THE iPAC WAY

by Tasha Miller

It is clear from Alexander's four books that he saw his Technique as relevant to all aspects of life. As well as his abundant references to structural problems to do with heads, necks, backs, limbs or with breathing he also gives us many examples of psychological and emotional problems, ignorance in living, preconceived ideas, faulty and often fixed ideas and prejudices, unduly excited fear reflexes and uncontrolled emotions.

Few teachers would disagree. However, because the practice for teaching that we have inherited tends to focus on applying principles and procedures to activities such as getting out of a chair or lying on a table the wider applications of the Technique to human behaviour in general can be overlooked. Students attend to what they 'do' in lessons and can form conclusions that it is about something physical, that is, movement, physical co-ordination and posture. They can cultivate the belief that the Technique is about how to get in and out of chairs the 'right' way or how to relax on a table, in spite of the best efforts of the teacher to explain otherwise.

iPAC is a practice for learning and teaching the Technique which explicitly and overtly cultivates an understanding of the relevance of conscious control to the entirety of human behaviour. It does this by expanding the scope of the lesson: from the ringing of the door bell to leaving at the end, all interactions are part and parcel of the content of the lesson and are perceived as psycho-physical events. This means that the relationship between the student and the teacher in using the principles and procedures of the Technique in their interactions is fundamental to understanding the process in practice. iPAC embraces complexity, recognising that at any moment there are far more stimuli at work than just the request to rise from a chair.

This is a broadening of scope of the practical lesson, not a change of focus. 'Hands-on' work using the table and the chair are still central to iPAC as the means by which a student is helped to overcome their reliance on feeling and to put into practice a new and more reasoned use of themselves.

iPAC is an acronym to help students anchor the AT process in their memory and improve their ability to work more successfully with it in between lessons. It is comprised of four key concepts as a way of processing all stimuli, a way of 'thinking in activity'. Every student is explicitly taught this process as follows:

Inhibition: This is explained to the student as the necessary first step in the reconditioning of human behaviour. It requires the student to perform the

conscious act of refusing to react to their primary desire to gain an end arising from any stimulus: psychological, emotional or physical. This conscious refusal opens the way towards processing a new and more constructive response to stimuli.

iPAC recognises the value of table work as an effective means for cultivating not only the powers of inhibition necessary for making changes but also for facilitating the opportunity to analyse the conditions present in the student's life.

Table work enables the calming down of over-excited reflexes and reactions and releases the student from their usual habits in relation to gravity. On the table students can further release habitual patterns through the non-verbal communication of the teacher's 'hands-on' work.

The 'hands-on' work I describe as 'bottom-up' processing. New sensory information to do with the proper working of the primary control and the establishment of the attitude of mechanical advantage is fed into the student's nervous system through the channel of touch and movement ('Job's Body', by Deane Juhane is excellent in explaining the neurological and physiological basis for this idea). Verbal explanations and instructions I call 'top-down' processing. Its role is to help the student build a conceptual framework for understanding and interpreting the 'bottom-up' sensory data that will help them develop greater conscious and constructive control over the 'use' of themselves in their activities. Both forms of input are concerned with the Primary Control in the 'Use' of themselves as a means to achieve an attitude of mechanical advantage. Please note, the use of the term 'attitude of mechanical advantage' does not correspond to the commonly expressed concept of 'the monkey position'. Further elaboration will be posted.

Primary Control: Students are introduced to Alexander's definition that the Primary Control consists of a certain relationship between the head and neck, the head and neck and torso, and the upper and lower limbs. They are also introduced to Alexander's general directions which relate to the primary control which he outlines in his books. In iPAC I emphasise the integrity of the spine as a single structure rather than encouraging the students to think of the neck as something separate. I organise the head in relationship to the spine and torso (which I define as including the spine, ribcage, pelvis and all the internal organs and systems therein) and then the lower limbs and then the upper limbs.

And I emphasise that the directions for this organisation should happen 'one after the other all at the same time', to create a total pattern of co-ordination. I also explain that this is not a positional concept but a directional or relational one. In other words I reiterate Alexander's statement that, 'There is no such thing as a right position but there is such a thing as a right direction'.

I then expand upon the concept of 'directions'. In the iPAC model directions are organized and systematic and correspond closely to the functional design of the skeletal system. The general directions given by Alexander are no longer worked with directly. Instead, new and more finely tuned directions are given to the student in a step by step manner in order for the structural mapping process to be built in a more comprehensive way. All directions given are reasoned through and the structural mapping process is ordered into four steps: 1) naming the parts, 2) locating the parts, 3) connecting the parts, 4) directing the parts in order to create a total pattern which I term the attitude of mechanical advantage. Through repetition, the student begins to perceive both at a sensory and a conceptual level, the meaning, significance and need, in relationship to evolutionary development, to move the 'directive' and controlling power from the unconscious plane, guided through instinctive patterns implemented by feelings, to a more conscious and reasoned plane. Here I introduce Alexander's concept of 'quickening the conscious mind' in order to be able to 'think in activity', consciously perceiving ends and means working simultaneously and affecting each other moment by moment and having the freedom to change our ends in respect to maintaining the integrity of our means whereby.

Analysis of the Conditions Present: In this step the student is encouraged to look at the conditions that are present moment-by-moment, both internal and external and the dynamic interaction between them; their life conditions in other words. Rather than blocking out distractions in order to 'concentrate' on directions, the task is to maintain directions whilst identifying the many stimuli that are in action that may be disturbing the proper working of the primary control and distorting the attitude of mechanical advantage.

This helps to give a student an overview of the whole situation at any moment as well as preventing the development of an obsession with directions as an end in themselves which often produces the 'Alexandroid' effect.

The analysis naturally includes psychological content. The student is encouraged to observe, analyse and unpack their habitual, automatic reactions in relation to their habits of thinking, feeling and moving. While it is true that feelings are unreliable, and that in the case of any particular feeling it would be very unreliable to suggest reasons or causes for it, nonetheless the student should not hesitate from recognising that they have such feelings and thoughts and that these are potent stimuli which may emotionally 'hijack' them away from their reasoning processes.

Conscious Choice: In the 'Evolution of a Technique' Alexander did not succeed in changing his manner of use until the end of the chapter, when he implemented his final step of making a conscious choice, asking himself, "Shall I go on, shall I do nothing at all, or shall I do something completely different?"

In spite of the fact that the student's task in learning the Technique these days is made easier by the assistance of a teacher, conscious choice is still an essential procedure for breaking the link between a stimulus and a habitual reaction so that the new and improved conditions that are being built by the teacher and student in their work together can be employed.

The goal of iPAC is to get students to see that they have choices and to give them an effective means by which they can change their habitual manner of reaction. iPAC teaches the fundamental principles of the Alexander Technique whilst encouraging awareness, conscious choice and the ownership of skills which in time become independent of the teacher. It empowers students to shift the locus of control from the external to themselves as agents.