

Breathing

Playing some sort of attention to your breathing is an activity which appears in a great many sporting, artistic, educational and self-help contexts. Yoga, singing, anti-asthma training, swimming, public speaking, running, Tai Chi, glass blowing, holding a camera, meditation, industrial lifting techniques, and the playing of wind instruments can all place demands on our awareness of our breathing.

Breathing attracts such wide interest perhaps because it seems to straddle two important “borderlines” between different aspects of ourselves.

- The borderline between that which is coordinated voluntarily (for example making sure that I organise my breath in such a way that I can sing a particularly long and difficult musical phrase) and that which is coordinated involuntarily (for example the process which keeps me breathing whilst I am asleep).
- The borderline between the physical (my breathing responds to my running up a hill) and the emotional (my breathing changes if I laugh, cry, panic etc).

The different “breathing methods” which have been extrapolated from disciplines such as those listed above are so diverse that a student aiming to improve her breathing might be forgiven for becoming confused and not knowing where to begin.

When Alexander began making the observations which led to his discoveries, he was himself the victim of contradictory advice from different voice teachers and doctors, and of a breathing problem that was not getting any better. However, when he began teaching his Technique he quickly became known as “the breathing man” not because he developed yet another “breathing method” but because he had found a way through the confusion and a way to establish the basis for correct breathing in any activity.

The primary principles of breathing are:

- The only thing you can “do” to your breathing is mess it up – the idea that one can learn directly to “breathe properly” is fallacious.
- The basic pattern of your breathing is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a result of your overall manner of use.
- The quality of your breathing¹ is an excellent indicator of the state of your use.

Anyone who has had a significant number of Alexander lessons will, I hope, have experienced – either gradually over a period of time, or all at once at a particular moment – a spontaneous “opening out” of their breathing. The characteristics of this experience can and should be noted for future reference

(when I sing, is my breathing similar to how it is in an Alexander lesson or am I distorting it?).

However, it is important to be rigorous in accepting that the improved pattern of breathing is a consequence of an improvement in the general coordination of the head/neck/back core of the body and not something which is in any way available simply by trying to remember what the breathing felt like in an Alexander lesson and then trying to reproduce it directly.

The vast majority of people interfere habitually with their breathing in the most fundamental way possible – by stopping breathing. Your breathing will improve dramatically if you develop an awareness of when you hold your breath (this may be associated with particular physical activities or with “concentrating” or with certain emotional reactions²) and when you catch yourself in the act, gently breathe out (you will be holding your breath in) and continue simply by **remembering to breathe**.³

1 Useful watchwords are: easy, regular, continuous, silent.

2 Even panic attacks, though very distressing, seem to be nothing more (or less) than a fearful holding of the breath.

3 This is a useful addition to the primary directions - a reminder not to rigidify the rib cage.