

# The Process of Change

The Alexander Technique is not relaxation; the required quietening of over-reactivity and release of excessive muscle tension has a purpose beyond relaxation. Non-doing is useful only to the extent that it permits and evokes the engagement of appropriate muscle tone.

If your back is not as healthy as it might be, or if the muscles of your neck and back have not been used for a number of years at their full stretch (the length at which they are strongest), then it is not unlikely that, in the process of rousing them to proper activity, you may experience some discomfort.

However, in my experience, it is usually fairly easy to distinguish this “change pain” – which despite being uncomfortable often has a warm “awakening” quality – from “destructive pain”, which seems normally to be experienced as a kind of “structural shut-down”.

Patrick Macdonald (1910-1991), who trained with Alexander used to say:

You cannot change and remain the same, though this is what most people want.<sup>1</sup>

Although perhaps slightly uncharitable, his point is nevertheless valid: however much we may wish to learn to coordinate ourselves better, if the new information we have to assimilate in the process is incompatible with our current position, progress will only be possible to the extent to which we are prepared to reject

inaccurate and outmoded old ideas at the same time as accepting new ones.

In the Japanese Zen tradition, the required attitude is known as *hibi shoshon* – “beginner’s mind”. This is the willingness to start from scratch over and over again. In traditional Judo, for example, having worked from white, through the coloured belts to black, the grades above black-belt are differently colour-coded until, at the highest level, one returns to wearing a white belt. This symbolises the understanding that the greatest achievement is to *become* a beginner – to reach finally a state of conscious, chosen unaffectedness.

The Alexander Technique demands not that we learn a new set of skills, so much as give up an old set – the set of skills through which we familiarly and habitually coordinate and express ourselves, and by which we interact with our surroundings and other individuals. For this reason the Technique can sometimes seem somewhat disorientating in effect – for in re-educating our kinaesthetic sense we are changing our “sense of self”.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander saw a strong link between personality and use:

Talk about a man’s individuality and character: it’s the way he uses himself.<sup>3</sup>

In accepting Alexander’s invitation to become what we might be, we must be prepared to give up what we already are.

In case this sounds alarming, I should say that everyone I know who has experienced this aspect of the Technique reports that the changes involved, though at times disconcerting, revealed a personality which was “more themselves” and that inner conflicts had been resolved or diminished.

The American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) noticed the benefit of “beginner’s mind” for his own field of work:

Intellectually, Dewey said, he found it much easier, after he had studied the [Alexander] Technique, to hold a philosophical position calmly once he had taken it, or change it if new evidence came up warranting a change. He contrasted his own attitude with the rigidity of other academic thinkers who adopt a position early in their careers and then use their intellects to defend it indefinitely.<sup>4</sup>

And the astronomer Carl Sagan (1934-1996) remarked:

Scientists often say “that’s a really good argument; my position is mistaken”. Then they actually change their minds, and you never hear that old view from them again. I cannot recall the last time this happened in politics.

1 *Body Know-How*, Jonathan Drake, 1991, Chapter 3 “How to Change”.

2 See page 13, *The Kinaesthetic Sense*.

3 Alexander quoted in *The Alexander Technique, The Essential Writings of F Matthias Alexander*, Edward Maisel, 1969, Chapter 1 “Notes of Instruction”.

4 *Freedom to Change*, Frank Pierce Jones, 1976, Chapter 11 “Dewey and Alexander”.