

The Alexander Technique : A Primer

The Alexander Technique is the study and practice of the work of Frederick Matthias Alexander – the Australian-born originator of the skill that now popularly bears his name. Mr. Alexander (also known as FM) taught his technique in England and the United States until his death in 1955 at the age of 86. His work has been described in various ways since its conception in the last decade of the 19th century. Typically depicted as an educational *mind/body* technique that is associated with improvements in posture, it is initially experienced through the subtle guidance of a teacher's hands. However, even as postural improvement is certainly a product of Alexander's work, a definition that ends there is wholly inadequate.

Over the past one hundred years, the Technique has also been associated with improvements in breathing, voice, balance, co-ordination, physical resiliency and stamina. It has impressed physicians, scientists and philosophers with its ability to address, manage and often alleviate a whole host of conditions that cause human suffering – conditions that range from chronic pain to depression and anxiety. It is considered an essential resource in the arts with regards to performance abilities and expressive freedom. And in the physical and cognitive sciences it is fundamental with regards to injury prevention, repetitive stress reduction and physical rehabilitation.

The practical foundation of the Technique, crucial to the understanding of it, is partly responsible for the inadequacy of most attempts to define the Technique. Peggy Williams echoed the words of Alexander, "...you've got to give a person an experience, otherwise it is like telling a blind man what the color red is!" However, at the risk of neglecting the experiential core of the Alexander's work, a basic foundation for the reader with little or no experience of the subject is a necessity.

Fundamentals of the Technique

The optimal functioning of the postural support mechanism is fundamental to the functioning of our human organism and our ability to realize our full potential in all the activities of living. The Alexander Technique teaches us how to consciously stop engaging in harmful habits of tension that interfere with our innate support mechanisms. Key to the practice of the Technique is gaining the ability to influence our habitual and unconscious reactions, and key to the gaining of some control over these reactions is learning how to stop habitually tensing our necks and pulling our heads back and down into the spine.

This undoing of habitual tension allows our spines to lengthen out of their typically more compressed states, our backs to release out of unnecessary contracting and narrowing tension so enabling our ribs and diaphragms to move more easily for optimal breathing and voice production, and our heads to balance more freely in a better coordinated relationship to the body. The body responds by triggering innate sensory motor processes that produce yet more freedom and improvement in balance and coordination and hence an overall improvement in our optimal functioning.

The feeling of ease that accompanies this newfound freedom is instantly palpable and

feels remarkably straightforward. However, it quickly becomes apparent that we are unable to directly control this more efficient coordination of the complex sensory-motor processes that are working continuously—and to some degree automatically—to maintain our dynamic equilibrium. Therefore, the Technique relies on indirect means to bring about this desired goal.

Indirect Means

At the hands of a skilled teacher we learn how not to interfere with our innate ability to be upright in a gravitational field. First and foremost, we learn what not to do, and therefore, allow for new experiences of more optimal upright coordination. As we gain confidence in our new experiences, we gain an increasingly clear understanding of what is needed—or not needed, as the case may be—to develop a more precise and conscious means for navigating the ever changing demands of gravity.

Pupils who study and practice the Alexander Technique acquire, over time, a more organized strength in their backs, and therefore become more capable of bringing about what is needed to optimally maintain themselves. Ultimately, pupils realize the kind of physical alertness that Peggy Williams likened to the stillness of a cat ready to pounce on its prey - stillness that is neither fixed nor collapsed, but poised, ready and alert for movement.

As is likely evident at this point, the Technique poses a challenge to those who would try to fit it into a sound bite. Wouldn't it be simpler if we were to return to addressing the Technique in terms of posture alone? However, try standing *up straight* for more than a few minutes without tiring, or attempt to sit at a desk for even a small period of time without collapsing through the torso, neck or shoulders. Most of us know very little about how we can actually go about maintaining an easily balanced, upright posture over time. In fact, most of us probably know a great deal more about how to use and maintain our stereos or automobiles. What a predicament!

It is no wonder that our all too human capacity for error and injury forever plagues our best-laid plans and direct efforts. The growing number of people with medically untreatable back pain and repetitive stress injuries indicates that there is an unfortunate lack of knowledge and medical expertise regarding the indirect means whereby a natural, upright balance and overall coordinated use of the human body is optimally sustained.

Mainstream Application of the Technique

Even as prominent medical professionals have lent strong support for Alexander's work since its conception, acceptance into mainstream medicine has come slowly, albeit steadily. By the mid 1900's studies of such eminent scientists as Sherrington, Magnus, Coghill and Dart corroborated the physiological soundness of Alexander's discovery.

In 1973 Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen, one of the founders of modern ethology, spoke of

the importance of Alexander's work in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Physiology/Medicine. He noted:

“...very striking improvements in such diverse things as high blood pressure, breathing, depth of sleep, overall cheerfulness, mental alertness, resilience against outside pressures, and ... in such a refined skill as playing a musical instrument.”

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Research in the fields of body mechanics, physiology and neuroscience continues to shed light on some of the complex mechanisms involved in producing the long-established benefits of the work, and a growing number of medical practitioners are recommending the Alexander Technique to their patients. It is becoming increasingly valued in the areas of health education and caretaker support. Additionally, it is considered by many as a preferred method for the treatment and/or management of chronic pain and injury prevention.

“The Alexander Technique enables people to get better faster and stay better longer. Its practitioners stress unification in an era of increasing specialization. This is undoubtedly the best way to take care of the back and alleviate pain.”

JACK STERN, MD, PhD, NEUROSURGEON
WESTCHESTER MEDICAL CENTER

“As an orthopedist, I have referred patients specifically with postural problems and back and neck pain, who have experienced pain relief after a series of lessons in the Alexander Technique.”

MICHAEL NEUWIRTH, M.D., P.C.
ASSISTANT CLINICAL PROFESSOR,
MOUNT SINAI SCHOOL OF MEDICINE,
ASSOCIATE CHIEF OF THE SCOLIOSIS SERVICE
AT THE HOSPITAL FOR JOINT DISEASES
ORTHOPAEDIC INSTITUTE, NEWYORK

The Technique has also become an essential resource at some of the most respected educational institutions and Performing Arts centers worldwide. Artists have long valued it as a tool for fine-tuning and maintaining themselves as the primary instrument of their art in their quest to realize artistic mastery and freedom of expression. The list of accomplished actors, musicians, singers and dancers who have relied on its benefits is as long as it is varied: from Sir Henry Irving, the great turn of the century actor, to the modern dancer and choreographer, Trisha Brown, to the internationally renowned celebrity, Madonna.

Among Alexander's early enthusiasts were the writers George Bernard Shaw and Aldous Huxley; however, the list of literary artists that have continued to derive benefit from the Technique is also extensive. In a recent introduction to a collection of essays on the Technique; the writer Robertson Davies writes:

“The Alexander Technique has played an important part in my life. It keeps the body alive at ages when people have resigned themselves to

irreversible decline.”
ROBERTSON DAVIES, WRITER

The Evolution of a Technique

F.M. Alexander wrote four books himself as an adjunct to his practical teaching; having done so, when queried on the nature of his work, he would often simply recommend that one read his books. In Alexander's third book, *The Use of the Self*, he describes the developmental path of his work. It is in the story of his work's evolution that we best find meaning for the jargon that has become standard in discussions of Alexander's technique.

As a young man, Frederick Matthias Alexander had a passion for Shakespeare, and made his living acting and reciting. A troublesome hoarseness that occasionally led to the loss of his voice threatened to end his career. On the advice of his doctors he periodically rested his voice, and while rest provided temporary relief, the problem recurred when he returned to recitation. In the absence of medical explanation or lasting cure, Alexander set out to solve his own problem.

In pursuit of his objective, he patiently observed himself while reciting in front of mirrors. It became clear to him that his trouble lay in the way he was using his voice – i.e. something he was *doing* with himself while reciting, was causing his problem. The lack of available, practical knowledge relating to how he was misusing himself impelled him to undertake a path of rigorous and patient self-observation and experimentation. Ultimately, this path led him to the practical means whereby he was able to resolve his own predicament.

Early in Alexander's experimentation, he observed that, when he was reciting, excessive tension in his neck caused him to compress his head *back and down* towards his spine. It became obvious that pressing his head down on his spine inadvertently led to an increased pressure on his larynx, and eventually led to his hoarseness. With further experimentation it became equally apparent that alleviating tension in his neck led to a marked overall improvement in his body's ability to function.

As Alexander progressively released the undue tension in his neck, he was able to reduce the resulting compression in his spine. *Indirectly*, he was able to free himself from the debilitating pressure that he had been unknowingly putting on his larynx, and greatly benefit the general functioning of the rest of his body. Even though his breakthrough seemed promising, it quickly became evident that the bothersome habit of pulling his head back would recur every time he tried to recite. His inability to prevent unwanted and involuntary tension while reciting evidenced a critical impasse in the development of his work. Repeatedly and uncontrollably he ended up doing the very thing he set out *not* to do!

The apparent impossibility of gaining control over his involuntary responses almost made him abandon his work. Nonetheless, when he recognized that *just the thought* of speaking would activate his persistent tension patterns; he was well on his way to triumphing over what appeared to be the irresistible impulse of human habit.

With perseverance he found that he could interrupt his habitual responses by pausing just the moment before initiating his speech, and then redirecting his actions. This last minute change in his decision to recite made it possible for him not to engage in the debilitating effects of involuntary muscular tension. Over time, exercising conscious control over his automatic responses to *the idea* of speaking liberated him from his injurious habits while reciting. Years later, Alexander used the word *inhibition* to describe the momentary pause and redirection of intention that he used to circumvent his habits. (Note: The meaning Alexander assigned to the word *inhibition* was not in any way akin to Freud's use of it to describe a psychological state of fearful repression. Rather, Alexander derived the term *inhibition* from its neuro-physiological foundations. In the physiology of muscle functioning, reciprocal inhibition serves to facilitate movement, not repress it.)

Once Alexander had eradicated the source of his own difficulties, he sought to explain his methods to fellow actors in an effort to assist them. However, words alone proved altogether insufficient, and FM began to use his hands to guide others towards the experiences of balance, coordination and *inhibition* that took years of work to cultivate within himself. In due course the *hands-on* methods that Alexander applied to a small number of aspiring actors benefited a far wider range of people. In addition to those involved in the specialized training of the performing arts and athletics, increasing numbers of people involved in the performance of the simple activities of everyday living benefited from the Technique.

Today there are several thousand teachers of the Technique around the world who are trained in the skill that Alexander so impressively mastered 100 years ago. Through the refined use of their hands, they work towards imparting experiences of balance and coordination similar to those that FM conveyed in his teaching. An integrated understanding and practice of Alexander's work is based on the renewal and development of these experiences. It is for this reason that a session in the Alexander Technique is called a lesson: the provider, a teacher; and the client, a pupil. To study the Technique is to enter into a process that aims to educate. There are no special exercise programs or workout schedules; the inherent beauty of Alexander's work lies in application of it in the moment-to-moment events of our every day lives.

The Importance of Practical Experience

In *The Use of the Self*, Alexander recounts his trials and successes. Keenly interested in how we, as human beings, make practical use of ourselves in the activities of our lives, it became clear to him that the manner with which we *use*, or misuse, ourselves has a profound effect on the overall functioning of our bodies. (Alexander appropriated the word *use* as shorthand to describe the overall pattern of coordination that is employed by an individual in movement and at rest.)

Underscoring the importance of practice over theory, FM preferred to reverse the common phrase "theory and practice" and spoke instead of the "practice and theory" of his work. For FM, a practical and experiential sense of the Technique was at the root of any thoughtful discussion of the work; it was important to him to communicate that the principle supporting his occupation was born out of experience, not abstract theory.

This practical aspect of the Technique proved to be of such far-reaching importance that the noted educational philosopher and great advocate of process-oriented learning, John Dewey, made an easy alliance with Mr. Alexander in the 1920's. Through this alliance, Dewey was moved to write the Introductions to three of FM's four books. In them, Dewey describes the procedures FM employed to find the solution to the loss of his voice. He recounts that Mr. Alexander systematically posited hypotheses, tested their effectiveness and then further tested their implications. Dewey states that FM's path of experimentation yielded, after years of commitment, a "principle at work that effected definite and verifiable consequences." In addition he notes that Mr. Alexander's conclusions were drawn from "sustained and accurate observations of the *living* and *the usual activities* of man..." versus the more common kinds of experimental observations that are "...made upon *dead* things under *unusual* and *artificial* conditions." As John Dewey rightly assessed, Alexander's conclusions proved to be a significant contribution to the practical realization of our human potential. Decades before holistic approaches to living became popular, Alexander realized that our reasoning minds must co-operate in unified purpose with the natural design of the balancing mechanisms of the human body.

A Lesson in the Technique

As briefly described earlier, a traditional lesson in the Alexander Technique involves a student learning how to *allow* for the release of undue tension in the muscles of the neck and back, and thus facilitate the easy poise of the head on top of the spine. Alexander used the words *primary control* to describe this naturally organizing relationship of the head to the neck and the torso. While this most important relationship is natural, it is not easy to come by. Inevitably we try to do something to make the neck free and then try to hold it there. In other words, we try to control a naturally occurring phenomenon with force, rather than employ the subtle undoing that allows for its free engagement. The desire to try to make something happen that we wish to happen is almost irrepressible. Even while the whole of our being experiences the relief of this newfound sense of ease that results from the subtlest undoing of our habitual tension, our aversion to change is considerable, and our habits establish a formidable resistance.

The repetition of the simple act of moving in and out of a chair, commonly known as *chair work* in a lesson, provides an illuminating example of such resistances as well as a practical activity within which to demonstrate the potential for change. During *chair work* a student will often be called upon to momentarily pause in order to rethink how it is that an action as simple as sitting down most efficiently takes place (e.g. with or without undue compression of the neck and back). Upon the stimulus to sit, a student is encouraged to temporarily refrain from action in order to replace the thought of going *down* (a thought typically associated with sitting in a chair) with the thought of going *up* (a thought that is fundamental to upright balance and the coordination of any activity). In addition, briefly suspending the intended activity allows for the conscious undoing (a.k.a. inhibiting) of habitual preparatory muscular tension and its related movement patterns.

Even though the goal of the work is movement, a new student may find that the initial pause reflects an eternity. However, the desired pause can actually be as brief as the

2/10ths of a second that it takes to change your mind. It is *remembering* to pause - for the briefest of moments - that actually represents the greatest challenge. As alluded to earlier, the confidence that students gain in their new experiences, over a series of lessons, best addresses this challenge.

In a traditional lesson a pupil will also be instructed while lying on a table. Working on the table (a.k.a. *table work*) has the additional benefit of disengaging habitual responses to gravity; it is therefore easier for a student to release some of the more unconscious muscular holding associated with being upright. Most students find work on the table a wholly enjoyable experience as it frees them from the more tenacious stresses and strains that they unconsciously accumulate throughout their day.

On Thinking and Doing

Alexander's most striking genius lay in the indirect means he used to bypass habitual responses that threatened the practical application of his principles. He had observed that no matter how earnestly he tried to maintain the poise of his head, it was not something that he could *do* directly (trying to hold ourselves up being one of the most common interferences with balance.) Instead, the poise of his head was accomplished by a good deal of *undoing*. It is useful to remember here that FM was resolute that *undoing* should not involve *relaxing* or *collapsing* (allowing the body to collapse being the other most common interference with balance.) In order to achieve the good bit of *undoing*, he suggested a good bit of *thinking*.

Alexander used the word *thinking* in the absence of any term in our language that better described what he was asking of his pupils. He was also known to say that "most people don't *think* as much as they feel they do." Indeed, the form of *thinking* that he asks of us is exceedingly comprehensive and holistic, and while this kind of *thinking* is a serious matter, its practice embodies a pleasurable alert and expansive lightness of being. Once again, it is difficult to convey fully what Alexander meant by *thinking* without providing an experience of it. It is the employment of this conscious and thoughtful intent, however, that makes possible the successful practice of Alexander's technique.

To assist us in this aim, Alexander put into words the thoughts that had the most powerful potential to circumvent our habitual responses, and thus indirectly realize our desire for upright balance. These basic thoughts and wishes he called *orders and directions*. Not surprisingly the primary *direction* he asked his students to summon was the direction of *up* along with the *order* to *allow the neck to be free*. Once a student has had the experience of not interfering in any way with the poise of the head on the spine, the desire to lengthen and go *up* initiates a means for upright balance that is profoundly different. Habitual stimulus-response patterns give way to movements derived from dynamic conscious intent that is inherently new in the given moment. This kind of thoughtful intent includes not only the initial impetus to move, but also the means whereby that movement will be most successfully carried out. Success will depend upon the degree to which a student is able to free themselves from habitual tension in cooperation with the strength of their wish to go *up*.

On Habit and its Pitfalls

Our interfering and ingrained habits of *doing*, as well as of thinking, will time and again foil our innate ability for easy balance. These deeply entrenched habits of muscular use and tension most often have their roots in erroneous and/or misguided sensory information. Part of the job of an Alexander teacher is to provide a student with more reliable sensory information. The more dependable the sensory input, the more easily and efficiently the wholesome design of our upright balance is naturally employed. However, our usually misguided attempts to break our less than useful postural habits lie in the unconscious nature of habit itself.

As humans we are supremely adaptable creatures; in many ways this fact proves to be both a blessing and a curse. Physically, the human body adapts to the environment by quickly producing a set of semiautomatic intentions to maintain its upright balance. Often the speed with which we necessarily adapt to a variety of complex situations can cause little errors to creep in. Over time these small errors compound and literally set awry the mechanisms by which our bodies would otherwise be able to sense accurately “which way is up”. Alexander coined the wonderfully Victorian phrase, *debauched kinesthesia* to describe this condition. In short, what we *feel* is “right” is often far from it. Not only will our erroneously felt senses interfere with the balance that we hope to bring about, they will prevent us from recognizing the means for balance which is in fact more appropriate, but which may yet *feel* “wrong”.

To a significant degree a lesson in the Alexander Technique is aimed at setting aright the senses upon which the functioning of our bodies so fundamentally depend. However, reeducating our physical senses is only half the battle. Our desire to be right, even in the face of knowing that we are going wrong, presents us with the most insidious foil for all our good intentions in practicing the Technique. Most of us will sacrifice a great deal to be right. Indeed, most of us - being well-reared products of Western civilization - will also admit to and perhaps even take pride in, a significant amount of goal-oriented behavior. Yet how many of us will admit to the likelihood that we will sacrifice most anything to achieve a cherished - or sometimes even an unimportant - goal. We will often sacrifice the very means that might best and most efficiently secure our goal.

In an Alexander lesson, this unfortunate aspect of human behavior is easily demonstrated when we are presented with the simple goal of getting into and out of a chair. Practically all of us will stiffen our necks and throw our heads back, despite having learned from past experience that unnecessary tension in the neck will deliver negative results. Alexander used the term *end gaining* to describe this all too human condition. To experience—even temporarily—respite from *end gaining*, and the elimination of the undue tension that accompanies it, results in a pupil experiencing a feeling of lightness, fluidity and ease of being.

In Summary

As human beings we are constantly involved in an open feedback loop with our physical, mental, and emotional environment. We all possess the innate ability to respond with integrity, balance and efficiency to the entirety of these stimuli – be they as basic as

gravity or as complex as emotions. Practice and commitment to the alert and thoughtful way we use ourselves, combined with more accurate experiences of our senses, can blaze anew the path of least resistance. With our feet firmly on this ground, the potential for efficiently navigating the challenge of being upright human beings is most easily realized. The practical technique that F.M. Alexander gave birth to in the late 1800s has stood the test of time. For over one hundred years it has consistently provided a resource for, and given evidence to, our conscious ability to fulfill our human potential throughout the course of our daily lives.

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