

Michael Chekhov

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Lessons to Teachers

Given by Michael Chekhov to Beatrice Straight and Deirdre Hurst at the Chekhov Theatre Studio, Dartington Hall, Totnes, Devon in April-June, 1936. These notes were taken in shorthand by Deirdre Hurst.¹

LESSON I

CONCENTRATION
TWO KINDS OF CONCENTRATION

CONCENTRATION:

Concentration - how important. Everyone has the power of concentration to some degree, but this is not sufficient for our work. You may have a group of geniuses, but if they have no concentration, their talent will be lost. While on the other hand, people with less talent but real concentration will have the power to hold your interest. The East knows the secret, but the West does not and must learn.

Concentration should be like a stone or a spear within you. It will give you great power because all the forces of your being are gathered together, and this gives great strength. With this strength you can really teach people so that they will understand. This strength gives you complete control and a wonderful feeling of joy and satisfaction.

In teaching you must know your subject so completely that you are perfectly at ease and so are able to answer any

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questions. To begin with, you must only reveal a small fraction of what you know. The students will realize that this is the case if you are really sure of what you are talking about.

You must be able to penetrate into the pupils because concentration is nearness - contact with a person, an object, or an idea. You must know your pupils and what they know. This class may be, in the beginning, very dull for them. They will come here excited, thinking that this is a beautiful place and that they will be able to get right up and act. The class will hold their interest for a few minutes, and then they will find it dull and will be only polite. You must not try to divert their attention to some subject that would be more interesting. You must use all your concentration and make them go on. They will become bored and angry with you, but this must be. The first day they will be disappointed - the third day they will be a little more like students, and perhaps weeks later they will begin to realize the value of what has gone before. It is essential that they have difficult times and find things hard and not to their liking. They must learn to be students.

The teacher must keep working with them, coaxing them, going over and over the same thing until they begin to see that there is something wrong in their work and will begin to realize in what way this training will help them.

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You will only use the senses of seeing and hearing in your early exercises. The other senses are much more subtle, and perhaps later on we will work with them. They are mysteries. The acid taste of a lemon can permeate a whole character. But this is not for the students.

TWO KINDS OF CONCENTRATION:

You must tell your students that concentration is very important. There are two kinds. First, when one picks up a beautiful object, one notices it and is, therefore, concentrating unwittingly. Second, when one picks up something unattractive and then forces oneself to notice it, that is at once a conscious, willed concentration, and this is what we are interested in.

Exercise:

Begin by asking them to look at each thing in the room - for example, a chair. Notice the shape, color, form. Say to yourself, "I see that chair." "I see its color," and "I am concentrating on that chair." Be with the chair. Do this for a long time. Help a student if he or she does not understand - some will understand quickly, others won't. When you feel that you have worked long enough on this and that they understand, ask them all to concentrate on the same thing together, instead of letting them choose individually. It is always harder to concentrate on a given object than on

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something you choose yourself. After a while, ask them to look closely at some object, then close their eyes and see it before them. They will be happy when they open their eyes and see how much easier it is.

Choose a sound and listen to it. Then have all the students think of a tune together, while the musician plays something quite different. Again let them take a tiny noise, and concentrate on it while the musician plays. When these obstacles are taken away, they will see how much easier it is.

After the exercise of looking at an object and then closing their eyes and seeing it, ask them to close their eyes, see the room as a whole, and concentrate on each object within it. Again, when they open their eyes and see the object, they will realize how near they are to it.

When you close your eyes and visualize an object, you will get a sense of expansion. You seem to extend beyond your usual physical self, and flow towards the object. The moment you open your eyes, this association is lost, because you become aware of the physical quality of the object and of yourself.

Now take a spot on the wall and, concentrating on that, at the same time play ball or some game, always sensing that spot even though you may not be able to see it.

For yourself a very good training is to take an

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object, for instance, an eraser. Concentrate on it for fifteen minutes, its shape, its color, what it does and does not do. Then put it down and have this feeling of power in your head so that your brain feels wonderfully clear. Then think of it at the base of your spine and then shake it off.

Students do not realize how important this concentration is and how necessary is the feeling of a "stone" or "spear." The theatre today is poor and the audience bored. It must be won with love and not fought. A man goes to the theatre after a good dinner, he sees a badly-acted love scene and is perfectly justified in asking what he is getting of value from it. But the new theatre will be something different. We will have the audience on their toes - tense.

This development of concentration will affect the students' characters. People will see quite clearly that they have some strength within them.

Outline for Lesson in Concentration

1. The power of concentration in the theatre.

Two kinds of concentration: the unwitting, undirected, unconscious concentration; and the conscious, directed, or willed concentration. Conscious or willed concentration means focusing our whole attention on an object.

2. Four steps by which we can develop this power.

- (1) Observing and being aware of physical objects.
- (2) First seeing and then imagining these same physical objects.
- (3) Using our creative imagination instead of observing the actual physical objects.
- (4) Close your eyes and imagine the room, then choose objects in the room and concentrate on them.

3. Exercises:

- (1) Choose an object in the room, observe its qualities.
- (2) Do the same thing and then close the eyes and try to see it clearly.
- (3) Observe the whole room and then choose a section of it, observe it, then close the eyes and try to see it all clearly. Then describe what you see.
- (4) Choose a sound and hear it only.
- (5) The same but in spite of another very definite sound going on.
- (6) Think of one tune while another is being played.
- (7) Choose some spot in the room, feel it, and then play a game, continuing always to "feel" the spot.
- (8) Imagine two dissimilar objects and merge one into the other.
- (9) Imagine the growth of a plant.
- (10) Imagine an action and then the reverse of it.

4. The Will:

The Creative Imagination

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Relation to objects - flowing toward them
What do we mean by Concentration? Concentration
is one of the most vital and important qualities
an actor can possess.

Our aim is to have a wise, sensitive body, obedient
to every command of our will. A sensitive instrument by which
we can convey our artistic ideas.

To do this we must discover the possibilities in
our bodies as if for the first time. We must feel that our
bodies are new things which we have just been given, and we
must explore and discover them and experience the endless
possibilities in them.