

What are we teaching? Part 1

John Nicholls, July 27, 2017

This is an edited version of a discussion that ensued as I was giving a lesson to a teacher who basically asked the question that is the title of this post. My thanks to Jamie Avins for recording and transcribing.

A big part of the teacher's job is to help bring about in you this natural, whole body response to gravity so that from the contact of your feet on the ground you're opening up all the way through. You have this springy dynamic that takes you up through your spine and opens you through the thorax, the back of the shoulders, the hips, everything is coming up and out in response to the contact of the feet on the surface of the planet. And for you, the student, your practice really is to try to keep coming back to this as often as possible in daily situations. You could roughly say that there are three main elements in how you access this for yourself, and the first one is quite simply everything that comes under the heading of Alexander's use of the word inhibition. That will mean becoming aware of and stopping or refraining from the habits that pull you down, tighten you, restrict you, prevent this opening up to gravity response from happening. The habits that have been constricting you unconsciously. And then at a more advanced level, also inhibiting perhaps much more newly developed habits of trying to "do" the up in some fashion. People all have their own little subtle ways of "doing" the directions so that you've got lots of scope for inhibition there. So there's first the inhibition of the very old habits and then, for many people, the inhibition of the subtler, newer ways of trying to fake it, trying to make it happen, trying to pull oneself up. Trying to, as the older teachers used to say, keep the length which is a phrase I hated. "You always have to keep your length, you must keep your length". The phrase itself seems to almost invite people to do a subtle effort to keep the length and you'll never get the freedom for breathing of the diaphragm and thorax if you're "trying to keep your length". So that's the first of the three main elements of accessing this for yourself.

Then of course the second is direction. You've got to want it to happen. If you don't want it to happen it won't happen. And you've got to channel your wish, your wanting it to happen, in some quite precise ways. In CCC FM actually uses the phrase "giving the directions in the form of a wish". And Walter was fond of saying directing is more like thinking than doing, but it's more like wishing than thinking because wishing has a certain energy to it. However most people then channel the energy into some sort of muscular effort, whereas we're asking you to channel the energy of the wish into muscular release along certain critical pathways, as you know. That is, muscular release of the neck, right through the whole column of the neck to let the back of the head lighten up, to let the whole spine lighten up, to let the back and sides and ribs and shoulders all be widening to breathe. To let the arms and legs undo so that the legs are open channels of communication with the ground. And when you are using your hands they are just open channels of communication from your hands to your back. So that's two of the three main elements I mentioned.

Now the third is a more subtle exposition of what perhaps underlies FM's idea of positions of mechanical advantage. AT people these days think, oh that's monkey. Well the one description in one of his books of a position of mechanical

advantage wasn't monkey. It was leaning back on a book on the back of the chair and he said this is one of a number of positions. And there are hints in the early writing that the term position of mechanical advantage was even a part of describing what one could almost dare to call good posture, the body carriage that would most facilitate this going up and widening process. So you see if you're standing at the sidewalk waiting to cross the road and you realize, oh, I've kind of dropped forward and down in the middle of my body like this, well that has to change. You can get some benefit from staying in that physical position and directing but you'll get more benefit if you move to a more favorable organization. So actually coming back and up from the ankles when you've found yourself forward and down through the neck and through the middle of the body is a small movement to be carried out with inhibition and direction that gives you a mechanical advantage. You're more likely to get the full benefit of the natural antigravity response if you are in this more back and up organization. Similarly, when you're sitting and you're completely collapsed, as we all know, you get some benefit from directing. But moving yourself to a better place will give you even more benefit.

So there's also learning how to notice that some, what should we say, positions, postures, body attitudes, just like some types of movement, are rather less advantageous, and some are rather more advantageous. And as you begin to have the discrimination to recognize that you can start to take advantage of it and favor and promote the styles of movement and the body attitudes that are more advantageous to getting this fundamental going up and opening out response working for you. So how do you develop that discrimination? Well by means of the hands-on work giving you these experiences in lessons, and you being conscious of that and being willing to bring it into your daily life: all this is intended to do what Alexander refers to as reeducating your sensory register. Which is how you become better able to discriminate as to what's good for you and what isn't good for you. And that's, dare we say, a feeling sense. Your sensory register is a feeling sense. It may not be very reliable at the beginning, but FM makes it quite clear in his books and those public talks that the hands-on work is designed to reeducate and to improve your sensory register to make it more reliable and useful. In one place in one of the books he says something to the effect that you cannot put this work into practice without a reliable sensory appreciation. So anything to add to that?