

The F.M. Alexander Memorial Lecture

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Candles and Onions: Layers of Learning

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Introduction

What I am going to talk about today is ways in which we, as Alexander Technique Teachers learn to do what we do, and why it is an accumulative skill that we can always improve, regardless of how long we have been teaching.

For the last two years, I have been studying for an MA in Alexander Teacher Training through the University of East London . This MA is by what has been called Work-Based Learning, which quite simply describes the acquisition of knowledge and experience in the field, whatever field that may be.

For Alexander Teachers, this is an ideal format, for our work is practical. We don't on the whole, spend much teaching time writing or lecturing. We spend our time with our hands on individual people, giving them a different sensory experience of their postural mechanisms than that to which they have become habituated.

Background

I have been teaching now for twenty years and involved in training people for 13 years. In particular I have done a great deal of work in the area of teaching the use of the hands. What is often termed Hands-on-Groups forms an integral part of all STAT training courses and it was this skill I chose to study for my MA.

In order to look at how we learn to use our hands, I looked at novice trainees, that is, people in their first six months of training, and mature trainees, those about to qualify. I videoed them having hands on groups and I tape-recorded interviews with them and with those who were training them.

I read voraciously, not only on the Alexander Technique but also on aspects of Adult learning, in particular transformational learning, reflective practise, the value of not knowing what you were doing (!Something I strongly related to!). I read quite a lot of anthropology because we are not dissimilar to an exotic tribe that has its own language and culture; I gained a lot of insight into our world by looking at the worlds of others. I learned how to make field notes, how to ask open-ended questions and all those researcher things that you have to learn if you are going to produce an acceptable piece of research. I then immersed my self in the wealth of material I had collected and got to the point that I am sure is familiar to all who engage with research, which was.

'What the hell am I doing?'

The Song

Then it came to me that I was listening to a song, one that consisted of many voices. These voices sometimes had solo lines; some of them had whole arias. There was a chorus of voices too, that together made up the back ground to the song.

It also occurred to me that I myself had sung many of these parts and that I was still part of the song and still singing it, but I was now also listening to it and hearing other parts and other voices.

So I started to consider what these voices were, and if they were represented in my study. This led to the development of several models and also to my writing a one act opera libretto based on the Alexander Technique. This I then threaded through my academic thesis, and I'll come back to that later.

I created a kind of time-line, or progression that those of us who have come to the point of teaching have most probably followed. The image of a timeline with recognisable milestones was not the only model I used to portray how we learn the AT.

The other model that emerged was that of a spiral. The nature of our learning is spiral, we come back again and again to the same concepts, such as the desirability of inhibition. We discover once more the need to free the neck. The spiral model became a spiral staircase that we climb as we learn, and I used a spiral staircase as the stage setting for my mythical opera.

It is symbolic of the spirals of learning, where one constantly rediscovers knowledge and yet it becomes deeper and more widely used. The spiral staircase also represents the spiral nature of the musculature of the human being described by Dart (1996) and the universal existence of spirals in nature and the universe, ranging from the crab nebulae galaxy to the cochlea of the human inner ear or the structure of DNA .

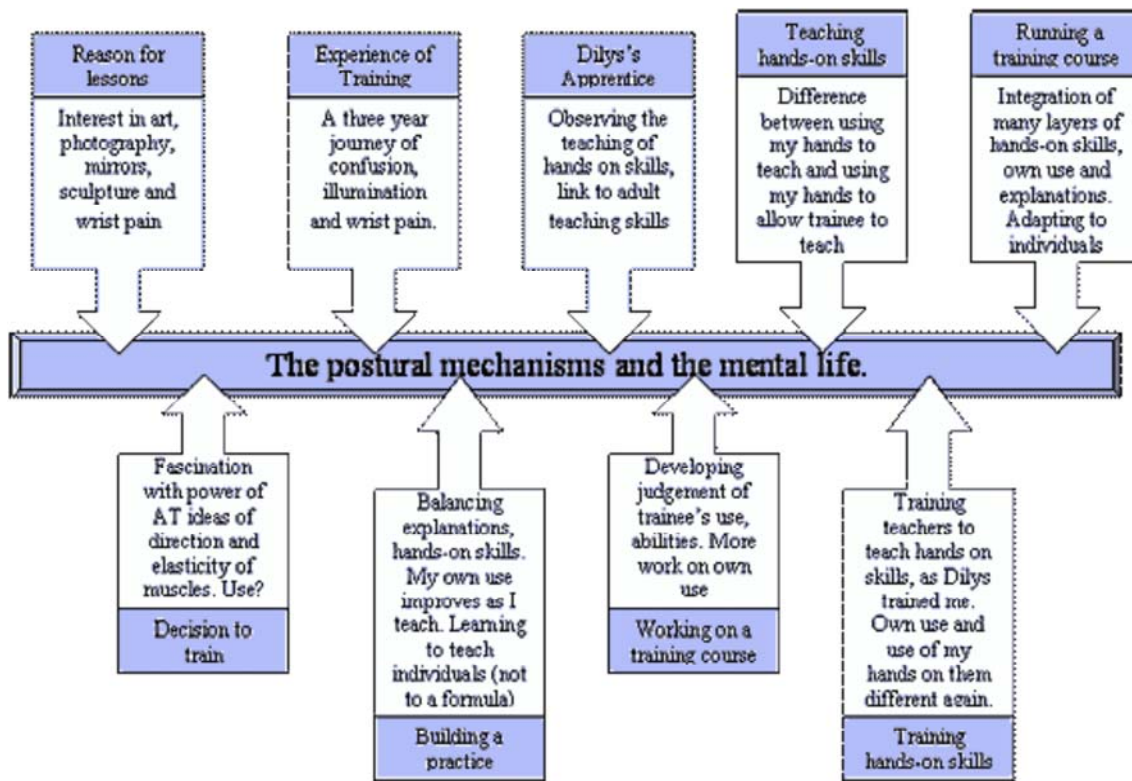
The concept of learning being spiral is not unique to us. Amongst the reading I did was a wonderful book by Mary Bateson (1994) Bateson is an anthropologist and a keen observer of education and culture and of things unseen as well as seen. The holistic scope of her thinking encompasses the broad experience of humankind and a vibrant approach to education and learning. She identifies a spiral learning process that one initially moves through with only partial understanding, taken in with what she describes as *peripheral vision* . A return later to the same material or experience makes possible clarification that was not initially apparent. It's as if you glimpse things out of the corner of your eye, and later they come into full view.

Spiral learning moves through complexity with partial understanding, allowing for later returns. (Bateson, 1994 p.31)

You might say that our learning of the Alexander Technique takes place on a spiral staircase of Use. Use is what we will improve when we seek out Alexander Technique lessons for our own benefit. It is also the most important factor in learning to use your hands effectively on another person. It is also a factor involved in teaching a student how to acquire this skill.

When each of us arrives at the point of teaching someone who is going to part with good hard cash for a lesson, we do so via a pathway that is both individual to us, but has what you might consider recognisable landmarks. This pathway, which you could consider as a timeline, influences the way we communicate our unique but recognisable version of the Alexander Technique.

This is my Alexander pathway, expressed partly as a timeline and partly as an experiential learning line.



Central to the timeline is the essence of the Alexander Technique principles that we are introduced to early in our Alexander experience, and which we continue to work with from then on. I have summarised these principles as the postural mechanisms and the mental life. This encompasses all those concepts that we know and love and often wish we knew and loved better, such as inhibition, direction, the primary control and so on. In my time line I have highlighted what to me are key points, sometimes only recognisable when they have gone past. My experience and exploration of these key points always re-embedded me in the stuff of the Alexander Technique, that central bar of the postural mechanisms and the mental life. Essentially no matter what I am doing with my work it always comes back to practicalities- how can I do this (whatever this is) better, with more freedom, with less effort.

This brings me nicely again to the topic of Use- (we always have to come back to it!) how do we learn to understand our Use?- to be aware of it- to recognise that it permeates every act. We know that we need to look after ourselves well, in terms of our Use if we are going to be able to teach someone else. But what does this imply in a practical sense? How do we blend the use of ourselves into our teaching and still be able to respond to our pupil as a changing individual?

Part of the answer, or perhaps part of one answer is the unique way that we use our hands as both transmitters and receivers of stimuli and information. We use our hands in order to feel what is going on in a pupil, to determine if they are pulling down, or fixing, or holding their breath. And at the same time we use our hands to stimulate the natural postural mechanisms of our pupils to start to wake up and do their job. In other words our hands offer an organising stimulus. And these two functions, both transmitting and receiving are brought about in the same way, they happen simultaneously and are the essence of what we do.

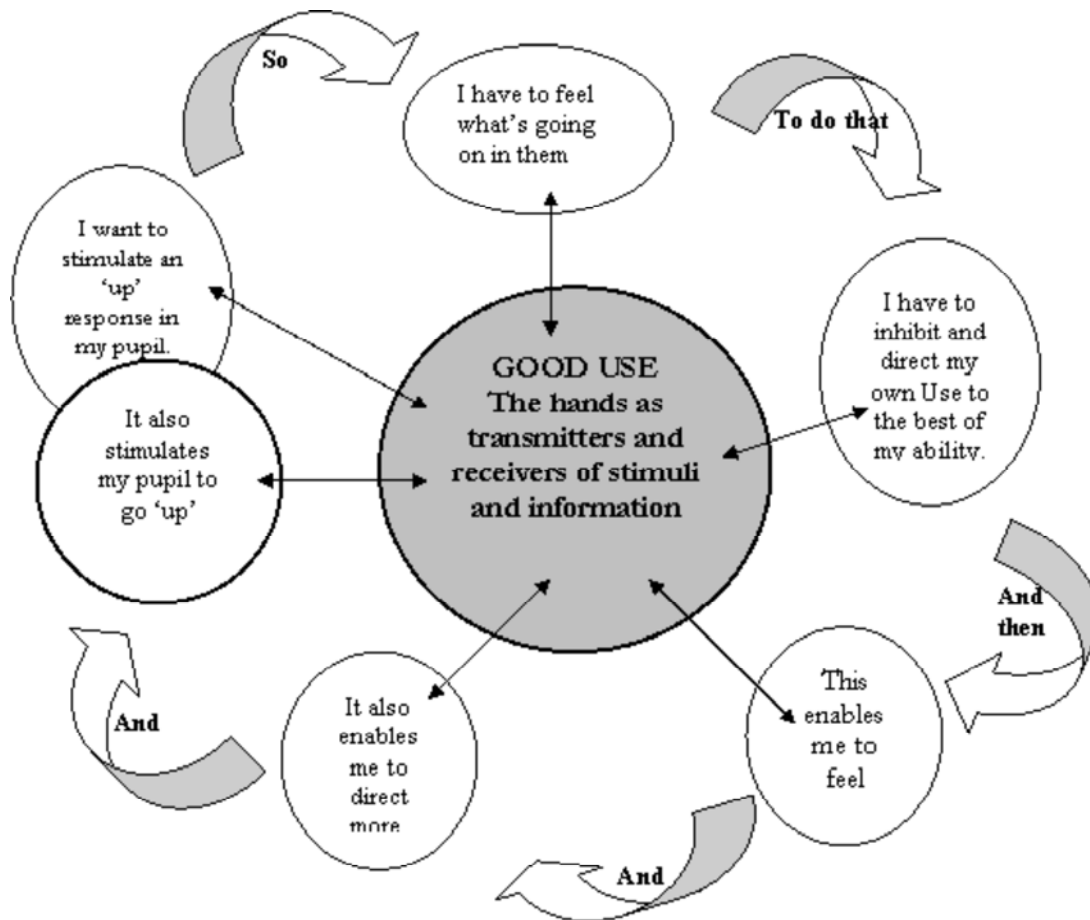


Diagram of internal dialogue when teaching

This diagram represents both a process and an internal dialogue that goes on when we use our hands. We put them on, we move them, or we leave them where they are. We move the pupil, we talk to them and all the time we are maintaining ourselves. It's a complex process.

Each circle of the diagram represents an aspect that has to be thought about. Central to the ability to teach well is good Use, which will enable the teacher to use their hands as transmitters and receivers. The surrounding circles and arrows deal with what has to be done to support good Use. The cycle can be brought into awareness at any point, but usually it is best to start it on the left hand side where two circles overlap. The aim of every Alexander teacher is to take their pupil 'up' to give them an experience of lengthening in stature. This can only be brought about if the teacher is paying attention to his or her own Use. To take a pupil 'up' the teacher needs to know what is happening in the pupil, to feel what is going on. Once again, to do that, the teacher has to look after his or her own Use.

If a teacher is going to feel what is going on in a pupil, he or she has to stay means orientated, not end orientated, so he (or she) pays attention to their own Use by the tools of inhibition and direction.

This in itself enables the teacher to feel more, and moving on to the next arrow, it enables the teacher to direct more, to achieve an even better standard of co-ordination in his or her own body (better Use)

It is this direction in the teacher that stimulates the pupil to go up, and takes you back to the start point of the cycle of good Use.

What this highlights is that there isn't something 'suddenly different' that has to be done in order to teach someone, a would-be teacher still has to climb up that staircase of Use.

I'm going to come back now to the study I did with novice and advanced trainees and look at what emerged from it. This also involved my reading about how other professions set about training people. One profession that has done a great deal of research is the nursing profession and I found a lot to engage my attention there.

Comparing Novices and Advanced Trainees

I read papers by Professor Barbara Daley (1998), of the University of Winsconston . When studying how novice nurses learnt she observed how much they wanted to be spoon-fed, and that fear of being wrong led them to seek input from senior nurses so they could be sure they 'got it right'. They needed a lot of input and were not able to self-direct their learning.

Novice Alexander trainees need much more input, both verbal and physical to 'get things going' than advanced trainees. Most teacher trainers recognise that they use their own hands rather more on novice trainees than on advanced trainees, recognising that it is more difficult for novices to manifest the co-ordination necessary. Novice trainees also tend to stick to the more simple 'working on self' practices that they can pursue without a teacher monitoring them. They are generally less well co-ordinated than their senior colleagues and not able to maintain good Use for more than short periods of time. When asked to articulate what they know they are liable to be very challenged and not be able to express themselves. As they become aware of their mis-use patterns they tend to identify them as being more local 'it's my knees that are the problem' than recognising that the whole body is involved in co-ordination.

Advanced trainees do not require so much input from a trainer to maintain their own Use. In this situation the trainer may get the trainee to work on them, in this way the trainer uses his or her whole body as a sensory mechanism that can feel what the trainee is doing. Simple verbal hints from the trainer in this situation are enough to help the trainee obtain an even higher level of Use.

Novice Trainees

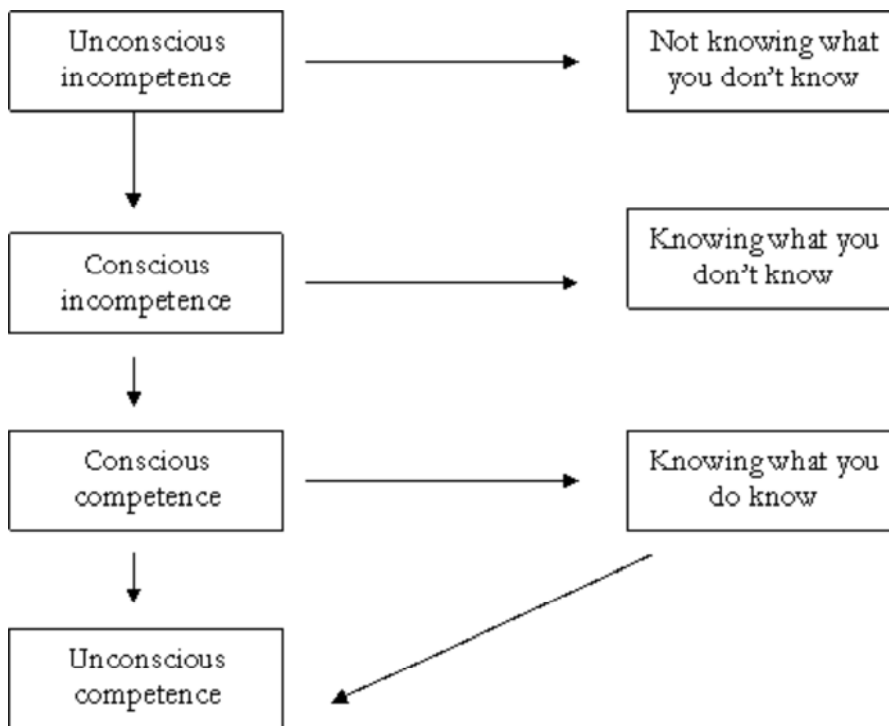
Need considerable verbal and physical input.
 Maintain good Use for only short periods of time
 Are generally not able to articulate their learning
 Identify their own mis-use as being more specific than global
 Practise only very simple procedures on their own
 Are more reliant on trainers to 'get it'

Advanced Trainees

Are able to self-improve with much less input, both verbal and physical.
 Maintain good Use reliably for extended periods of time.
 Are generally articulate as to their learning
 Understand the total pattern of Use and the role 'separate' body areas play in it.
 Practise increasingly complex procedures without supervision
 Develop procedures for themselves.

Fig. 14 Comparison of novice and advanced trainees

I am going to outline another pattern of learning that emerged in my studies that is by no means unique to us but is very pertinent. It is a map of four stages of learning.



The first stage, described as unconscious incompetence, or not knowing what you don't know is often characterised by confidence, or blissful ignorance.

The second stage is different, you become aware of what you don't know, you are consciously incompetent. For adults who may be highly skilled in other areas this can be a very uncomfortable stage.

It is however, a vital stage as it leads on to conscious competence, knowing what you do know. This stage is often characterised by success in whatever the endeavour is, plus a realisation that success is dependant on careful and conscious practice. The fourth stage, unconscious competence, is where practice has become so familiar you have forgotten how you got there.

Dance teacher Stephen Brown (2003) discusses the four stages of learning in relation to the physical skill of Argentine Tango and says that its only when the fourth stage of unconscious competence is reached that the dancer touches the possibility of 'inner Argentine tango', an effortless mastery. Brown also suggests that people learn Argentine tango in a spiral, moving from the first stage of learning to the fourth repeatedly. He discusses the role of the teacher as one of helping the student manage the 'tension' typically experienced at transition points. When a student starts to move from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence, they can experience this as a deterioration of skill.

The four stages of learning and learning to use 'the uncomfortable place'

The four stages of learning are very relevant to a trainee's progress. The first stage, unconscious incompetence, is often the point at which most trainees begin their training course. They have

usually had personal experience of the Alexander Technique and have benefited. They start their training thinking they know all about it and can be very confident.

In the second stage confidence drops as trainees become aware of their limitations and of how far they have to go. Adults who may be highly skilled in other areas find this very difficult. For Alexander trainees, this is 'the uncomfortable place', but it leads on to conscious competence, knowing what you do know. This stage is often characterised by success in whatever the endeavour is, plus a realisation that success is dependant on careful and conscious practice. I would liken this to a common experience of Alexander trainees who have mastered the skills of using their hands and then face the challenge of using their hands and talking to the person they are working on at the same time. For many trainees, they feel they can do one or the other, not both. They are poised at a transition between conscious competence and the next learning stage, which is unconscious competence, where you know what you know so well that you don't need to think about it so much. You could describe this as having built up the correct habits of work that you can then depend on

The recognition that is useful for trainees to experience 'the uncomfortable place' could help trainees develop a greater sense of internal self. The knowledge that this is a necessary transitional stage from knowing what you don't know to knowing what you do know could be helpful. Being aware that this is something that could happen over and over again enables trainees to stay focussed on means and not concern themselves with ends or results. Returning to the uncomfortable place changes its nature so that it becomes a creative void, a place from which new ideas and realisations can emerge. It is the seedbed of reflective practise. The skill of both trainer and trainee in managing this 'place' is crucial. If either attempts to rush on too quickly to conscious competence, then there isn't enough fuel to feed the creative void. Maintaining an effective tension around this area produces thoughtful teachers capable of independent practise.

I'd like to return now to the mythical opera that seemed to write itself whilst I was endeavouring to write an academic thesis.

It is called *Gravity and Light*. In it I have cast F.M as a magician. I have always found the technique magical and this acknowledges that experience.

Gravity and Light, takes its title from the two opposing but complementary forces that stimulate the human postural mechanisms. We must contend with gravity as a downward force in our lives, holding us onto the planet, and yet we have an inbuilt urge to extend upwards. This urge is both physical and for many symbolic of an inner search for understanding, enlightenment, illumination. To grow towards the light is a fundamental urge for most life forms, be they sentient creatures, or plants.

Grappling with these two forces is a rewarding journey that can lead in many directions (mostly upwards!). This piece is the culmination of a twenty-year journey that the librettist both wittingly and unwittingly undertook. It explores a crystallisation of understanding, experience and practice that extends both into the past and the future.

OVERTURE

(Introduction)

GRAVITY AND LIGHT

An Opera based on The Alexander Technique.

In one Act

Or

Analysis of training of
the specialised use of the hands
in Alexander Technique teaching

The Mirrored Chamber

The opera tells the story of Emily, a young girl who has a burning ambition to practise magic. She has heard of a powerful magician named Frederick , who had the ability to transform people with the touch of his hands. He was a mysterious figure, who had spent many years locked in a room gazing at his own reflection in mirrors. Mirrors were all around, revealing secrets that he alone could understand (1). He helped the lame to walk and the stutterer to speak (2). He freed the sick from their prison of pain, and helped the breathless to breathe (3). He enlivened the minds of the dull and caused the philosopher to think yet more deeply (4). He was a strange and powerful man, now partly wrapped in the mystery of the past; his innermost secrets known only to a few. His hands brought about the transformations he made, and Emily wondered if she too could perform his most powerful spell; transforming gravity into light.

The Spiral Staircase

Emily sets out on a strange journey. She hears of a wise man that, she believes, Frederick had initiated into his practices. He lives in a large rambling house surrounded by his helpers and pupils, all of whom speak a strange language that Emily can't quite understand. Keen to learn everything she can, Emily wanders through the house, meeting different characters that give her thoughtful directions. But in her haste Emily misunderstands them and she constantly finds herself climbing a spiral staircase that she thought she had already climbed, only to realise that actually, although it appears to be the same staircase, it looks different every time she climbs it, and the view is different the higher she goes.

In time Emily realises that if she wants to learn the secrets of Frederick's spell, she must stop looking where she has been looking and embark upon a strange and delightful journey into an unknown land and that the spiral staircase will take her there if she can understand its message.

The Matrix of Learning

Coming back now to how Emily might have learned to cast her spells. All the ideas I have outlined, the spiral staircase, the Alexander time line, the four stages of learning together form a kind of matrix of learning, a sort of rich nutrient 'Good Use' jelly that you can grow Alexander teachers in!

Conclusion

I have left it to the end to explain my title and I am going to do so by reading an extract from my reflective diary, which I was obliged to keep throughout my research period, and which is mostly full of fragments of thoughts, diagrams and ideas. It was an entry I made on the day I videoed Walter Carrington teaching a Hands-on Group to students in their penultimate term.

Nov 11 th 2002

Later on in the morning, Walter gave me a 'turn' and I experience an extraordinary sense of clarity. In three short well-filled minutes his hands shape me, define me and lift my body and spirit up.

Deeply familiar yet totally fresh, I go up, the way I have since my own first Alexander lesson when I was 20, and, at the same time, it is new. I am not the person I was; I am the person that I am. But the threads of Self that connect the 20-year-old single, carefree Carolyn to the 50-year-old mother of two teenagers and Head of Training Carolyn, are largely woven from my experience of the Alexander Technique.

I go from it and I return to it again and again and again. Another twist to the story, another hill to climb, another thought to consider. A living territory, like a landscape I have walked through many times before, that changes subtly and occasionally dramatically every time I revisit it.

Walters's hands are strong and yet gentle, they are powerfully subtle. His fingers momentarily lie either side of my breast bone whilst his opposite hand does the same between my shoulder blades. Pressing but not pressing, lifting but not lifting, defining and refining my sense of my own unique structure. A gentle persistent invitation to expand, to go up, to lengthen and to widen. Never dominating, always allowing. I, out of long, well trained conscious habit, inhibit all extraneous thought and movement and allow his hands to stimulate my neuromuscular system.

I am happy.

Nothing else I have encountered has ever given me this experience, or anything remotely approaching it

Walter's back hand is on the lower part of my neck, whilst his front hand is orchestrating my ribs and diaphragm. Effortlessly, my breathing frees and opens up, my neck lengthens out of my shoulders and my back deepens the sense I have of the floor under my feet. I don't need to move, to run around, to stretch, I am doing all those things whilst standing perfectly still. I am simply standing there, going up. It is such a joyful 'all' that I find it hard to communicate its utter simplicity.

Like a candle repeatedly dipped in wax, I acquire another layer of understanding. Like an onion, another layer of mis-use is peeled away. I am learning and unlearning at the same time.

And so finally that explains my title.

Thank you.

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