

Walter Carrington

Why do we stiffen our necks?

When considering this question, we should bear in mind that it is possible to make a subjective or an objective approach to the Technique, and the problems we variously encounter in practising it. Self-observation is difficult and unreliable: our judgements about other people's conditions are more likely to be valid than those about our own; but in spite of the obstacles we meet in assessing our own experiences, they do help our study of the individual - and this is what the Alexander Technique is all about.

So to take our question subjectively we can ask: Why do we make ourselves stiffen our necks?

When we wish to do something, the mere expression of this wish is enough to bring into operation our habitual muscular patterns of action. Action involves movement, and movement always involves the neck. Stiffening the neck may be avoided with the right muscular activity; but if our wishes are indeterminate, then a conflicting habit-pattern gets started up and causes the neck to lock. Exploring our levels of consciousness through our wishing and willing is very involved, and the analysis of our desires usually reveals complications.

Now the objective approach to our question: What are the external factors that cause us to stiffen our necks?

First emotions: by which I mean the feeling that is engendered in the organism in response to stimuli, and the consequent changes in pulse rate, skin temperature, etc. A frightened man has two alternatives: to stand still or to run away. Straight away the organism can take conflicting courses of action - the classic cause of stiffening the neck. The imagining of a situation can also bring about metabolic changes in kind, if not in degree, comparable to those experienced in the same real-life circumstances. People thinking of something frightening can get themselves into an actual physically frightened state: to take an extreme example, psychiatric hospitals are full of people like this, with their necks held absolutely rigid - the physical manifestation of their hyper-anxiety. So we stiffen our necks in an attempt to control emotion and imagination; but this habit pattern only sets up a vicious circle of constriction which makes our situation worse.

What can we do about stiffening the neck ?

It is extremely difficult to tell you how to cope with this problem subjectively. But I can offer some suggestions, if it is somebody else's neck.

A good way of stopping a pupil in what he is doing is to distract his attention. A tactile stimulus may do it - a verbal stimulus often helps. If one thing doesn't work then you try something else. It is very, very rarely any good pointing out to somebody that he is stiffening his neck, unless you are convinced that he doesn't happen to know. If you are conveying information, then it is fair to say, "Look, you are stiffening your neck". But if there is the slightest degree of reproach or recrimination in your voice, even if he wishes to oblige you, you will find initially he will stiffen it more. So the objective approach is best: present an alternative stimulus, distract his attention and in that way get him into a different muscular habit pattern.

Don't worry about the pupil's psyche - about what is going on in his mind. Present a stimulus, and if it doesn't work try something else quickly: life is too short to try and analyse why you didn't get the response you wanted.

* Transcript of a Talk given in May 1972.

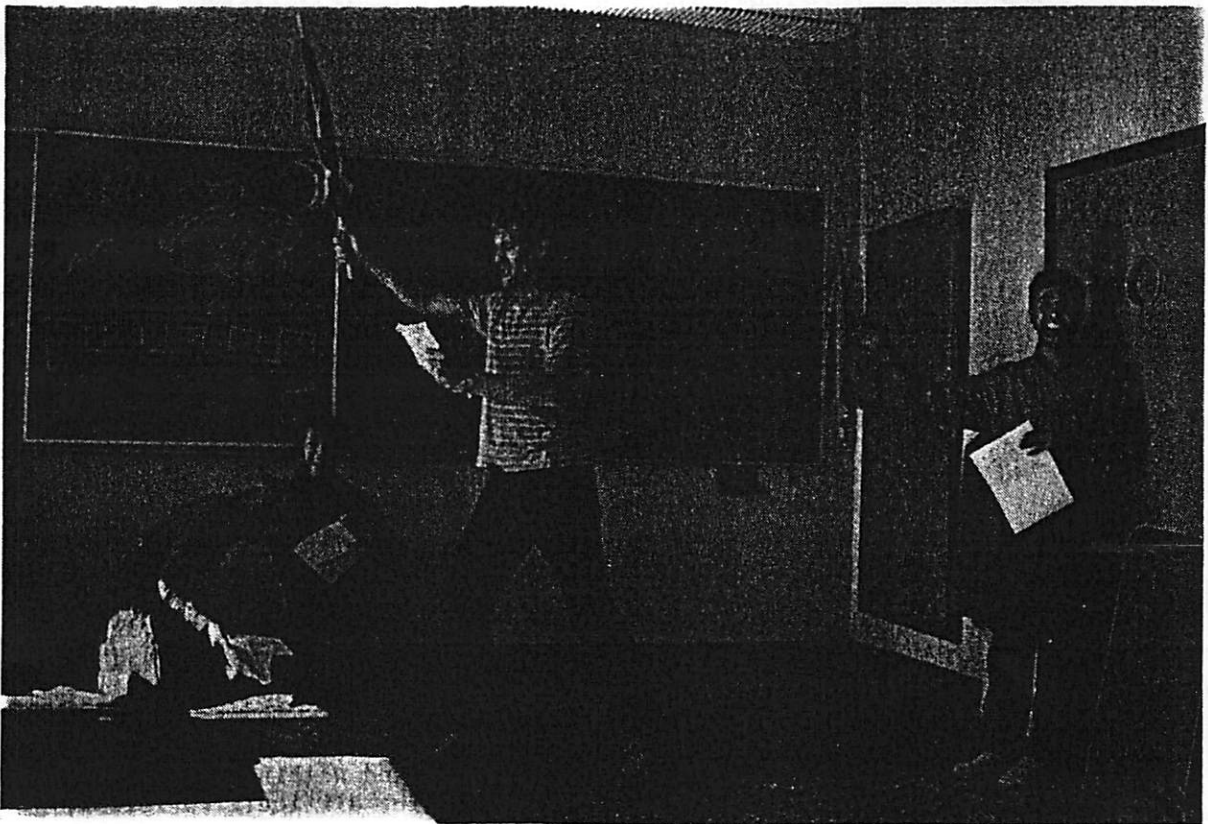
In a recent note to the Editor, Walter writes: There are two points that I should like to draw to the attention of the reader: talking and writing are very different ways of communicating and this often makes a transcript difficult to follow; also a talk expresses momentary thoughts on the topic in question, rather than considered and re-considered opinions. There is so much more that I could say, and perhaps should say, for instance, "On stiffening the Neck" but I hope this brief report may be of interest to your readers".

Thankyou Walter!

When it comes to looking after your own neck then you really do have problems. But if at the beginning, you realize what your neck is - a "going concern" - a very complex structure in which a lot of things are happening all the time for all sorts of reasons: swallowing, breathing, blood supply and two-way nerve traffic to the brain - without even taking into consideration what role the neck plays in moving the head - and then remember that we know very little about it, and must therefore not interfere, then this will help you avoid relaxing the neck, trying to feel what's happening, thereby building up a climate of anxiety and stress which leads to holding the neck. Having accepted your neck as a "going concern" and established non-interference as your maxim, whenever you feel yourself stiffening your neck you can ask yourself if it is worth it, and put the importance of that into scale with other things.

Alexander people are always talking about controlling our reactions. But in my submission the Technique is not so much about controlling reaction as knowing how to avoid stimuli arising that produce the reactions that we don't want. Inhibition and the whole basis of the Technique is really a matter of trying to control stimuli: see that the stimuli are not presented, or get out of the way. It is nonsense to pretend that most of us are really capable of withholding or changing our reactions to powerful stimuli. If the stimulus is strong enough then our reactions are predictable. Try to avoid things which will cause your neck to stiffen: let it operate as it is supposed to operate, leave it alone and let it work. And if things are not going your way, then acceptance of the situation is the key to overcoming it (see the case of spasmodic torticollis described in Alexander's The Universal Constant in Living).

If you have really got non-interference established, then you can start making change: that is the point where your neck begins to work for you.



Members of the School performing 'Die Beerdigung der Katze' (The Cat's Funeral) a German play written and directed by Victoria Lösche, a first year student. The play concerns an unhappy (because lame) Cat who regains her full functions through inhibition & direction (not Alexandrian).