

Trainee Corner

Theme: Redirecting

January, 2014

At the Alexander Training Institute of Los Angeles (ATI-LA), the teacher training curriculum includes what the ATI-LA faculty calls "Theme". The trainees are asked to think about and explore a topic, a principle or a question over a given week and then report back about their experiences. Sometimes the discussions are theoretical, sometimes the trainees are asked to apply the theme to their activities, and sometimes they are asked to simply observe how and where the theme shows up. Recently, the theme was "Redirecting". The trainees had also been asked to share their experiences/observations of the theme, but to do so in the first person present tense -- as if the experience is happening right now. Following are examples from three trainees, two relatively new and one in the middle of his training, with regard to "Redirecting":

Trainee "R":

I am driving down the highway. I notice the clock. It is much later than I thought and much later than I want it to be. I am frustrated and anxious that the trip is taking longer than I expected. I now notice that my neck is tight. I am pulling my head down on to my neck. My body is crunched; I'm in a slump; I'm uncomfortable. I realize that crunching up my body won't help me to get home any sooner. I stop tightening my neck. I direct my head to ease away from my neck. I now direct my body to follow my head up and I sense myself lengthening. I am not going any faster, but I am less anxious now. I will get there when I get there.

"R" comments about reporting the experience in the first person:

I find that when recounting the experience in the past tense I get hung up on judgment and supposition. Recounting the same experience in the present tense places more emphasis on awareness. I am less inclined then to worry about whether I was doing something correctly or not, less obsessed with figuring out the "why" of it all, and less likely to depart from the story and enter into hypothetical rambling. And, with all that set aside, I actually see more clearly how my thoughts effect my use, and how my use in turn effects the quality of my experience.

Trainee "K":

It's break time from class and I'm walking to the coffee shop. I'm trying to walk quickly because there are a few other things I need to do during the break. I'm thinking of doing walking turns with teachers and remembering what they've said about walking and how to walk quickly. I'm thinking about knees forward and relaxed ankles and released pelvis and on and on until my coordination is completely disjointed and awkward. I know I look like a crazy person careening down the sidewalk like an Andy Capp bar fight. Suddenly, it occurs to me that I don't need a specific instruction book for "walking fast". I just

need to remember the principles. As I'm thinking this, I feel my neck becoming free, leading my whole body forward. I can sense my whole torso and my legs being walked under me.

“K” comments about reporting the experience in the first person:

I just see it as an interesting thought experiment. Self-reflection is very important for learning your own motivations, desires and habits. I don't feel strongly about the use of present-tense but the practice of recounting behaviors or experiences in order to learn from them is vital.

Trainee “B”:

I'm sitting on an airplane and feeling calm as the flight goes smoothly when suddenly the plane begins to experience severe turbulence. I become fearful of the plane breaking apart in mid-air (as was often depicted in the TV show LOST) leading to a crash and everybody dying. My mind is preoccupied with worst-case scenarios and how I might react to them. I notice my heartbeat quickening and my muscles tensing in response to a perceived threat, one which I feel powerless to control. After experiencing this fear for longer than I would like, I suddenly realize that my anxiety is based from worrying about what could happen in the future. I bring my attention back to the present to notice what's going on: that the plane is moving more erratically than it normally does, but no one has been physically injured. I ask myself how I would feel if I was experiencing the same physical sensations in another environment, like on a bumpy road riding on bus, an experience more familiar to me, but where I have a similar lack of control over my external environment, where it's also possible to be killed. I realize that the physical sensations themselves don't bother me so much as what could happen, and when I focus on what's happening in the moment, almost all of my anxiety goes away and I'm able to quickly return to a similar calm state that I had before the turbulence began. Through inhibiting the habit of dwelling on the future when I anticipate a possible threat, I'm able to stay in the present and direct my thinking and actions to deal with it in a much more healthy way.

“B” comments about the AT:

Although I have flown dozens of times in the past and know logically that it's very rare for planes to crash and normal for them to experience some turbulence, I often felt anxiety with flying by worrying about what could happen. It was not until after I began studying the Alexander Technique, and being more aware of my thinking and choices that I felt I was able to deal with this experience successfully.