

Book Review: THE ALEXANDER PRINCIPLE by Dr. Wilfred Barlow

By Tasha Miller and David Langstroth

This book has been a classic of the Alexander literature since it was first published in 1973. It brought the Alexander Technique to the attention of a wider population and inspired a whole new generation of teachers and pupils. Notable among these was Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen, who, upon reading a review of *The Alexander Principle* in a magazine in a dentist's waiting room, sought out Dr. Barlow for lessons for himself and his family. Tinbergen later gave praise to the Alexander Technique in his Nobel Prize Oration.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the book's success was that Dr. Barlow was not speaking from the fringes, but was himself a respected member of the medical profession. He was a consultant rheumatologist in the National Health Service and has held a large number of hospital appointments. He was also a respected teacher of the Alexander Technique who trained with F.M. Alexander. Barlow married Alexander's niece, Marjorie, who is still teaching the Technique in London.

This is a book full of information. It explains the nature and implications of misuse and goes into great detail concerning the role of misuse in a number of common diseases ranging from arthritis to breathing disorders. He is unflinching in his criticism of medical diagnosis when he makes the point, "Use is the single most important factor which remains to be dealt with by medical science", and his chapter on mental health is particularly good. He makes it abundantly clear, from a scientific perspective, that we cannot make sense of mental health problems without an understanding of the manner of use of the individual.

The book also contains original research, including before and after photographs of people in all sorts of conditions. These black and white nude photos are clinical and scientific, the subjects being posed against a grid to show up their particular distortions. Stark and unflattering, they are nonetheless highly effective. In this case a picture really is worth a thousand words.

Dr. Barlow makes the important arguments that the manner of use of those responsible for children has a huge bearing on the habits those children develop; that use is implicated in our sense of purpose, our enjoyment of life and our sense of self; and he has serious recommendations for doctors, teachers and PE instructors. And, responding to advocates of group teaching he comes down firmly on the side of individual lessons. "Alexander instruction is, at first, an individual matter, one-to-one: it cannot be skimmed. Unless it is detailed, it is nothing."

Overall, the book covers a remarkable amount of ground, touching on a wide range of areas and implications. If there is criticism to be made, it would have to be that Dr. Barlow has weighted his discussion towards the medical. Also, the photos he uses tend to give the impression that the Technique is all about posture, in spite of the pains he takes to avoid this in the text. The medical aspects of this book are immensely valuable, but it just seems he could have said more about performance, personal

interactions, and the role of the technique in the daily business of living. The Technique as a means to control manner of reaction is somewhat overshadowed by the description of the Technique as a fundamental tool against disease. This book also seems to be a little light in describing the actual process of learning the technique, particularly the pitfalls and problems that many pupils have. <p>But these criticisms are minor ones. Overall this is an important and valuable book, and we would highly recommend it to people interested in the Alexander Technique at any level. Even the experienced teacher will find things in here which will be valuable to their teaching.