

# ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND SWIMMING



# ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND SWIMMING IN SPAIN

**F**or a week in August 2006 I attended John Hunter's Alexander Technique summer school for teachers and pupils in the Spanish mountains near Barcelona. It was a very positive experience that proved something to me about the value of learning the Technique.

Learning the Alexander Technique involves a gradual process of change. The process is different for everybody but it takes time to understand your habits, to accept the need to change and to learn to think differently rather than do something in order to be more free. For me certainly it is a slow process. I get glimpses of my potential to be less bound by my habits. Sometimes, when I make a decision to stop before doing something and to think myself up, I notice my breathing open up and freedom of movement takes me by surprise. But half an hour later I may be tearing my hair out because my modem isn't working or my child won't get dressed and my will to use the Technique seems to desert me. It is sometimes difficult to know if you are really getting anywhere with the Alexander Technique because the changes that happen are subtle.

So it is good to be in a group of people all in the same boat. The group in Spain was a mutually supportive group. Because everyone was working to the same principles, there was a positive upward energy throughout the week that I hadn't previously experienced, or at least allowed myself to be part of. It was a privilege to be with

Elisabeth Walker, aged 92, who trained with Alexander in the 1930s. All week she showed us poise, cheerfulness and love for humanity. She was also up for swimming every day in a colder than normal pool and was keen to improve her front crawl!

It was the work with the other teachers and pupils of the Alexander Technique in the water that made the biggest impression on me about the value of the work. Most people, including Alexander people, have an instinctive fear of water which makes letting go into its support and managing the process of breathing challenging. To build trust in the water and to learn counterintuitive movements that make you swim more efficiently can take a lot of time and mental effort. The Alexander Technique is a useful teaching tool because it can help you encourage people to focus on preventing unnecessary tension. With your hands you can also guide people into a new experience.

Steven Shaw once told me that the Shaw Method is "the Alexander Technique in the water from beginning to end." And I try to follow his lead. But, again, it is difficult to know as a swimming teacher whether the pupil really is learning the Alexander Technique in the water. Most of my pupils come to me because they want to learn to swim. Not many are interested in embracing the process of change that is the Alexander Technique. I still feel that what I am doing has value because, if I can point out to someone that, for example, a free neck will help them move forward better than a stiff one, they are learning something about the Technique.



But at John Hunter's summer school I worked for a few hours every day with people who were already engaged in the process of learning the Alexander Technique. And what I saw clearly was that the more experienced Alexander Technique practitioners were a remarkably different category of learner. Pupils rather than teachers were also streets ahead of the average learner. John Hunter himself was first to come to the water for a lesson. He was practically a non-swimmer and acknowledged he was nervous of the water. He was soon breathing into the water and gliding independently but not without some difficulty getting the hang of the breathing. He quietly stuck at it. Within a few hours, he was swimming breaststroke, comfortably getting his head out of the water to inhale. For nervous swimmers this is one of the most challenging skills and usually takes considerable time and support. The speed with which he got it was something I would not have thought possible.

Elisabeth Walker, at 92, at first, looked like an old woman in the water. Her breast stroke breathing seemed a little rushed and I wondered if some of her movements

were restricted by aging joints. In fact, she just needed to be shown the movements and she was soon swimming the breaststroke like a 20 year old. She was remarkably open to change and responsive to new ideas, delighted to know where she was going wrong. To have such a responsive pupil at any age would be a joy but to teach her was an experience I will never forget.

All the other AT teachers and pupils I worked with were notably quick to get new movements. I was constantly seeing people learn new movements, which gave them a different relationship with the water, in minutes where it normally takes hours. "It just goes to show that what we're doing has value," said John Hunter. For the first time in eleven years of the work, I am starting to really believe this so thank you, John Hunter. I even learned a bit of Tango one evening. I wouldn't have thought that possible a few years ago.

Ian Cross, September 2006. Photos show Elisabeth Walker teaching pupils to write and Ian working with Elisabeth in the water.

Photos courtesy of Mireia Mora Griso