Frank Pierce Jones's Views on the Alexander Technique

The moral and humanistic implications of the Alexander Technique

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In this paper I want to review Frank Pierce Jones views on the Alexander Technique's practical application in pursuing the possibility of changes in mental attitude and the extension of the range within which free will can operate. First of all I want to thank Michael Frederick for organizing this Congress, and for inviting the presentation of papers on Frank Pierce Jones's contribution to the Alexander Technique. I trust I speak for those present in expressing appreciation for what you and the executive committee for this First International Congress for The Alexander Technique have made possible. I suspect you have addressed an unspoken desire within each of us here to get on with the business of communicating — hopefully to learn we share more in common than we might suppose.

As individual teachers we represent ourselves. However, we also represent a collective body of teachers who happen to be teaching during what might be considered the second critical phase of the work's life and growth. The first certainly was the period of time following F.M.'s death. Part of our reason for being here is to pay homage to those teachers who successfully led us through that initial critical time, i.e., through the business of preserving the original teaching in the absence of its founder.

Today, our numbers as teachers have greatly increased. Because of this — unlike teachers of the first generation — we have been exposed to a wide variety of interpretations of the technique, and to varied approaches in conveying the teaching. Even when preparing this paper, while I visited my wife's parents on their farm in Virginia, the potential drawbacks to such exposure became obvious. My father-in-law and I were discussing the work. He'd seen some publicity advertising the technique as a form of massage. The allusion to massage perplexed him. For several years prior, he'd

observed me giving lessons to his wife, who had received a serious back injury after having been thrown from a horse. In recalling how I had used my hands to convey the teaching to her as a means of addressing her injury, he remarked it had in no way resembled massage.

And he was right. In increasing our numbers it appears we thereby increase the chances for misinterpretation. At the very least, we open the way to wide ranges of individual interpretation. Since my paper is about Frank Pierce Jones's views on the Alexander Technique, I'd like to tell you what Frank felt about this, and how his views were imparted through his teaching.
Historically there have been teachers of various disciplines who have experienced a given teaching in its original form, first hand from its originator, and who, because of who they were, then went on to give it additional depth and insight without detracting from the original. This is precisely what Frank Jones did. And after twenty-six years of compiling data through experimental studies of the specific principles and concepts embodied in the Alexander Technique and publishing his findings in leading scientific journals, he concluded that the key features which distinguished the Alexander Technique from other disciplines and the character of thinking involved in employing concepts and principles particular to the teaching, must remain intact.
In the uncompleted fifteenth chapter of Body Awareness in Action, Frank planned discussion on what distinguished the Alexander work from other seemingly related disciplines. In his notes, he accounted for the varied points of view and suggested two approaches in which the teaching appears to have prevailed.

Some people read F.M. Alexander's books or have a few demonstration lessons and are fired with enthusiasm for a vague, general idea of 'non-doing' or not end-gaining' which they deduce from their experience. Others close their minds to the possibility of a new experience and refuse to see anything in the work but a kind of posture training, or whatever association of ideas suggests itself to them. Both interpretations miss the significance of the work completely.

You can be wrong about something in a great variety of ways.
There are also a great variety of ways in which you can be 'right.' Understanding the significance of the principle of the primary control and applying it, no matter how partially, to the solution of practical problems inevitably brings about a change in habitual patterns of reacting to stimuli. Depending upon the resources of the person, how far he is willing to apply the principle, and how long he lives, there is no limit to the extent to which not only his life but his philosophy of life may be affected As the range of his experience and control extends, he will continually revise and enlarge his understanding of the principle. Consequently there is bound to be a great range of opinion, even among those who rightly grasp the basic principle. To some, it will mean no more than improved posture and lessened fatigue. I see no reason fir quarrelling with this point of view, since both are definite, tangible goods. What is of more importance to me, however, is the possibility of change in moral and mental attitude and the extension of the range within which free choice and free will can operate.[note1]

The availability of choice outside one's habitual realm of patterned behavior intrigued Frank and for him was the chief reward for bringing the Alexander experience into his life. Improved posture and lessened fatigue were productive byproducts of inhibiting habitual response — not to be confused with ends in themselves. Posture was simply a phase of movement reflecting the organism's total dynamic response within a gravitational field.

You never seek to learn 'good posture' — the static 3-dimensional arrangement of body parts — when studying the Alexander Technique,[note2] nor do you consciously set out to learn how to increase your capacity for energy. In Frank's Notes, he quoted AR Alexander saying:

"The trouble with most pupils is that they think they are taking lessons in order to learn something, whereas they should be taking them to unlearn."[note3]

Awareness and inhibition were sequential stages in Frank's teaching. They were the first two stages F.M. Alexander passed through before discovering the specific characteristic of the head's relation to the organism responsible for righting the postural reflexes. Frank's experience was that pupils had to go through the same sequence if they were to make real progress.[note4] To reason otherwise was to view change in neo-Pavlovian terms or according to Skinnerian conditioning in which change is predicated on the absence of intelligent choice. In Frank's unpublished notes, he wrote:

"If Skinner is right, that there is no such thing as free-will, then we are stuck with a set of very maladaptive responses. I can't see how physical education, psychiatry or behavioral therapy as I understand it can do much for us at this stage. I don't think he is right, however. I believe that we do have free-will and that we can change our own behavior if we want to. I believe, with John Dewey however, that we have to use our own intelligence, and not go on depending on outside experts to tell us."[note5]

Translating this reasoning into teaching, Frank states:

"The aim of teaching as I conceive it, is to bring a pupil to the point of self discovery that F.M. reached when he was able to translate what he saw in the mirrors into kinesthetic terms, and to apply this new knowledge to the solution of his problems and become in effect his own expert in the use of himself. To accomplish this result I do not believe it necessary or desirable, or fir that matter possible to follow the same steps that F.M. followed in making his discovery or that I followed when I began studying the Technique.[note6]

In other words, we can have lesson after lesson in the seemingly never-ending contest with our reactive patterns of unconscious behavior. Although, along the way, at some point Frank thought it was really up to us to accept the full responsibility for the freedom from habit the work offers us: to go on from there, and solve our own problems. For though we might have little control over the events in our lives, we certainly have control over our responses to those events, and how we allow them to affect us. Once lessons

offer the freedom to choose a better course of action than the one habitually taken, we truly encounter the depth of our own commitment, not just to the work, but to ourselves and to those around us.[note7]

How does a teacher convey this responsibility — that it is up to you to bring the teaching into your own life and solve your own problems — in effect, to become your own expert moment by moment? Granted, there is much that comes about during a lesson through conversation, but lessons are basically lands-on' experience. Moreover, Frank's emphasis was "in the possibility of change in moral and mental attitudes and the extension of the range within which free choice and free will can operate."

The extent to which a person changes as a result of having lessons, whether student or teacher, is debatable. I would go so far as to suggest that the Alexander Technique itself does not change one in the slightest (except on the purely physical level which, as Frank suggested earlier, is quite a positive benefit and not at all to be discredited). The teaching, however, in providing a means for seeing the possibility for change, offers the choice to change by presenting the freedom from habit necessary to make the choice. But! The person, no matter how much he experiences positive results from change and the rewards of using himself non-habitually, must choose. For that choice to be made he must be willing to accept the absence of what he customarily reinforces about himself as a legitimate basis for living life differently. Frank relates the story of a lesson given a woman during which she exclaimed she was seeing things about herself which she preferred not to see.[note8] She left it at that, never to return. Conversely, a neuropsychologist who was having a lesson with me, upon leaving, turned to me with one hand on the doorknob and said dryly, "Thank you for removing all my defences." Then she stormed out. However, she returned the following week and studied for three years. The availability of choice outside the context of a lesson is independent of the teacher's hands. Because of this fact, the person must become his own expert in the use of himself. Otherwise, you can never cease to take lessons, and you'll always rely on the teacher for advice and approval. I'm often asked during a lesson, "But what can I do when your hands aren't guiding me?" My reply is always the same, "When my hands aren't there to guide you, your awareness is." And must be. The choice, however, presented within the space between stimulus and response is theirs alone.

Frank once noted that a colleague and student, Harold Schlosberg, was "unwilling to admit that the Alexander principle offers any help for the solution of ethical problems."[note9] Whereas Schlosberg remained sceptical insofar as lessons in the Technique might make a better person out of whoever walked in, he found no problem in observing personal value and reward in the general improvement of well-being and efficiency in use.

In recognizing such benefit, Schlosberg acknowledged one of the two ways that the work has survived. I call this aspect of the work, 'Getting Good at Being Better.[note10] You tend to become more effective at what you already do. However you continue doing all that you have done. You're just able to do so while expending less effort and energy. In effect,

you become better at being who you already are. The rewards and benefits are indeed great for all of us if you already happen to be a basically decent person.

The pitfalls, of course, are that the thief is apt to become a better thief, the liar a more effective liar, they'll simply be more efficient.

The positive side of '*Getting Good at Being Better*' might be exemplified by lessons I recently gave to an NFL football player, whose playing position was that of tight end. For chose of you who don't know that much about football, or about as much as I do, a tight end runs for passes and generally gets tackled hard by the opposing team.

While in the air trying to catch the ball, he is often hit, usually from the side and from the This man had been hit by four men simultaneously, and knocked cold. For over a year afterward he'd complained of back and neck pain and, in general, of less than optimal performance.

He was hardly interested in the moral equivalent of the Alexander Technique. But he happened to be an unassuming, highly capable professional and quite a decent person. His physical therapist, who had taken a workshop with me, sent him my way. His immediate objective was to have no pain; he'd tried everything, but to no avail. He couldn't bend over beyond a certain point without being stopped short by pain; the same was true when reaching up to catch the football. For a receiver this spelled trouble. When I placed my hands on him, I had the feeling that he was still holding on in defense of the original impact. Left alone in midair, with nothing to ground him, he appeared to have held, almost squeezed, the upper portion of his gluteus maximus muscle, while simultaneously absorbing the impact of head collision by shortening his cervical spine. He was still holding his breath. In effect he was frightened. And because he exhibited the classic muscular pattern associated with the startle reflex, his responses were not available when he needed them.[note11]

He was in town for the month so I only saw him six times. The first lesson was unremarkable; I didn't think he cared much for the work. I asked his physical therapist, who was taking a lesson shortly after I'd seen him, what he thought of his lesson with me. His remark was perfect. I was "the first guy who'd ever made him think" With that good fortune going for me, I resolved to help him bring the work into his thinking even more. By the sixth lesson, most of his generalized pain was gone. However, excessive muscular contraction in the gluteal region persisted, which I believed contributed to his localized lower back pain. My teaching problem was how to convince him he could continue to address the dilemma without my presence. What made most sense to him was when, on the last day of lessons, we went outside and passed the football back and forth. I explained that much of what he was doing was holding on to his response to the original impact; he was therefore using himself to reinforce those conditions which bound him to having to re-experience the pain.

By way of illustration I suggested he use as an example that which was closest to him in an everyday sort of way, i.e., his contact with the football. I explained that each pass was

a different pass from the one he'd previously caught, yet if he continued to use himself as if he were catching the previous pass, he'd never be present for the one at hand. His hands were holding all the footballs he'd ever caught and missed, yet to be available to receive the new pass they must be empty. That meant letting go of what he knew. If he could sense himself gripping to catch well before he was even near the football then the choice was his whether or not to continue to hold on.

This made sense to him. Then he observed that when he was attentive to the way he set himself, and he stopped pulling his head back, allowing it to move forward and up instead, he caught the ball with the tips of his fingers which is the way he wanted to in the first place. But this manner of receiving the pass only occurred when he inhibited the 'set' associated either with the possibility of pain or with getting set to catch the ball.

He noted also that if when he reached above his head to catch a pass, he refrained from pulling the football into his body with his shoulders and instead let his elbows free out and down — thereby allowing the muscles to release and the bones to move freely in their joints — he then retrieved the ball more quickly. Essentially he no longer impeded his reflexes. It was rather a classic — and practical — experience of Frank Jones's succinct statement about the Alexander work in conjunction with motor activity:

"The Alexander Technique is a method for improving motor performance by integrating the voluntary and reflex components of a movement in such a way that the voluntary does not interfere with the reflex and the reflex facilitates the voluntary." [note12]

Now, this was a clear case where, although not interested in the moral equivalent, the person became much more effective at what he already did, albeit without unnecessary expenditure of effort and energy. He simply got good at being better, and because of that was more efficient at catching passes. His posture changed and his energy increased because he became aware of what he had to undo, of what he had to unlearn. In saying "no" and preventing the wrong direction, he let the 'right' emerge.

The other approach, apart from improved efficiency at what you already do, and the one Frank favored, and had a way of conveying through his hands, might be termed 'Calling Yourself Into Question.' The teaching in this instance is viewed as a way of examining every aspect of your being, every belief, every value you've ever held. I once gave a lecture on the 'fallacy of self improvement techniques using the self you've got.[note13] Yet the paradox is that it's the self you have which led you to the point where you realized it was doing you no good. So what must you do? You let who you are teach you. However to do this you must let go, just at the moment you're most apt to hold on. The Greeks had a marvelous saying, more akin to a Zen koan than what you might think you'd get from a classical point of view.

In one breath they claimed:

Destiny is character and character is destiny.

If you subscribe to the former, you might as well resign yourself to the self you've got. But if you subscribe to the latter, then what you do is make use of the self you know in order to let go of all aspects which bind you to having to repeat the nature of your experiences. The answer lies in the paradox. As the Zen archer who, standing before the target, (a reflection of himself), very much aware of where the target is in relation to what he seeks to accomplish, draws back the bow, just at the moment when he is most apt to hold on, at the moment of highest tension, he lets go.

That moment of highest tension exists for each of us in each lesson. It lies within that space between stimulus and response. The moment of highest tension is the moment you are most likely to resort to habit, to do what you know, to hold onto your perception of yourself whether it is good for you or not. In this respect you always think, feel and act from where you've been, not from where you are. There is an immediate conflict because at the moment the response is called for there is only the present. Yet, through misuse it is the past we call upon: the 'self we know best that we reinforce.

Consider the classic example of the sit-to-stand movement. If when sitting, while using yourself to maintain that particular postural phase of movement, the impulse to stand arises and habitually you begin to 'set' yourself to stand, although you remain seated, there is immediate conflict — for while sitting, you're 'using' yourself as if to stand, yet you remain seated. Really, at that point you are neither here nor there. It is, however, possible to leave yourself alone (inhibiting the 'set') and consider standing, even while sitting. But not if the goal outweighs the willingness to wait and consider how you're using yourself to accomplish what you want.[note14]

Most people do not consider the space between stimulus and response during which time the brain has registered whatever intention you have well before you can actually perceive the muscle fiber in preparation for movement.[note15] That is the moment, however, where inhibition elicits the deepest reward.

It is the moment you neither express the thought, the feeling or the perception, nor do you suppress them, rather you transform them by not admitting the conditions usually present which go to support the habitual response — the moment of highest tension.

Frank's familiar metaphor of the monkey trap illustrates this condition quite well. It is a self-inflicted predicament brought on by the instinctual refusal to let go, to hold on for dear life to whatever you feel is good for you even though your motivating desires are principally governed by untrustworthy sensory information. But the primal life force of self-preservation is deceptively strong, so the monkey seeks the fruit inside the bottle, grabs hold of this life-sustaining, pleasure-giving fruit, and thus cannot remove his paw from the bottle of captivity — because he refuses to let go. Absurdly, the bottle defines the parameters of his perceptive existence. And with no knowledge of how to change his situation, he remains trapped until a way out is discovered. Or else someone happens by and offers the solution.

Curiously enough, after coming across the same tale taken from different traditions, I happened to find a Sufi version where the way to release the monkey from his captivity was given.[note16] It seems that the hapless monkey must remain where he has put himself until you tap his elbow. Then, reflexively, he lets go. Once again, the voluntary has impeded the reflex, and it took the stimulation of the reflex which governs the order of the whole to rescue the creature from his own undoing. If the voluntary is not to impede the integrative action of nervous response, the element of conscious intervention over the interference of reflexive response is an absolute must. Self-examination has been the subject of human preoccupation and fascination from the time the apple was passed back and forth. However, without an appropriate 'means of facilitating change, we are no better off than our hapless monkey. Frank's enthusiasm with the Alexander Technique was that it addressed the means of pointing out to the person the "underlying conflicts that make it more difficult to accept an unrealistic solution.[note17]
An example from my own teaching comes to mind as a nearly perfect illustration of free will acting in its own best interest for the good of the whole.
I choose this case for another reason as well. The student was a 14 year old boy who played football but who played music as well. He was large and sturdily built for his age, and his neck was about as stiff as I'd ever seen. On about the fifth or sixth lesson, I asked him whether he was getting anything from the experience. He replied by asking: "If I continue having lessons, will I want to play football?" An interesting question.

I said it depended on his reasons for playing football. If he were primarily motivated by maiming someone, then perhaps not. That it was probable the more he experienced the absence of those conditions — brought about as a result of misuse — which were responsible for certain choices (which led him to want to play football and which prevented him from experiencing himself as an integral part of the whole of which he was a part) then the more he might not want to play football. On the other hand if — like the NFL football player — he played for the love of the sport, the movement associated with it, then he might very well continue to want to play and do so with less effort and energy, exerted in ways that kept him from experiencing the full potential of himself.
He replied: "What if I want to kill?"

"Who?" I said, wanting to know where I stood in relation to his desire. "The kid next door," he replied. "Every time I see him, I beat him up." "Every time?" I quizzed.

"Every time."

"Once isn't enough?"

"I can't help it," he replied.

"You mean you don't want to beat him up?"

"No, but when I see him, or when I even think about him, it's the same."

"Well," I said, "what is it about him you want to hit?"

"I'd never want to be like him," he replied.

I had watched the boy during our conversation, and remember our conversation very well.

All the while he was speaking, explaining himself, he used himself in very specific ways. The pattern was a general one, but the more he tried to reason his way out of wanting to hit the other boy, the more fixed he became. So, I asked him if he noticed this phenomenon.

He did: we were well on our way. I changed the subject, talked about something else until the pattern of use particular to his response to the other boy was less prevalent. Then I asked him about the boy. Immediately his chest tightened, his shoulders locked rigidly in place, and his neck shortened dramatically. "Did you notice what just occurred kinesthetically?" I asked. Yes, he did.

I worked with him again using the sit-to-stand movement to re-establish more neutral conditions. I kept my hands on him, at the base of the occiput, giving all the direction I was worth. I asked him to think of the kid. He did. "Do you have the same desire to beat him up?" He didn't. So long as I supplied the inhibitive directions, using my hands to do so, he was much less prone to return to those conditions necessary to reinforce and support his anger. He simply couldn't do it. "Now, you try it," I said. We worked for another twenty minutes or so on his willingness to bring into his own awareness how his use supported his desire, and how inhibiting that use diffused his intention to fulfill the desire and accomplish his objective. I always emphasized that when my hands weren't there to act as a reference point for inhibition — providing an alternative choice — his awareness could be. Then I charged him to try it in the field, so to speak I asked him to make a pact with me to experiment the next time he saw the kid and listen to himself, kinesthetically, before he acted.

When he perceived the pattern of use, I suggested he give both himself and the kid a break and say "no" to hitting him, while using the directive aspect of thinking to affirm a deeper, more integrative movement, one more congenial with harmony. I suggested that he was not just to run through the directions in a liturgical sense, but in context with inhibition, giving himself time to consider where he was in relation to the circumstance. He was, in effect, to decide whether he wanted to allow circumstance to determine where he was in relation to it — or did he want a choice as to the extent he allowed that moment to control his life? He came back after the weekend. I asked what happened.

"It worked," he said, and smiled. A month later, I received a postcard from the boy's father. Since he knew nothing of our conversation, he simply said, "I don't know what you and my son talked about, but he quit football and enrolled in music camp."

FM was once asked by John Dewey at a dinner they attended together what Alexander would regard as the best test of a person. F.M.'s reply was: "A person who can make the decision not to do something and then stick to that decision."[note18]

That's a whopping and wonderful statement with regard to our work. If, however, in saying "no" the person, like my neuropsychologist who left with no defenses, has no alternative experience from which he can trust the absence of what he customarily feels as a legitimate basis for response, then what good is "no"? The point, as Frank saw it, and as I certainly see it, is that one never says "no" for "no's" sake. You withhold consent only so you can affirm a much deeper level of integrity within the body and being than your habits would call forth otherwise. Can this alternative be conveyed as part of the hands-on experience? It is essential that it can be if Frank's moral equivalent — and possibility of free will — will be reinforced in an approach to teaching the Alexander Technique. Did Frank convey this? He did for me. With him I experienced a profound and deeply unifying direction, curiously enough, within which I was permitted to be who I was — however with neither the feeling that he was reinforcing who I was, nor attempting to change me. That experience, conveyed through his hands, was for me the moment of highest tension — I could go either way. But because the moment was characterized by what Frank termed 'the ongoing present,' it drew upon the integrative action of the nervous system — not upon what I might have called into play through habit. This was the curiously supportive space, a freedom from the known, which more than anything else, gave me the freedom I needed to change. What his hands did was to reveal to me aspects of myself long since covered by defensive patterns of reactive behavior.

In providing direction which enabled me to free in response to what I feared letting go of, I was in effect able to remove my hand from my own bottle of captivity and begin to consider why I had ever had to place my hand there in the first place. As time passed, experiencing his lessons became different. The inhibitive reality of the experience became more of a part of an ongoing continuum, which actually enhanced the affirmative aspect of the experience. It became as much a part of my behavior 'not to do' something as it was 'to do something, which freed me to commit myself to whatever I did more completely. Only then, because the decision was made not to do something, in full view of the consequences, did that and that alone free the affirmative. It was part of a new body of knowledge, to paraphrase John Dewey, but it was more than that: the Alexander work became pure 'means-whereby.' And when response was called for, I stood in the presence of that knowledge, aware that I was free to respond in a particular way because I could freely choose not to respond in another way.

Endnotes

1. Jones, Frank Pierce, Notes to unfinished fifteenth chapter of *Body Awareness in Action* , A.T.A. Archives, Wessell Library, Tufts University, Medford, Mass.

2. Jones, Frank Pierce and O'Connell, D.N., "Posture As a Function of Time," The Journal of Psychology, 1958, 46: pp287-294. The conception of posture as a fixed position of the body which can be judged 'good' or 'bad' by reference to an external model has largely been superseded. Sherrington's studies have long since established the reflex nature of animal posture, and under their influence it has come to be recognized that

human posture, too, though subject to voluntary modification, is primarily reflex. Stanley Cobb once defined posture as "the tonic background that underlies and makes possible all orderly movement." Posture, in this sense, is not static but dynamic. It is the manifestation of a changing relationship among the parts of an integrated whole.

3. Jones, Notes.

4. Jones, Frank Pierce, Letter to Walter Carrington, March 19, 1970, A.T.A. Archives, Wessell Library, Tufts University, Medford, Mass. It seems to me that a pupil has to follow the same sequence (awareness and inhibition) if he is going to make any real progress. A conditioned response, no matter how good it may first appear, is bound to turn into a 'doing' and lose all value as far as the Technique is concerned.

5. Jones, Notes.

6. Jones, Frank Pierce, Body Awareness in Action, op. sit., p153

7. Excerpted From Thompson, Lester W., The Teaching of Frank Pierce Jones, A Personal Memoir, The Alexandrian, Vol. 1 — Spring/Summer (1982) p5. Frank Pierce Jones Collection, Wessell Library.

8. Jones, Notes.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid. Frank objected to this argument on the grounds that the thief, because he was aware he was choosing the old response, would be at a better advantage to change his ways.

11. Jones, Frank Pierce, "Method for Changing Stereotyped Response Patterns By the Inhibition of Certain Postural Sets, Psychological Review, Vol 72 No 3, May (1965) p207

12. Jones, Notes.

13. Thompson, Lester W., Lecture given at Interface Foundation, Spring, (1984)

14. Jones, "Method for Changing Stereotyped Response Patterns by the Inhibition of Certain Postural Sets," op. cit., pp211-212. Frank validates this thesis in the example of climbing stairs from a psychological view.

15. Libet, Benjamin, "Time of Conscious Intention to Act in Relation to Onset of Cerebral Activity (Readiness-Potential)" in Brain, 106 (1983) pp623-624. From the Neurological Institute, Department of Neuroscience, Mt. Zion Hospital and Medical Center, the Department of Physiology, School of Medicine, University of California, San Francisco, CA 94143, and the Department of Statistics, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

16. Shah, Idries, "How to Catch a Monkey" in Tales of Dervishes (taken from The Book of Amu Darla), E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. (1970) p29.

17. Jones, Notes.

18. Binkley, Goddard, The Expanding Self — How the Alexander Technique Changed My Life, STAT Books, London, (1993)