

THE USE OF THE EYES AND THE USE OF THE SELF.

Comparing the Bates Method and the
Alexander Technique

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In this essay I am going to compare the work of F.M. Alexander and William Bates, to see how they overlap and reinforce each others'. At first glance, their approaches seem to be quite different: a typical Alexander lesson includes some chair and table work- a Bates lesson some sunning and palming, visualization and other exercises. What I'm interested in, is the thinking behind these activities, which in both systems should be learned from a qualified teacher, who is able to give the student the right experience.

Bates and Alexander both started to develop their methods to cure their personal problems. Alexander's discoveries stemmed from him loosing his voice whilst working as an actor. (Alexander, 2001.) He started his career as a breathing and voice coach, and went on to make a connection between Alexander work and improved posture. (Barlow, 1978.) The Alexander Technique deals with co-ordination, bringing awareness to the ways humans interfere with the best possible functioning of the organism as a whole, both physically and mentally. The Technique can also be used to improve specific conditions such as back pain or stuttering. (BMJ 2008;337:a884, Alexander, 2001.) In fact, Alexander paid close attention to the way his pupils were using their eyes, and he reported the eyesight of some of his pupils having been cured in the process of learning his Technique. (Alexander, 2004 p.84, p.178-9, 2001 p.66.)

Bates was a renowned ophthalmologist who cured his own eyes by studying what he was doing wrong with them, and in the process ended up questioning Hemholz's theory of refractive errors. (Bates 2000.) He compared the overall appearance of his patients before and after they had been cured, noting improvements in their posture as well as in visual acuity. (Bates, 1920.) Bates observed, how emotional struggles were contributing to the loss of vision, which led him to link thinking and seeing. (Bates 2000 p.199.) He found out, that eyesight fluctuated according to the situation, even with persons who had perfect eyesight. This led him to develop a method of undoing unnecessary strain connected with trying to see. (2000.)

Alexander like Bates, was concerned about stopping whatever it was he was doing wrong, and stopping in a way that would not add any more effort to his system. (Alexander, UCL 2004 p.84-5, Bates, 2000 p.42.) The discoveries that were helping these men to cure their own ailments proved to have much wider fields of application, than they had initially thought. Bates expanded his method to cure a whole range of visual problems, as well as learning difficulties. Alexander taught pupils from practically any walk of life. They both kept teaching and refining their methods until the ends of their lives.

Alexander shared Bates' view of the eyesight being affected by "the muscle pulls of the organism in general", and even refers to it as a fact. (Alexander, CCCI 2004 p.161.) He also observed psycho-physical manifestations of a person trying to concentrate, leading the reader to first observe "the strained expression of the eyes, an expression of anxiety and uneasiness", noting that "the eyes might be distorted and the whole expression one that is recognized as the self-hypnotic stare." (CCCI 2004 p.169.)

Correctly applied Bates exercises help the eye to release into movement, rather than being stuck in staring. Bates didn't design exercises to strengthen or stretch the muscles, but to counter-act "wrong habits of thought". (Bates, 2000 p.48.) This is sometimes misunderstood by Alexander teachers, however the Alexander Technique and the Bates Method share this philosophy. Both men were aiming to stop people going wrong, rather than trying to do something to be right. (Alexander, 2000

p.35, Bates, 2000 p.48.)

However, Bates' method doesn't include much of the means to encourage overall coordination of the person, while they are working to restore their vision. Bates worked by vocally guiding his patients through the procedures he had developed, (Quackenbush, 2000) whilst Alexander taught by using gentle hands-on guidance combined with words. He also passed on this skill to future generations of Alexander teachers, while Bates trained only a couple of assistants. Therefore it can be valuable for students of the Bates Method to get an experience of physical guidance through hands-on Alexander work.

Aldous Huxley was a pioneer in combining these two approaches. He wrote a book that introduces the Bates method, informed by the Alexander Technique. He makes a distinction between "passive relaxation" and "dynamic relaxation", which can be difficult to understand without any experience in the Alexander Technique. (Huxley, 1994.)

Bates developed a specific tool to achieve relaxation in the eyes, that he called imagination. He knew from his own experience, that a relaxed eye sees black, when there is no light coming into it. (Bates, 2000 p.121.) He also found out, that telling his pupils to imagine black would cause them to strain to see black. Alexander called this phenomenon end-gaining. The term refers to the human tendency to try and get results directly, rather than using the appropriate means to achieve a goal. "End-gaining" is characterized by unnecessary strain, whereas the "means-whereby" approach implies a level of dynamic relaxation, while performing an activity such as seeing. (Alexander, UCL, 2004 p.11.)

It is very difficult for a beginner of the Bates method to accept being in a blur, whilst not straining to try and change it. Therefore Bates developed indirect approaches to encourage the kind of relaxation he found to be beneficial for people suffering from eye problems. (Bates, 2000, Quackenbush, 2001.) He could, for example, invite a person to imagine something pleasant with closed eyes. Bates understood the pitfalls of imagining, but nevertheless managed to give his pupils an experience of actively resting eyes, that enabled them to see. (Bates, 2000 p.210.)

Alexander criticised attempts at visualizing a movement before doing it. (UCL 2004p.141.) His claim was, that "such 'visualizing' or 'sensing' would necessarily be dependent on the same unreliable sensory appreciation (feeling) which had led to the errors it is desired to eradicate". On the other hand, Alexander was interested in the idea of exercising children's imagination. (1957 p. 73.)

Alexander's views on improving vision seemed to be, that the eyes will improve naturally in the process of classic Alexander work. (2001 p.66.) He could see very well, and didn't develop any specific procedures to work with eyesight. Instead he did create procedures to explore his voice problems, or to focus on his co-ordination, while working with his hands. Interestingly enough, the "whispered Ah", which he designed for vocal awareness, includes a genuine smile with the eyes. For me the procedure highlights the connection, the eyes have with the voice, breathing and emotions.

Both Bates and Alexander created practices relating to their own experience of physical disability. However they shared a philosophy of non-doing. From my own personal study of the Bates Method, I feel I have learned one more way to gain feedback about my use. One can't fake seeing, unless squinting, which adds quite an obvious strain to the eyes. Using the eyes as feedback is a skill that can be refined, just like using the hands or the mirror in The Alexander Technique, to detect minute changes in the relationship of the head, neck and back.

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