These adopted idiosyncrasies were later discarded, like old scaffolding. Yet hopefully something hard-to-define and essential remained.

RR & MHW: Do you use Macdonald's routine when working with your trainees?

GP: I don't do it as much, but in some courses, they do.

RR & MHW: Why not?

GP: Why don't I do it? Because I'm lazy, and not as good at it.

RR & MHW: What do you do instead?

GP: Role changing. When I work on trainees and I feel that they "got it," we change roles. I say "While it's still fresh in your system, give it back to me." It seems to work for us. We go back and forth like that while I guide and correct the placement of their hands, if needed. John Baron (my co-director) and I give the trainees a lot of freedom, because we found that they can *teach each other* certain things quite well. It's not easy for a training director to know how much to control the process of training and how much "rope" to give—how much to let them figure it out for themselves. It's an educated gamble. For this to work in the long run, trainees must be motivated and attentive.

RR & MHW: Did you ever work on Macdonald during your training?

GP: Yes, when we were further along in our progress, we worked on him. It was not easy because he would not lower his standards for *anybody*. We learned to work in a way that

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pleased him and met his physical needs: We knew that he had congenital curvature of the spine, though it was hard to *notice* a curvature then, but only few were aware that he had suffered from epilepsy since childhood. He had overcome many obstacles. In a rare emotional moment, I heard him say that he owed Alexander his very life.

To be able to work well with him, we had to be *unfazed* by corrections. Learning to do that meant learning to remain cool—to inhibit.

RR & MHW: You mentioned table turns. Did Macdonald teach you how to give a table turn during your training?

GP: Yes. In fact, had he not been teaching it, I, for one, would have found it difficult to develop a teaching practice. Learning how to do table work was especially important to me because of my early insecurity with chair work. Table work is teachable and easy to explain. When a pupil is on the table, one can more easily impart a sense of expansion—by non-doing—as well as *undo* fixed patterns by means of manipulation. There is a difference, of course, between *non-doing* and *undoing*.

RR & MHW: How did Macdonald guide trainees towards improvement?

GP: By building you up gradually. He took his time. By having you observe again and again how he solved problems, then taking your hands and doing it together, he taking full responsibility and you observing as you followed, again and again. Repetition was an important part of it.

His was a good example of old school at work. It was not an indulgent or pampering approach. He had refined, sharp senses and the ability to *feel for* others and, like we Israeli “Sabras” [who are named after the cactus fruit that is prickly on the outside and soft on the inside], Macdonald may have appeared tough...but had a tender core.

When I think of him, integrity and virtuosity come to mind. He was a kind and generous man but no psychologist. I studied Zen later in Israel and in Japan, so I can verify that he was not unlike a Zen master. Of course he never talked about himself in such terms, but *Zen in the Art of Archery* was one of the books he highly recommended. I know of other old traditions where students learn an approach to life, indirectly, by learning a practical craft or art. The word *technique*, by the way, comes from the Greek for *art*.

Perhaps because he felt (as others did) that Alexander did not *explain* enough and his heart was not into training teachers, Mr. Macdonald took special care to explain what he was doing. He slowed and broke down the procedures and the placement of the hands into details and thus made them clear and digestible.

He kept an eagle eye on what was going on (in the two adjoining rooms) at all times. If he spotted you working without using a true position of mechanical advantage, he’d let you know.

Most of us did not mind being watched and corrected; I know I did not mind. I saw that his corrections came out of responsibility and care for his students. F.M. said that pupils tended to treat him like the enemy when he pointed out their mistakes. That defensive tendency must go, or serious training cannot take place.

Not everyone had as easy a time of it. Those who had issues with authority had problems with his way of teaching. A training director is not a professional psychologist, and the training course should not become a psychotherapy clinic. For deep psychological issues, one can always seek help elsewhere.

RR & MHW: You were entirely happy with your training. How do you think a positive experience such as yours influences a future teacher as opposed to someone who struggles more during training?

GP: It stands to reason that a happy training experience will reflect on your work. Yet it is entirely possible for someone who struggled while training to become a good teacher and/or training director.

To be sure, I went through difficult periods during training, but it was

about growing up—not due to faults of my teacher. Who said that it ought to be smooth sailing anyway? Maybe I was happy with my training because I did not expect it to be different. Maybe some have a naïve idea about how conscious control is to be gained. Real change is difficult. Alexander explained about *antagonistic forces* making up the whole. It means that one has to strengthen and learn how to work with opposition. That could mean having the strength to withstand the good as well as its “shadow”—the so-called bad. By working seriously on yourself and overcoming crises, you get stronger. If you believe psychologists such as C.J. Jung, *crisis is inevitable* when deep learning is concerned.

Input from other Alexander Technique Teachers

RR & MHW: Which other teachers did you study with when you were in London? Did it ever confuse you? Or help in a particular way? Was there any teacher other than Macdonald whose influence was significant?

GP: Macdonald was *by far* my main influence. Others added and embellished, but were not as influential. And no, I was never confused by other teachers’ approaches.

Peter Scott, whom I mentioned earlier, was a second influence. He was trained by Alexander and later was helped by exchanging work with Macdonald, who invited him to assist on the course. Scott gave me private lessons and was very helpful.

Mr. Scott had a very different temperament, as well as a different body type; he was careful, serious-looking, and very religious. He was a tall man with huge (pianist’s) hands, and he was slow and deliberate in movement. He intentionally tested his student’s “inhibit-ability.” He worked well with and was a good contrast to Patrick Macdonald.

In my second year, I visited the Carrington School and had Walter and others work with me. It was helpful to experience a different approach, but it was only a brief experience. Since that time, however, I’ve had many opportunities to happily collaborate with Carrington-trained teachers.

In the mid-70s, I worked with Marjorie Barstow, in our San Francisco training course as well as in private lessons. I appreciated and learned from her unique abilities. I was puzzled, however (to say the least), by her later flip-flopping regarding training. She told me emphatically—and more than once—that she did not train teachers. But here may not be the forum to discuss this, as indeed it deserves to be discussed.

“Find someone whose teaching and character you value and do your best to learn from this teacher. And while doing it, don’t forget...to be true to thine own self.”

It's also true that I continue to pick up "nuggets" here and there from colleagues.

One thing worth mentioning is that as trainees we worked a lot with each other away from class. And when I stayed an extra year in London after I was certified, we used to meet all the time to work. It taught us just how important it is to continue working with colleagues on a regular basis. It was different from class—more relaxed—and proved to be a middle step between class and independence.

Back in Israel, we continued working with each other on a regular basis. I strongly suggest this to every teacher, especially in the first few years after graduation. I cannot see how a new teacher can make it without such help.

From my perspective, three years of full-time training are often not enough. We ought to collectively explore ways for raising training standards. And in the meantime, we in our Berkeley course have decided to add one year to the training. Beginning in January 2013, we'll offer our graduates an elective fourth year. Enrollees will attend class two days per week for an extra year. The cost will be very reasonable. We already have had enthusiastic response from our current trainees.

RR & MHW: Would you give verbal feedback to each other during your private exchanges?

GP: Yes. We did that in class, too, but we gave each other feedback more liberally when away from class. I can remember working on a friend who kept asking: "What are you thinking? What are you thinking?" We picked each other's brains, you see.

After we returned to Israel, some of us taught in the same building in Tel Aviv, and we worked on each other between lessons. We also helped with each other's students.

RR & MHW: Two on one?

GP: Oh, yeah. It was not uncommon (laughs). Why not? Collaborative work is an art in itself. I have a vivid memory of Peter Scott and Bill Williams working together on me on the table. (Bill is the only teacher I know of who completed his training with both the Carringtons and Macdonald. Later he developed a meditative, unique way of working and acted—discreetly—as mentor to some trainees, not unlike Miss Margaret Goldie did.)

New Teacher

RR & MHW: Did you start teaching right after graduation?

GP: I remained in London and started teaching right away, while still going to class regularly. On two occasions, when Macdonald traveled, he asked me to take some of his private pupils, which I appreciated, but not without being nervous. Mind you, I was giving these lessons in Alexander's old teaching room. Nooo pressure!

RR & MHW: Do you remember what/how you taught in those first years as a beginning teacher?

GP: I was better at table work and could achieve enough to make people want to come back for more. In general, I taught as I had been conditioned to teach: in the mold of my teacher, with slight variations. I did well and developed a practice in Tel Aviv with no difficulty.

RR & MHW: You have earned your living teaching the Alexander Technique. That's much more than many of us can say.

GP: The Alexander Technique became my life's focus. There was nothing I would rather do. I was lucky to have a few successful colleagues precede me and establish the Technique's reputation in Israel. The Alexander Technique really caught fire in Israel around then. Word of mouth, it turned out, is an effective way of advertising! We did not need to formally advertise, since people in Israel have no cultural barriers regarding spreading the word to friends and relatives.

RR & MHW: What advice would you give to new Alexander Technique teachers?

GP: As a general rule, I don't give advice. But since you are asking, I will try to think of something. I once heard Walter Carrington quote Shakespeare: "To thine own self be true." It resonated with me. But that might be too general, so I would add: Find someone whose teaching and character you value and do your best to learn from this teacher. And while doing it, don't forget...to be true to thine own self.

America

RR & MHW: When did you move to California?

GP: Macdonald first suggested it to me in 1968. One day, out of the blue, he said: "Giora, why don't you go to America?" It took me completely by surprise—it had never even occurred to me! I don't remember what I mumbled, but I didn't take the bait. Later I figured out that he wanted me to go because *he* wished to move to America and have one of his students pave the way. He did move to Los Angeles anyway, around 1970, but things did not work out as expected. He got tired of waiting for a Green Card and returned to England.

Then in 1972, my American father-in-law insisted on sending us tickets, and eventually we gave in, accepted his offer, and came to America—but not without apprehension. We were content in Tel Aviv as a young family, with a one-year old boy. I'll give you a sense of how uncertain I was about going to America and what a big event it was for me: For the second (and last) time in my life,

I consulted the I Ching! I remember asking, "How am I to behave in order to succeed in America?" The unexpected, yet very Alexander, reply was: "Be an example." OK, I thought, *this* at least I can try.

We made up our minds to go and experience something new *for two years*. I left a thriving practice and we rented out our little roof flat in Tel Aviv by the Mediterranean Sea, fully intending to pick up our good, comfortable life when we returned to Israel. Well, things happened...and here we are, 40 years later, still stuck in California! Being an American citizen, though, I am not complaining.

RR & MHW: You're an American citizen now?

GP: Oh, an appreciative American citizen.

RR & MHW: When did you become a citizen?

GP: In 1985 I was invited by my friend Yehuda Kuperman to guest-teach in Switzerland. Discovering that my passport had expired, I hurried to the Israeli Consulate in San Francisco. I was told "Your passport expired years ago! Sorry, you must go to Israel to apply for a new one." I went home upset and wrote

"You know, to inhibit can be an expression of courage: sometimes to suffer a stimulus and not react is an act of courage."

the Israeli Consul a long letter, explaining what I had done in Israel: how I had served my country, was injured in the army, was a member of a kibbutz protecting the border, etc., and now I couldn't afford to go to Israel (I really couldn't), and needed the passport for my livelihood. I pleaded for reconsideration. A few days later something unusual happened: the Consul personally phoned me. He started explaining at length about the law and technicalities, how he had appealed to his superiors and they too tried, but it was against the law—impossible! I was very anxious, as you can imagine. But as he continued talking, my attitude changed. I completely let go of my disappointment and anxiety and became resigned to...whatever. I just kept listening, waiting for him to finish his lecture. He went on and on. Then in the middle of a sentence, he blurted out: "So, when are you coming to get your passport?" I could hardly believe my ears. I think it was an example of Inhibition at work. He must have felt that I had become completely *detached*. In the middle of that long *spiel* he turned 180 degrees! "So when are you coming?" I quickly replied: "Right away!"

After my Israeli passport was renewed, I went immediately down the street and applied for American citizenship. My life, by then, was here, and it was time to change my "political identity" in order to reflect it. A few months later I became a citizen, which made my children very happy. Actually I do have dual citizenship, but my Israeli passport has expired...again.

Training Course Director

RR & MHW: Can you say something about the transition from private teaching to running a training course with Frank Ottiwell?

GP: In 1974 we opened ACAT-West, with my (first) wife Catherine as administrator. This is how it began:

Frank had trained with Judy Leibowitz and years later worked with Macdonald. I remember Macdonald bringing Frank as a "body" into our training class in 1966. Macdonald was by then Frank's mentor, you could say.

When we stopped in London on our way to California, Macdonald said: "Oh, if you're moving to California, here is Frank's telephone number." I phoned Frank, and we went to visit him. After we settled in San Francisco, he visited us and we began to exchange work, which led to closer ties. Frank then mentioned that a number of people wanted to be trained, but he wouldn't do it alone. If I agreed to join him as co-director, however, we could do it together. I had seven years of teaching behind me, but not the slightest intention of becoming a trainer. I wrote to Patrick about Frank's idea and was surprised that he was very much in favor of it. He encouraged me personally and promised to help us.

We invited Ed and Linda Avak (trained by the Carringtons) to join us and form a team in directing the course. They considered it, but eventually declined. So we went ahead and started the course, with Macdonald as our yearly guest. (There is footage taken in 1975 of Macdonald working in our class,

now available on DVD.) That is how our training course came about.

RR & MHW: What about your current training course?

GP: In 1983 I opened The Alexander Educational Center in Walnut Creek (now located in Berkeley), and later invited John Baron to join me.

RR & MHW: You also trained teachers in Germany. Tell us about that.

GP: In 1985 (the year of the passport fiasco) when I taught on Yehuda's thriving course in Switzerland, some of his students liked my work and invited me to open a course in Freiburg, Germany. It suited my needs then, but since I was not about to move to Europe full-time, I found a co-director, a gifted teacher/musician trained by Yehuda named Aranka Fortwaengler. Walter Tschaiowski, who now heads a course in Hamburg, was the initiator and assistant on our course. That arrangement enabled me to spend four months per year (two months twice) in Freiburg—a charming university town hugged by the Black Forest—while continuing my training in California, with John Baron as co-director. This German course still exists, and I go there every summer to teach and serve as moderator.

After Freiburg I received an invitation from Heidelberg to establish a similar arrangement there, which lasted four years. I have continued to teach in Europe every summer, now also in Bremen, Hamburg, Berlin, Munich, Basel, Zurich, Paris and Vienna. I also occasionally teach in Galway, Oxford, and London. Most of my

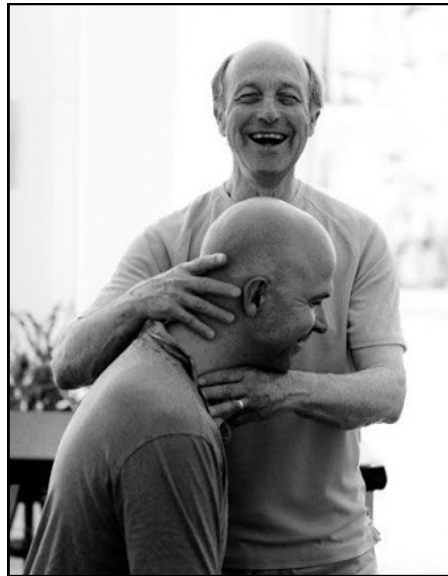
collaborators/friends, by the way, are not from the Macdonald lineage.

The Austrian Alexander Technique society (G.A.T.OE) was formed as a result of my prompting. I did it because a non-affiliated society was about to register with the Austrian government. I thought it would be damaging to our credibility if the public and the government were introduced to the Alexander Technique as a profession that does not require in its bylaws any quantitative standard for training—an unheard of situation in the modern world. I also helped the Alexander Technique Centre Ireland in Galway renew its STAT connection. I mention this proudly, as part of my (sometimes controversial) "activism" on behalf of the Affiliated Societies' standards.

RR & MHW: Is there anything that consistently distinguishes German (European) trainees from Americans you've trained in California in their approach to training? Is there anything else you would like to share on this subject?

GP: Like in America, Alexander Technique folk in Germany are not representative of the average population. Our colleagues there—like here—are special in the sense that they are interested in personal growth, and aware that the individual is the key to changes in society.

Generally speaking though, in European culture, especially in Germany, the teacher is "It." Teachers, by tradition, are invested with authority and status. In the United States, one painfully discovers, the *student* is king, and the teacher is the



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one being tested. Things on this continent are more...fluid, rather like a work in progress. The other side of this coin is that in the New World there is more freedom, more questioning, and more creativity. So a teacher's life is easier in Europe, but after one gets used to the topsy-turvy American hierarchy—and is stretched by it—it is actually quite OK.

On America's soil new experiments are taking place and things are in flux. There is more raw energy and therefore more potential here. Trends tend to begin here. The land itself seems to support new behavioral patterns, more so than in Europe, where old traditions are slow to change. The Alexander Technique's beginning was in Australia, its development in Europe, but more and more the focus shifts to America, where it has yet to flourish. Do you suppose that I am biased?

The Art of Teaching

RR & MHW: How did you develop your own way of teaching?

GP: I am not a good judge of my own work, but if there is such thing as "my way of teaching," then it was developed incrementally.

I'm reminded of what Patrick Macdonald observed: "There isn't such a *thing* as the Alexander Technique—only *teachers* of the Alexander Technique." Strictly speaking, the original Alexander Technique died when F.M. Alexander passed away. Most of those he trained kept it *similar* (and recognizable). They kept the essence going: the principles, the procedures, and the discipline. Yet each one eventually taught in a distinct way; there is no escaping this. We are still speaking the same language, but with different *dialects* and *accents*. There is beauty and advantage in this variety, *as long as the essence is there*.

It deserves mention that F.M. appeared to have been ambivalent about how much any one teacher's style should vary from his own. On the one hand he encouraged his trainees to be themselves and not imitate him, but then in the end he disassociated himself from the society that was to become STAT, stating (I am paraphrasing): "How can I be sure about what you all will be teaching ten years from now?" That unfortunate attitude on the part of the founder affects all of us. Had F.M. joined STAT, the Alexander Technique's name, no doubt, would have been copyrighted and the training standards secured. Nowadays we find ourselves in a situation in which *anybody* can claim to be teaching the "Alexander Technique" and there is nothing we can do about it. Tough, but *c'est la vie*.

RR & MHW: Would you take us through a Monkey, as if we didn't know it?

GP: [He stands.] I stand and am aware of the ground I stand on. The feet are kissing the ground, so to speak—touching the ground fully, including the heels, the outside part, and the toes. I'm aware of my body's midline, so I can differentiate between right and left.

I *point* my spine up, as I would point a finger towards the sky to indicate, "This way is Up." When you point the spine up along its natural structure, a certain tone is elicited, your stature tends to grow, and your awareness turns brighter. At the peak of that growing movement, I take my whole body (altogether!)

slowly...back, back, back...(still fully in touch with my feet) and then bend my knees.... [He is now in Monkey.]

And when I am in this position of mechanical advantage, if you try to push me off balance I would respond, not by resisting directly, but by "sinking" into the ground. It's a stable and pliable position.

You see what's involved: first the *placement*, then internal *expansion*, then *movement in space*. It can be done with the legs more (or less) apart—that does not matter. If I'm standing like this [with feet close together] it's a little hard to *differentiate* right from left and find the center. So, after taking a wider stance, I allow the elongated spine to move down in space and the knees to split (like a ballet "turnout" is *meant* to be). What I demonstrated is good for habit-breaking.

RR & MHW: The habit of what?

GP: Life's habit of standing, for one. It is basic. People stand and think, "This is normal." But really this is where they are comfortable, and they want to stay *safely in the known*. But if you embrace the art of changing, you must dare to do something *new*. Like putting the feet where you are *not* accustomed to putting them. On the other foot...I mean hand—if someone is like this [demonstrates feet very wide apart], I may ask him to put the feet closer together.

To prevent misunderstanding, I will add here that there are variations of the position of mechanical advantage, as well as different ways to teach it. I refresh and renew my own practice every now and then, highlighting different *aspects* at different times. Changes in approach to the procedures come naturally if you stay curious and alert. If you love practicing you never get tired of practicing, which leads to new discoveries.

An important point in teaching the procedures is to learn to follow your teacher's instructions. When learning to cook, you don't start improvising before giving the expert *a chance* by following the recipe. You can always improvise later. My aim is to make my students find ease, not cause discomfort. But the way to greater comfort is often indirect. Teachers always do better when teaching with *authority*. To paraphrase the Bard: Assume the appearance of authority if you do not have it. The next time you do it, it will be easier, then easier still. Personally, when I am taking instructions I find vagueness to be unhelpful.

RR & MHW: Do you teach Monkey to your private students?

GP: Absolutely. It's like asking a ballet teacher "Are you teaching plié?" You know? Using positions of mechanical advantage is essential to good bodily use. If you practice

Monkey daily, you get cumulative effects and have something that will always serve you in terms of energy and strength.

RR & MHW: Do you teach private students differently than you teach trainees? If so, how?

GP: Often private pupils come not to learn, but to be fixed and to feel better. So if they insist, I fix them as much as I know how. I confess to occasionally being guilty of stooping to "glorified bodywork." One needs to earn a living, no? I would risk ruining my livelihood by being a purist. When unmotivated private pupils are at ease, they become vulnerable to learning. Then an idea or concept is introduced while the poor pupil is unsuspecting. It's like they are given a sugar-coated bitter pill.

**"If you love practicing, you never
get tired of practicing, which leads
to new discoveries."**

For example, when a lazy pupil lying on the table finally listens to my instruction to open his eyes, I pounce: “That’s it! Now you are doing your work. Try it at home and see for yourself how helpful it can be.” Or when a notoriously “relaxed” pupil finally goes Up, I say “Turn and look in the mirror. See how much better you look!” And I encourage her to “exaggerate” like that more often.

RR & MHW: Does the student’s goal influence how you teach?

GP: I am not sure how to approach this question. In private lessons I begin to teach by observing and analyzing new students’ postural behavior and by asking what they came for. Then I *make a connection* for them *between what I see and their goals*. I communicate better coordination by my touch, which puts them at ease. Through touch I can help with so-called postural problems, movement, strain, nervousness, shyness, anxiety, and other conditions. But people typically come with *postural issues*, and later discover other benefits, which has the effect of changing and expanding their goals. There is no variety, no significant difference in how or what I teach. People truly learn indirectly, and then apply the Technique to their various interests.

If by *student* you mean *trainee*, there is still no difference in the way I teach. I teach on the training course as in private lessons, with the addition of giving instruction in how to teach and how to develop a good touch. A great deal depends on what trainees bring to the table: how motivated, how good observers they are, and how eager they are to pry knowledge out of me. It’s definitely a reciprocal relationship.

RR & MHW: How do you approach the moment before putting hands on?

GP: Interestingly, that was what John Nicholls and I were asked to describe during the Paris conference with scientists [The Embodied Mind Conference, organized by Alexander Technique teacher and scientist Rachel Zahn, in February 2012].

I do my best to *embody* what I would like to communicate: a relatively free condition of poise and coordinated movement. It’s like turning a switch *on*. Since my physical coordination is predicated upon my mental state, if I am not *already* free and *Up*, I summon up a friendly and free *state* by, say, recalling a positive experience.

You see, we go through a wide range of experiences in life: bad, so-so, good, and sometimes even *exceptionally positive* ones. The experiences do not go away—they leave their *impressions and stay stored*. I’d rather recall and revive *the essence* of the positive ones. What about the negative ones? By not acting on them—by neglect (i.e., inhibition)—they lose their force and may even fade away. So it is a matter of not acting on the negatives and instead recalling and generating positive states.

Maybe because I’ve been traveling a lot for many years, spending time in all sorts of strange places, I taught myself, out of sheer need, to connect with comforting, good experiences and make them an internal reality, when the need arises.

RR & MHW: Once you have your hands on a pupil, then what?

GP: We can begin by moving together. For example, when I take someone up on toes, I take the lead. After the student gets

my hands’ cue, I ease up, and we move as one. I don’t have to keep my touch at the same intensity after the cue is received. I lead, then yield and let the *movement* lead us.

I’m often aware that I’m intruding. If you work on somebody who trusts you, he lets you into his personal space. A trusting relationship between teacher and trainee is therefore vital. A trainer has to *earn* this trust, though. I don’t want to misuse it; being aware of it, hopefully, makes me do as little damage as possible. You see what I mean? I try not to get into a frame of mind where I assume I can manipulate someone any way I choose. I know what I myself like and what I don’t like

when people work on me, and have learned not to inflict what I don’t like onto others.

This issue of how much to control the pupil when given permission to enter his or her personal space is actually quite important to me. I have vivid memories of people working on me and causing me to suffer without good reason, and I know why: it was too blunt; it was “Let me fix you.”

I have a story about a dear colleague. He was working on me after many years of our not seeing each other. He worked rather roughly for a while. Finally I looked at him and said: “What do you have against me?” So he suddenly realized—I don’t know what his thoughts were but—he realized that I actually had a point. His work changed dramatically after my comment, and he gave me a fantastic turn! We all need honest feedback, don’t we? And it is best when the person in the teacher role, who often is not aware what his hands feel like, is humble enough to say: “I stand corrected!”

RR & MHW: We are interested in your thought process while giving a lesson; can you describe your inner dialogue?

GP: You are asking too much.... OK, I am not sure “inner dialogue” describes what I actually do. I do engage in a kind of dialogue with the pupil, though. It is two minds, two organisms communicating. They influence each other automatically, just by being near each other—and, of course, more so by touch. I remember that fact when I work.

I ask the pupil to inhibit—to shift to neutral—to become receptive. I as teacher generate a directed life force, accompanied by words. I do my best to synchronize my words with my action, actually producing “forward and up” as I am saying “forward and up!” The empathy I feel for the student is not because it is a “nice” thing to do, but because I know how it feels to be on the opposite end. If what I do does not *in fact* produce the phenomenon known as “forward and up,” the lack of clarity bounces back at me and I feel it as frustration. So when I am working on a student, it is as if that person there is *me*.

So you are right after all: I do also engage in inner dialogue and my inner dialogue is: “Remember, Giora, that is *you* out there, so don’t do to him/her what you don’t like done to you,” etc.

RR & MHW: Can you say something about teaching skills and confidence in teaching?

GP: We all know that teaching goes best when the teacher exudes confidence. So how am I tackling my innate *lack* of confidence?

F.M. told Marjory Barlow, his niece: “It is all about conscious control and confidence, dear.” Not of *self*-confidence, you see, but of *confidence*. You can gain confidence, then, not

“I stand corrected!”

by hardening or pumping yourself up but rather *by remembering* that *the principles are proven and true* and the Alexander Technique works! Again, it's being encouraged by joining something bigger than your own self.

RR & MHW: Can you assess the progress of your student or trainee by the way he/she responds to your stimulus?

GP: Yes. A lot of this work can become intuitive. You can see...you can feel something...which, together I call *intuition*.

I do not think of intuition as something fuzzy. Intuition, to me, is direct knowing. It is a higher knowing than mere reason. When you read Alexander's books, reasoning was the thing at that time. I think the next stage—which includes and exceeds reason—is Intuition. When head and heart are in accord, that harmony brings about a kind of knowing. Alexander himself had that unity, I have no doubt. He was a genius and ahead of his time! His writings, though, reflect the style and times he lived in and do not include discussion of intuition. I assume that writing explicitly about it (and other subtle things F.M. was aware of) would have been risky for one who wanted to be taken seriously by his contemporaries. Alexander admired William James, who was more explicit when writing about extraordinary personal experiences.

RR & MHW: We remember from our week with you that you expressed a wish for people to feel happy. Can you say more about that? How does that influence your teaching?

GP: Did I really say that? I tend to talk too much.

Wishing to be happy is almost too simple, isn't it? It sounds corny, but isn't it what everybody deeply wants, whether consciously or unconsciously? Since we Alexander Technique folk embrace the notion that humanity is moving from the instinctual to the reasoned, is it not *reasonable* to work consciously for happiness? F.M. wrote about fear, worry, etc., as problematic impediments to happiness. No need to talk about it too much, though. It took a lot of time for me to be clear about my wishing to be happy. It is a tall order, but so what?

Many people are cynical and, being a former cynic, I am not in a position to blame anybody. In my youth I was an idealist, then became a doubter. I am now a "born again" idealist.

Training Course Structure and Content

RR & MHW: Can you describe the structure of your training course in Berkeley? How did you develop it? Has it changed over the years? Does it resemble that of Macdonald's? What is different?

GP: At first, and for some years, I followed Macdonald's structure more or less, just as I followed his way of teaching. Though it was not original or authentic, it worked somehow. We've trained a good number of people who went on to become good teachers and some have even become training directors.

Then I went through a time of deep, prolonged personal crisis, and when it was over I found that an internal

restructuring had taken place. I somehow emerged a changed man. Not that I've gained anything. I just lost something. Now I have less need for strict structure, so the "style" reflects that.

RR & MHW: The week we were on your course there was no day when you read from Alexander's books.

GP: It didn't happen when you were there, but we do read. We often assign reading and the trainees summarize and present it.

Macdonald required reading *The Use of the Self*. The other books were optional. We Israelis didn't understand much of it anyway, so I didn't have a model for reading a lot in class. I've read the books in later years, of course.

Here are some of our training course teaching priorities: Training is about launching students on a course of self-discovery. Mastering the skills is important, as is knowing how to *be* with people. We believe it is important to discuss the *practical applications* of the principles. We try to elicit the students' ideas and tap their potential and hidden talents. We encourage them to strengthen their weaknesses—to come out of their shell. We do what we can to give them *manual skills* as well as the skills of being comfortable with all kinds of people.

Our trainees read, think, and come to class with questions, which we discuss at length. Such discussions happen *daily*. We don't intrude into their private lives or play psychologist. Often these discussions are more pertinent and less dry than reading books, I dare say.

Alexander's books have their place, of course. But ours is a living work and F.M. Alexander admonished his students to make the work their own. Is it not true that after 20, 30, or 40 years of immersion, you can

internalize the ideas and discover things just as Alexander did? Then you become a walking, talking "book."

RR & MHW: One of the roles of the training director is to create a safe environment to support change and growth as trainees learn to become teachers. How do you do this?

GP: Well, I observe what's happening. We have made some mistakes, which motivated us to be more alert. If someone in class is negative, everybody can feel it—one bad apple can spoil the whole class. Now if something hits us as wrong, we recognize it for what it is.

RR & MHW: If someone cries—you know, we all—most of us—cry at some point in our training—what happens?

GP: If someone cries? If it's relief, we don't mind. I want to distinguish crying because *feelings are hurt* from crying because *feelings are welling up*; it's a different kind of crying. I personally don't mind when a trainee opens up and cries. Sometimes a trainee can be forced open prematurely, though.

RR & MHW: Do you ask trainees, directly or indirectly, to inhibit certain thought patterns? For instance, if there is someone with a pattern of self-doubt, would you ask him/her to inhibit in order to change that habit?

GP: I deal with the problem lightly, at times with humor. It's not a small thing to inhibit certain patterns of behavior. We try to create an environment where we show each one of them



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that they are valued. People respond to positive gestures even more than to being asked to inhibit problematic behaviors. It is best to *identify* a problem and deal with it indirectly through encouragement. Confidence begins to grow by *learning to do simple things really well*, like learning to handle someone else’s head, shoulder, or foot. The deeper understanding inherent in diligent practice of manual skills comes gradually, in due course. Becoming a competent *craftsman* is good in itself, and it may lead you to becoming a real *artist*.

RR & MHW: How do you teach trainees to “feel” or “sense” what’s going on in a student?

GP: I never teach a trainee how to feel what is going on in the student; I rarely ask a trainee to feel. It can be a “bottomless pit,” to indulge in *trying to feel*. Feeling what is going on in the pupil comes naturally when you are at ease with yourself. You can teach (and learn) *to see* what is going on. By *not avoiding* what is in front of you—by insisting on making use of the gift of seeing. You diagnose by observing. Then the things that need to be noticed will *present themselves*. But for all of that to take place, a consistent openness, trust and skilled guidance must also be there.

To develop sensitivity and empathy—the ability to feel for another—as well as the ability to convey stability, quietude, or confidence, you have to learn—to insist on—being still and steady. When you “do less,” you naturally sense, see, and hear more. The unconscious floats to the surface and you can face your... whatever, and deal with it.

RR & MHW: How do you guide trainees in this area?

GP: I think modeling—how to be quiet and attentive—is the best way to teach. If a teacher does not have a handle over his emotionality, he cannot help another in that realm.

For whatever reason, my inclination is not to point out faults in my students (even when I see them), but to inculcate a positive attitude instead. I read somewhere that by not making a big deal of faults, the faults feel unappreciated and sorry for themselves and eventually they leave; they go away and find someone else to bother. It’s written in a book, so it must be true.

RR & MHW: Do you teach your trainees how to recognize the *feeling* of muscular tension?

GP: No.

RR & MHW: How do you teach trainees the feeling of Direction?

GP: There is a way that I teach it when they work on me. Directing begins with becoming aware and thinking, but then the thinking produces actual bodily changes that can be felt by touch and seen by the eyes. Teaching about directing can be done like this: The trainee puts her hands on me and then I just stand there. I point out: “Now I’m *not* directing.” Then I make myself *lively by directing*. When you become more alive like that, the difference is obvious. Aha!—she sees and senses the difference.

RR & MHW: How do you know when a trainee is ready for more information (new moves, new concepts, etc.)?

GP: By watching and following the progress of the student; also by the student asking for more, overcoming shyness and hesitation, or *showing interest*. The process of becoming a teacher depends a lot on self-motivation, so I watch for that. Yet

sometimes we discourage a student from jumping into a full working mode too early. Waiting develops patience, which is good, but waiting too long is not good, so we try to strike a balance.

RR & MHW: Does it matter to you if your trainees go out and teach the Technique or not?

GP: Of course I wish they would teach, but it’s not that important to me. For some people, it’s their circumstances in life or the economic reality of needing to make a living that influences their decision not to teach. It’s not always possible to teach if they don’t have anyone supporting them. Sometimes it’s more important that people learn something *for themselves*. And the rest, you know, one can’t control. In order to make it as bona fide teachers people have to be well-trained, highly motivated, and lucky! Ours is not just any profession. We are not yet well recognized and accepted. And to teach conscious control is not easy.

Principles

RR & MHW: At The Embodied Mind Conference, you were interviewed on the topic of attention. Could you tackle this term here with us? What is it? What significance does it have for learning and teaching the Alexander Technique?

GP: Oh yes, attention. At the risk of stating the obvious: It all begins and ends with attention. Paying attention is the first step to being aware, alert, and awake. Paying attention is the ABC of gaining understanding and knowledge, and when knowledge is practiced, crystallized, and embodied, we call it consciousness.

We become better teachers when we *attend to details and nuances* of our craft. For example, we pay attention to *where and how* we use our hands while placing them on a pupil’s neck. While there is no single correct way of doing things, there certainly are *worse and better* options. Our

anatomy dictates that we pay attention to where we place our hands, so as to use our limited energy effectively. As teachers, we inevitably deal with the nervous system. We deal with fluid situations, which call for finesse, and *the angel is in the detail*. The attention I am talking about cannot be forced from the outside (as in “Sit straight and pay attention!”), but rather it is the natural outcome of interest and care.

RR & MHW: Primary Control, Inhibition, Direction, Means-Whereby, Awareness, Habit—what’s the most important thing your students and your trainees need to know? Is there a hierarchy among these principles?

GP: I would say Primary Control, because it is the “altogether,” but it’s not as if there is a clear demarcation. The goal is to integrate the diverse elements, coordinate, simplify, and harmonize the whole system. *When this is done, we say that the Primary Control is working well.*

RR & MHW: What is Primary Control?

GP: Alexander described it as a *physical entity*: a certain relation between the neck, head, and back. So it is simple: Primary Control is physical—a Master Reflex for the physical coordination, if you will. This description omits the *nonphysical* aspect of the undivided *self*. The Primary Control is indeed physical and pertains to all vertebrates. *Conscious Control* is something else. Consciousness controls the Primary Control.

“When you ‘do less,’ you naturally sense, see, and hear more.”

The “seat” of Consciousness is not as easy to “locate,” since it involves the (physical) *brain* and the (non physical) *mind*—thoughts and feelings. I gather that some prominent scientists regard the brain and mind as *identical*. I tend to think differently. As things stand in science, the presently available instruments are simply not good enough to measure thoughts and moods; they only can measure their *influence* on the brain. That, of course, is not proof that thoughts *originate* in the brain or are identical to it. Last summer I was gratified to learn that a prominent scientist, the head of the Institute of Neuroinformatics in Zurich, shares my view on this.

Alexander wrote about a *state of acute awareness*—a plane to be reached. That is food for thought. Maybe this state is rarer than imagined. I sometimes wish F.M. were still with us to share his thoughts openly. He might express himself more liberally and say more than he did half a century ago.

RR & MHW: Primary Control can get better or worse.

GP: Exactly. It is a part of our physical/evolutional inheritance as vertebrates and it functions on different levels of efficiency, especially in humans. One could say there are *levels*. Sometimes you have more control of it and sometimes less.

One ought to remember that the Alexander Technique is a means—a tool. We make use of this tool according to our individual ends and goals, which are diverse. Students as well as teachers of the Technique, naturally, enter into it with *different ends and goals*. Some see it mostly as a tool to help artistic performance. Some study for help with pain and rehabilitation. Others are concerned mainly with posture and movement. Still others think of it mainly as a tool for psychological stress relief. A fewer still are obsessed with developing non-specific higher consciousnesses. Early on Alexander observed that he could not change his pupils’ *basic motivation*. A thief who has good use of Primary Control would be a better thief; he would not turn into a saint by learning a technique, if he had no change of heart. Good coordination is only good coordination, and *it can easily be misused*. Having what we call *moral fiber* comes late in human development, it seems.

We can have excellent *physical coordination* and completely *abuse* this gift by taking advantage of others! Yet we can easily argue that bad behavior is not *truly* good use. Do you know what I mean? To become *unselfish*, for example, can be regarded as good use of your intelligence and moral sense. You see, I don’t have merely physical principles in mind, but also ethical principles.

The way I look at it, true good use will necessarily involve a psychological and moral element. But we Alexander Technique teachers are not gurus or teachers of morality. That is left up to the individual. People who use the Alexander Technique skillfully have the ability to apply Primary Control to wider and wider spheres.

RR & MHW: As a path towards growth?

GP: Absolutely. I feel that unless we arrive at some awareness of moral behavior that informs interpersonal relationships, we cannot claim to have good use of the self. Tolerance, kindness, cooperation—these, too, are principles.

“I feel that unless we arrive at some awareness of moral behavior that informs interpersonal relationships, we cannot claim to have good use of the self.”

Harmony is important to me: to aspire to harmonious relationship. As we learn to work on the psychophysical self, we often discover the Self and find it is vast, and we cannot go on excluding things from the whole for too long.

RR & MHW: What about Inhibition?

GP: Inhibition is a powerful concept. What does it mean “to inhibit”? If someone insults you, or spreads rumors about you, the instinctive tendency is to strike back or defend yourself. “No no, I’m a good person and I don’t deserve this.”

Or you might want to do worse and try to hurt them back. But that starts a cycle. That hurts you too, eventually, and it doesn’t solve the problem. So something has got to give, and if you happen to embrace a moral principle (of not hurting others, for example) and you succeed, even when tempted to

retaliate...this is an example of Inhibition.

I paraphrased *Hamlet* earlier; this quote (Act III, scene iv) from it is one of my favorites. It is pure Alexander Technique:

...Refrain tonight,
And that shall lend a kind of easiness
To the next abstinence, the next more easy;
For use almost can change the stamp of nature,
And either [lodge] the devil or throw him out
With wondrous potency.

I have no doubt that F.M. was inspired by this idea of inhibition and even borrowed “use” and “refrain,” the latter as a substitute word he used for Inhibition. I recommend you read the passage in its entirety.

Personal Growth

RR & MHW: How have you grown and changed as you have taught the Alexander Technique?

GP: I am not sure it is up to me to evaluate how I have grown, though I can say that I have changed. Since my training, I was lucky to have encountered a few people whom I’ve observed to have excellent use in dealing with others. These behavioral examples of people who truly achieved something admirable were imprinted on me. Of course it meant that they had knowledge and understanding of *themselves*.

If you like someone and admire his/her abilities, it rubs off on you, eventually. It is a form of apprenticeship without calling it that. Even Yogi Berra said: “You can see a lot by just looking.” But in order to really change and grow, growing has to be *very important* to you. I, for one, was always motivated by *dissatisfaction with my status quo*.

RR & MHW: And if you grow in the Alexander Technique will that affect your understanding of yourself?

GP: First of all, you said “If you grow in the Alexander Technique...” If you grow, you grow—it’s not “in the Alexander Technique”; the Alexander Technique *helps* a person grow.

RR & MHW: If we keep growing, we eventually come to the unknown.

GP: In the process of growing, naturally, we face the unknown. The unknown is also the origin of fear. To face that, you need courage—another principle. You know, to inhibit can be an expression of courage: sometimes to suffer a stimulus and

not react is an act of courage. It builds character and leads to greater poise.

RR & MHW: You are known to have a special sense of humor. How did you develop it?

GP: I did not always have this sense of humor. It was different in my youth; it had a vein of cynicism running through it. My sense of humor developed after recovering from the deep crisis I mentioned earlier. It helped my teaching, too. I'm a Scorpio, the proverbial phoenix that dies and rises out of its own ashes. It's pretty typical for us Scorpios to swing between high and low. I could say that it's a pretty apt description of what happened to me: for a time I was incapacitated, but I came up again.

RR & MHW: Did you keep teaching during that time?

GP: I had to. I only stopped for a while when I thought I had nothing to give. In order to teach and to teach well, you need a surplus of energy, because you are giving out a lot. It's not like standing behind a podium and lecturing. There was a time when I couldn't teach. But I emerged lighter. And people said I had a sense of humor. Who knew...?

RR & MHW: Do you consciously bring humor into your private lessons and the training course? Is your use of humor ever related to the whispered "ah" instruction to "think of something funny"?

GP: I am not sure F.M. really said "think of something funny," but even if he did, Macdonald did not. He used: "Grin with your teeth together." I heard the same from Marjory Barlow. In any case, thinking of something funny is not humor.

Of course, I do use humor spontaneously and also intentionally. I do it because I don't take myself seriously and I don't believe others ought to take themselves too seriously. The kind of humor I like does not make fun of others, but makes the atmosphere lighter and helps disarm defenses.

The Ego tends to take itself seriously and to have clear boundaries, which it guards and defends. That is one of its functions. It is sometimes called having *armor*. But when I teach, I wish to go beyond the surface and reach deeper. Humor helps. To be sure, life is serious. It can easily be taken as tragedy, but that is exactly why I don't wish to let it get too serious. In summary: I take life very seriously and myself lightly.

Ok, here is a silly joke I made up:

An Alexander Technique teacher enters a bar, points his gun at the customers and screams: "EVERYBODY STOP DOING! And nobody gets hurt!!!"

But seriously now...having lived long enough and having had my ego pounded, I tend to see things from a certain

perspective—"been there done that" sort of thing—and naturally I have developed a modicum of detachment.

I read somewhere that it is useless for creatures that live in the sea to complain about the waves. But that is what people often do. Humor is having a fresh perspective on things.

RR & MHW: You have sometimes mentioned (with a twinkle in your eye) that if you wrote a book, its title would be: *I Stand Corrected*—and you used this title for your 2012 ACGM workshops in New York. Do you want to say a bit more about this title? Does it summarize your learning and perspective at this point in your teaching life?

GP: Yes, this was no mere joke; it does reflect my perspective. The double meaning fits the Technique perfectly. Using different words it says: I was shown how to improve my "posture," and it changed my pre-conceived ideas about posture and also about how to achieve positive change in general.

To go even further, to me the phrase means that unless I adopt an attitude of open-mindedness and readiness to admit (at any stage of my learning) that I may have been stuck, falsely content, or too proud, I cannot expect to go on learning. This conscious adopting of open-mindedness is especially required of us students of the Alexander Technique.



Giora Pinkas with class at The Alexander Educational Center

RR & MHW: In an issue of *AmSAT News* (Issue #59, Spring 2003) you wrote: "... but the real goal is growing personal awareness, and understanding. Such learning is incremental by nature... and tested not by success, but by learning to endure difficulties and adversity." How do we learn to endure? Do you talk about that with private students or trainees? Do you believe that learning the Alexander Technique is a path towards learning to endure?

GP: Yes, I am convinced that, in order to mature, you necessarily must endure difficulties. You see,

endurance fosters strength. I don't say that it is necessarily inherent in the Technique per se (because the Alexander Technique is interpreted in many ways), but I am talking about an aspect of the Technique as I understand it: a tool for uncovering your inherent potential. Growth does not come easily or cheaply. If you read F.M.'s biography, between the lines you can come to a similar conclusion.

I know for sure that Patrick Macdonald thought along the same lines. He sacrificed a lot to be as good as he was. (To become a "virtuoso," you need virtue.) When I heard him talk about how difficult it can be to go on when the going gets tough, I was young and did not get the meaning of it. I know more about it now.

Other Important Influences

RR & MHW: You use the terms *Chi* and *Life Energy* as you teach. How and when did those concepts enter your vocabulary?

GP: These terms entered rather early. Patrick Macdonald used the phrase “Life Force.” To me it meant the same as *Chi* or *Energy* and is in accord with physics. The general idea is to be in touch with, generate, and *balance* the forces within us. It’s not complicated.

RR & MHW: You have said that what you learned in other areas after training in the Alexander Technique was just as important as that first journey.

GP: Yes. I have learned much since the 60s, as one would expect—not just from Alexander Technique sources, but other influences also changed me deeply. I don’t wish to overstate it, but it is true. I was 26 when I started training; I was 30 when I finished—what did I know?

Before leaving Tel Aviv to begin training, I became intrigued with Zen by reading a book of Zen stories. But it was Krishnamurti (1895–1986) who captured my interest in London. I found his writings and live talks inspiring. After returning to Israel, a friend suggested that we visit a Japanese Zen teacher, Nakagawa Roshi (b.1947), in Jerusalem’s Mount of Olives. That visit led to a trip to Japan, where we participated in an intensive week in a monastery run by a well-known master, Soen Roshi (1907–1984). It also led to my courtship with Catherine, my future (first) wife. We continued meditating in Tel Aviv and later at the San Francisco Zen Center. In California, we encountered other authentic spiritual figures, like the hip Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987), but also others who weren’t quite what they wished they were.

We resumed attending Krishnamurti’s talks in San Francisco and Ojai. I wrote and invited him to visit our family. He responded with a nice note, but declined because of his age. Shortly after receiving Krishnamurti’s letter (1973), I came across another spiritual figure who captured my interest completely, and who has remained an important inspiration: Meher Baba (1894–1969), whose writing on the subject of consciousness I find illuminating.

I have come to embrace the ancient Kabbalistic notion that life can be viewed from the perspective of the *evolution of consciousness*; that the evolution of species is not merely about survival, but is *determined* by an innate urge to evolve consciousness. In other words, consciousness is the main game in town. It is the soul’s business to evolve consciousness by progressively moving into more and more complex forms/bodies/species. Humans contain traces of and complete the entire evolutionary process. You and I are *potentially* capable, by a process sometimes called *Involution*, of undoing all the blocks and misconceptions (Ignorance) we gathered during the *loong* evolutionary voyage. And by doing so (good luck!), we can become completely conscious. Throughout history people were burned alive for expressing such beliefs. So be kind with me.

RR & MHW: Giora, were you able to access this other learning more easily or more readily because of your Alexander Technique training?

GP: Could be, yes...I think so. The Technique really opened me to wide vistas and broader principles. The application of Alexander Technique principles is so very broad and universal: what it means to redirect my actions, what it means to inhibit deeply, etc. Though I do not take the Technique *in itself* to be necessarily a spiritual discipline, there is *no conflict* in my mind between the Alexander Technique and

spirituality. You know, I heard that Marjory Barlow said that F.M. was the most truly religious man she ever met.

Alexander did not address the whole cosmological picture. F.M. *wisely* did not “go there.” He was keen on other people’s writings, like William James, who did touch upon esoteric ideas. He respected people who wrote about what they knew from personal experience.

RR & MHW: For some people the Alexander Technique might be what puts all other things into context, but as a 30-year old man, did you have the feeling you were not finished growing or learning?

GP: I was still raw. I don’t want to leave you with the wrong impression. In a most practical way; the Alexander Technique is as important to me today as it was in the beginning. The experience I’ve gained over the years gave me a perspective and context for the Technique, but my view for this wonderful work is as glowing as it was after my first lesson.

It is up to each person to use the general universal principles and take them as far as he or she can. A technique is only a technique—a tool to dig with. Alexander knew not to make a cult out of his work. Thankfully, he was not in the business of telling others what to believe in. When asked what he believed in, his brilliant reply was “I believe in everything and I believe in nothing.”

That’s my man.

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Giora Pinkas, a native of Israel, began lessons with Shmuel Nelkin in 1962 and has made the Alexander Technique his life’s work. He trained with Patrick Macdonald, taught in London for a year after qualifying, and then, after a short period teaching in Tel Aviv, moved to California. He opened ACAT-West with Frank Ottiwell in 1974 and in 1983 opened The Alexander Educational Center. Giora spends many weeks each year teaching and moderating in Europe.

Ruth Rootberg (Alexander Technique School of New England 2003) has published in AmSAT News, AmSAT Journal, and other publications, and she has volunteered for AmSAT in many capacities. Ruth lives and teaches in Amherst, Massachusetts, and has presented workshops near and far. Her current interest is interviewing teachers about their aging process.

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