

CHAPTER 4

KNOWLEDGE GAINED FROM TWO CASE STUDIES

4.1 Introduction

In compiling these case studies, which were undertaken with pupils of mine of different ages and at different stages of development, I tried to locate specific causes for specific problem areas, as well as specific cures. As these are not always clearly definable, I would not recommend that a flute teacher use these exercises without either personal Alexander experience or the help of a qualified Alexander teacher.

During these case studies, I had to keep in mind that I could not always apply every aspect of the Alexander Technique, but that I had to let things slowly develop; to let the connections and applications emerge and grow of their own accord. Although I was not hunting for opportunities to apply the Alexander Technique at every single turn, I found it quite impossible to keep the Alexander Technique out of my teaching. The border between the utilisation the Alexander Technique and my teaching the flute was becoming increasingly vague. Analysing, discovering and self-discovering by intelligent observation became integrated into my teaching and practising. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote. "We are by nature observers and thereby learners" (Brett 1992:11).

4.2 Case 1: Gudrun

Gudrun was an advanced amateur flutist who had been playing for more than ten years. She had been taking flute lessons while a student, and then while teaching Geography in a school. She was playing various kinds of amateur gigs, mostly with an Austrian folklore windband. She found regular practice difficult and was aware that the sound she was producing on the flute was deteriorating. She was a classically-trained flutist with a rich, natural sound; but this was becoming strained

and thin, whenever she tried to play louder or with a more singing tone. She suffered from fatigue and pain in the lower back from time to time. I suggested that she take some Alexander lessons in Salzburg, where I could be present, and that we incorporate Alexander Technique in her flute lessons. She agreed to this.

4.2.1 Body posture

Gudrun complained of fatigue after playing. Her head was held too far forward in playing, and from time to time visible tension occurred in her neck. Her neck was stretched forward, with her arms held quite far to the front; her shoulder blades were pulled up and tense at the back. Her embouchure was very flexible, and her fingers quite agile; thus she relied mainly on this, and less on what the rest of her breathing and blowing system was doing. Her pelvis was raised at the back, so that she was continually raising her heels from the floor and stiffening her legs while playing.

4.2.2 Breath and embouchure control

Gudrun's breath capacity seemed to be diminishing. Breath intake and expiration was mostly active only in the upper half of her chest. The muscle tone in her abdomen was weak, so that her sound-support was weak and inconsistent. She often complained that she felt as though she never had any control over her breathing muscles. Subsequently, the sound was unsteady and wavering. Although her embouchure was flexible, the corners of her mouth were often retracted excessively, especially in the upper range of the instrument.

4.2.3 The head position

The major interference with her technique seemed to be the forward-held head position. When her head was held by the Alexander teacher, she managed to play slowly through the three octaves of the flute while keeping the sound full. This was the only possible way to keep the sound resonant. Without this guidance, she had no control over her head position, and every attempt at playing by herself, without

her head being held, resulted in the sound getting thinner and breathy. She managed to let go of the tension at the corners of her mouth when she was asked by the teacher to “think her face back into her neck”. This loosening up of the lips was connected to the direction given by the teacher to “let the tension in the neck go”. This was the first improvement.

4.2.4 Learning body awareness

After the first few Alexander lessons Gudrun began to understand what it meant to “release weight into the sitting bones”. In her subsequent flute lessons I became aware of the fact that she was not raising her buttocks any more, which meant that the tension in her lower back was getting better. This was the second improvement. She was consequently having less trouble with backaches and found flute playing less tiring. In releasing the lower part of the back, she was saving and distributing her body energy in a more economical way (Warren 1992:10).

Releasing the tension in her legs was still difficult. I was continually telling her to relax her knees, to rather bend them a little, and to distribute the weight more evenly via her feet into the floor (Barker 1978:83). It feels very ‘unsafe’ to relax the buttocks if you are used to tightening them in playing. To help her with releasing the tension in her legs, we tried moving around during the lesson; she walked slowly around while playing, leaving her neck free and moving her head gently and naturally from side to side.

Gudrun was delighted with the new awareness of her body and what she was doing with it - this helped her to do more intelligent practising. It was evident to her that she had to be much more careful and disciplined in practising the flute.

The Alexander teacher decided to experiment with Gudrun’s breathing to see if she could get her head/torso alignment under control. Gudrun, although feeling satisfied with her breath capacity, was actually suffering from shortness of breath and too little control over letting it out. She therefore compensated by taking in as much air as she possibly could - audibly! Nevertheless, it was apparent that she still suffered from

shortness of breath. She understood that she had to re-examine her breath control and that she was probably overdoing the intake of breath, thus causing other tensions in the head/neck/torso alignment, the shoulders and the abdomen (Lehman 1914:29).

We were getting better results when Gudrun tried to relax her abdomen before the intake of breath. Singer Lilly Lehman underlines this aspect (1914:29):

Undoubtedly, I took in too much air in breathing, cramped various muscles, thereby depriving my breathing organs and muscles of their elasticity. I often had, with all care and preparation for inhalation, too little breath, and sometimes, when not giving special thought to it, more than enough. I felt too, after excessive inhalation as if I must emit a certain amount of air before I began to sing. Finally I abandoned all superfluous drawing in of the abdomen and diaphragm, inhaled but little, and began to pay special attention to emitting the smallest possible amount of breath, which I found very serviceable.

The Alexander teacher asked her to be aware of the messages which she wanted to convey to her hands; to "listen to her hands". She said that Gudrun was trying too hard at this stage and that she should use the Alexander lessons more to relax and not try to *do* anything in particular. In a standing position, she was asked to think her weight releasing into the sitting bones. An immediate and visible release of the stomach wall and abdomen followed. She did some work with Gudrun in a sitting position, after which the tendency to lean forward when picking the flute up to the lips seemed to decrease. She was asked to inhale, letting the air out over the tongue without pushing or blowing.

The teacher started working with her on flexing the pelvic muscles, in a lying down position. Gudrun had very little control over the muscles between the sitting bones. Her long-standing habits of tensing the lower back muscles were too ingrained for her to develop strength in her lower abdomen at this stage. The tension in her lower back was interfering with the abdomen muscles so that she had too little support and control in her lower abdomen. The actual tightening of her back was detrimental to her breath control (Byles 1978:56).

Gudrun's lack of breath control was also causing her to tighten her throat; this in turn caused the sound to lose its fullness. This habit seemed to be very strong and irresistible, and also contributed to the tightening of her lips when playing in the higher register of the flute. With the releasing of her neck, allowing her head to be free and "high" on her neck, she managed also to let go of the narrowing in her throat. In practising the flute she was encouraged to play only long, slow notes at first, in order to give herself time to allow the releases to take place.

Each progressive step in attaining better breath control was linked up to her previous success of "thinking her face back into her neck"; this also caused the releasing of the corners of her lips. The further loosening up of her lips was connected to better breath control. We did some breathing and voice exercises in her flute lessons, singing "aah" and "ooh" on several notes, experimenting with different vowels to see which was the most effective in helping her to open her throat in singing. She also tried the different vowels while blowing, where she was most successful in thinking the "o" sounds. To her everything sounded the same at this stage, but she remarked that she had the feeling of being able to focus the sound better when she was thinking of a round vowel.

4.2.5 Transferring body awareness to the playing of the flute

In Gudrun's flute lessons we worked, at this stage, on allowing her lower abdominal muscles to release outwards (Lloyd 1986:100). As she was allowing the releases in her throat to take place, the tension in her neck was easing up as well. After having experienced the releases in her neck and shoulder blades, she went for two conventional Alexander lessons again. After these she was able to drop her pelvis in sitting down. She also reported feeling more relaxed than before and able to extend her abdominal muscles; this meant that she was able to let the releasing of her stomach muscles take place, before inhaling air. At this time, we found the breathing exercises in the *Flute Check Up* by Peter Lukas Graf (1991:6-13) very useful. Although she had tried these exercises previously, she had found them to be too exhausting and had described them as "an impossible torture". Now she was actually enjoying them!

The “Monkey position” was something which always helped her to get in touch with her new-found body awareness again. When tension occurred in any way, by e.g. tiredness or apprehension, and caused an inability to let the releases happen, we always used this half-sitting position that the Alexander teachers call “Monkey” (Lloyd 1986:44). It was explained as a process of allowing freedom at the back of the neck, releasing tension at the front of the legs, so that the knees give way and go forward and away. The Alexander pupil lets the arms hang freely on either side of the body, while the ankles, knees and hips are bent and the torso remains “wide” and lengthened. Alexander (1932:64) described this as the position of greatest mechanical advantage. It takes the average student a great deal of practice to become released and free in all the joints of the body and still allow width and length in the torso; but it is a very useful position for attempting to learn another skill while staying free in as much of the body as possible (Lloyd 1986:40).

Overcoming problems

The teacher showed Gudrun how to gently empty the lungs, allowing tension to be released all the way through the body while the air was being let out in a gentle “huh” sound. This is called by the Alexander teachers the “whispered ah”. It is a gentle process, not having much to do with her breathing as a flutist at this stage, but she was encouraged to simply let it happen, without *trying* or *doing*.

Flute and playing with an embouchure which I can rely on

Our observations of her playing after having attended the Alexander lessons were very valuable. At this stage Gudrun had actually stopped listening to the sound and was concentrating on how she was using her body. I observed that there was a much nicer flow in her sound production. She was no longer so tense in the shoulders, but when they moved it seemed to be part of the flow in the sound. Her body seemed to be much more in balance than prior to her taking Alexander lessons.

Understand or have patience with detailed explanations

During this time, Gudrun went to study in England for six months. Here she also went for Alexander classes from time to time. When she came back, she started preparing for an audition for the Mozarteum in Salzburg. Her walking, sitting and standing habits were changed, and the use of her body as a whole was completely different. She had lost some weight in England and reported not to be having

backaches any more. She was thinking of taking up volleyball again. This I advised her not to do - at least not at that stage. (I was instinctively sure that she would fall back into old habits of wrong body use if she were to take up this strenuous sport - especially at the highly competitive level at which she had previously played.) Luckily, she decided to take my advice. She passed her audition with comparative ease.

4.3 Case 2: Katharina

Katharina was a very young pupil. She started taking flute lessons with me at the age of eleven, after she had had lessons with another teacher for ten months. She was very keen and eager to learn. I did not immediately realise her unusual talent and capacity to absorb and adjust, because I was too acutely aware of a number of overriding problems.

4.3.1 Stating the problem

Katharina held her neck, arms and flute in a totally awkward position. She poked her neck and face very far forward, letting the flute hang to the right side at a strange angle and playing with an embouchure which I can only describe as 'impossible'. The embouchure hole of the instrument was almost completely covered, which meant that she was making almost no sound, even though she was blowing very strongly with a tight smile-type embouchure. She wasted most of her air and gasped continually for more.

I did not try to persuade Katharina to take Alexander lessons, as I had to use Alexander principles to teach her from the very first lesson. She was too young to understand or have patience with detailed explanations, she just wanted to be able to play the instrument. Although she was not yet a teenager she already had a strong tendency to slouch. She was very tall for her age, which was perhaps playing a role in this. I use the word 'perhaps' because she only slouched when taking the flute to her mouth and starting to blow. She was completely unaware of this fact. When I happened to mention it a few times, trying to make her understand that her

posture was bad and had to improve if ever she was to improve her sound production, she looked at me with an expression of complete disbelief. She answered that she was always being told not to slouch, but to walk and stand well because she was so tall. In other words: *The playing of the instrument was causing her to do exactly what she was trying not to do.*

At first she frankly disbelieved me, and was quite adamant about it. It was only when I brought *two* mirrors into the class, so that she was able to see herself from different angles, that I could convince her that her posture needed to be changed. She became aware that she was doing something of which she had been completely unaware. This was her first experience of kinaesthetic awareness. This realisation led to her beginning to believe and trust me.

In addition to the features described above, Katharina was also pulling and lifting her left shoulder higher than her right, causing her left arm to lift the flute; this was causing her in turn to complain of both fatigue and cramping in her left shoulderblade. Needless to say, the angle at which the flute was dangling downwards looked extremely uncomfortable.

The tension at the corners of her mouth and in her upper lip was causing a lot of energy to be wasted. Furthermore, she was losing too much air, which made the sound too breathy, with little or no control over either the intonation or the production of the different registers.

I thought at this stage that changes would take place reasonably quickly, because she was at such a perceptive age, and learning very fast. Nevertheless, as I came to know her better I was amazed at her extraordinary will, intelligence and ability to change old habits and learn new things at a rapid rate.

4.3.2 Experimenting with alternative methods of teaching the flute

We started working without the flute. I organised a piece of foam for her to lie on, and initiated some elementary breathing exercises. We both lay down on the floor

and I showed her how to breathe by placing my hand on my abdomen. She imitated, with her hand on her abdomen, feeling it moving upwards when she inhaled, downwards when she exhaled. She had had difficulties in doing this correctly in a standing position, for when trying to do it correctly, she was actually doing it incorrectly - inhaling and flattening the stomach at the same time. This was causing tension. I asked her to try not to do anything; just to lie down and feel (experience) it without trying - just letting it happen. While lying on her back with bent legs and a number of books under her head, I showed her how she could let her back 'melt into' the floor by releasing the tension in it. After we had done this a few times, she required fewer books for support under her head, which meant that her head-neck-torso alignment was improving (Lloyd 1986:74). She was enjoying these unusual kinds of activities in her flute lessons, which was a help to me because, although we laughed quite a lot at the beginning, she began to realise that she was able to breathe correctly and stand more upright, without over-stretching, after doing the exercises while lying on the floor. I explained to her that she could allow herself to lengthen throughout her whole body. She found this easy and relaxing.

After we had been practising the lying down breathing exercises and the movement of getting up into a standing position, (rolling onto her side first, not stiffening the back in standing up) she started to show signs of a better head/body alignment when holding the flute. At this stage, I did not allow her to do much more than hold the instrument while breathing, keeping it in a blowing position.

The next step was to play some long notes; but her embouchure was still a problem. By standing with her body in better alignment, she was also holding the instrument differently - not so far forward any more. This implied that the angle at which she was blowing into the flute was also, automatically, changing. But she was, understandably, seeking for the old embouchure position, wanting to go back to the old habit. I tried different things to help her release more tension. For example, I stood with my hands cupped under her elbows and asked her to let the weight go into my hands; in other words, to release the tension in her arms and simply release her arms into my hands. She responded immediately by collapsing. She said that she could not do what I wanted because she was afraid of letting the instrument fall

to the floor. I persevered and repeated the same procedure with her a few times, initially without the flute. When she again tried to produce a sound - with me holding the weight of her arms at the elbows - she said that her arms felt completely light. This was, at least, a small yet definite improvement.

4.3.3 Becoming more aware of the body (kinaesthetic awareness)

During the next two lessons, Katharina seemed to be going back to her old slouched position - although not completely. I thought that she needed to lengthen and widen through her whole body and decided to try some crawling with her. During my own Alexander classes, I had become aware of the fact that there are many physical processes involved in this action, probably making it easier to feel the releases taking place. This crawling position made it easiest for me to feel the lengthening and widening releases taking place at the same time. I tried to show my pupil, who by this time really trusted me not to be making a fool of her, how to go down on one knee, then on to the haunches, and then leaning the weight of the body on the hands so that she was on all fours. I gently placed my hand on the small of her back, asking her to lengthen herself - but without using any muscle tension. She responded at first by raising her back. I asked her to think length into her neck and width into the throat. After thinking this way, she was able to release the small of her back. We repeated the whole process a few times and then went into a rocking position from where we tried crawling a few steps, then getting up again without undue muscle tension.

These activities were taking quite a lot of time in each flute lesson. She understood that they were important and that she was not wasting her time, but I always had to make very sure that she was not bored. We always had to get back to playing the flute, of course. It was for me of great interest to see how the basic concepts of the Alexander teaching began to emerge in the context of her being generally much less formal and more relaxed; she was not so psychologically tense anymore.

Katharina was playing everything from memory at this stage, as I was trying to allow as little interference as possible. She could read quite well, as she had been playing

the recorder since she was a little girl, but she enjoyed being able to play from memory now and was also encouraged by this to try and improvise quite a lot. When I asked her to play something from memory though, she kept her eyes looking down to the floor.

4.3.4 Improvement of tone quality

The fact that she was keeping her eyes down was causing her to pull her neck and head out of alignment again, which had a negative effect on the tone production. Her whole face and neck were following her eyes and it was not enough to merely tell her to raise her eyes. I explained that she had to try and think of the tip of her nose connecting with the first vertebrae at her neck, so that “the face could go back into the neck”. Trying this a few times rapidly engendered a change in the tone colour from thin to more resonant. She expressed astonishment at this. I also became aware of the fact that she was changing the position of her jaw; this resulted in her not covering the whole of the embouchure hole with her lower lip any longer.

At this stage I asked her to release her weight into her feet. I could actually see how her stomach seemed to relax. (Her mental ability to use imagination and phantasy also helped here immensely.) This improvement had the added benefit that, by thinking the weight downwards into her feet, she was able to let her lower abdomen release. After allowing this further release to take place, the tone quality was completely different - stronger, more resonant - and she could keep the tone quality for much longer. This also helped her to use, and thus need, less air.

At this stage, I felt that I needed the advice of an Alexander teacher. I was lucky enough to find a student flutist who was doing an Alexander Technique training course in Munich. She lived in Salzburg and it was therefore possible for her to attend some of our lessons during the weekends. She was very interested and helpful, so I introduced her to Katharina at the next lesson. Katherina was proud of the fact that she now had two teachers!

Operating a release prior to breathing in order to play a note on the flute, was a new idea for her; but a very rewarding one, when she managed not to overcompensate

by over-stretching the back or her neck. With the help of the Alexander teacher she was able to let the weight release into her feet and form a more resonant tone, as if incidentally.

Where she had been falling back during the week, either into the old slump or over-stretching her neck and back, it was most satisfactory for us to see that she was able to lengthen now throughout her whole body. She was also carrying herself differently in her everyday life.

I have worked with experienced Alexander teachers in South Africa, Germany and Austria, and I was able to observe Alexander teaching to instrumentalists (mostly flute and violin); this helped me to direct and observe Gudrun's and Katharina's progress. All of the processes and changes observed during the two case studies, and during my own Alexander Technique lessons, led to eventual conclusions. From these I could form vital concepts that helped me in both performing and teaching.

5.2 Balance in standing

With both of the case studies the most important problem areas seemed to be with the balance between the head and the body, and therefore with the alignment between the position of the head and the spine. Gudrun held her head too far forward, causing both tension in her neck and pain and fatigue in her back. This in turn caused her to raise her pelvis at the back and stiffen her back while playing, which created yet more tension. To help her to release the unnecessary tension in the back, and to allow the consequent releases to take place, she had to be in a state of the faulty, or over-stretched, position of her head. On the other hand Katharina held her neck, face and flute all at a totally awkward angle. Through the Alexander feeling of the natural alignment between head and body during the process of learning to play the flute.

To attain a balanced stance, students have to learn to release the tension in the back muscles when standing. The idea is actually for students to find a distribution of weight that allows them to make the most of their postural set-ups. As an aid in