

# The Primary Control

Human beings have a natural tendency towards health; we possess an intricate, largely subconscious system of bodily “housekeeping” which monitors and regulates the rhythms of, for example, hunger, sleep, the pulse, hormone balances, the healing of injuries and the complex interrelationship between such functions so that a healthy equilibrium is maintained, or at least tended towards. There is, of course, a musculoskeletal component of this housekeeping system which organises the distribution of muscle tone throughout the body, patterns of breathing, balance, and fundamental modes of movement such as walking. This organisation is achieved through the system of postural reflexes which develop during early childhood.

This developmental process begins with the *primitive reflexes*, evident in new-born babies<sup>1</sup> which are soon “reabsorbed” into the depths of the nervous system, and continues through the emergence of rolling, sitting, crawling, standing, walking, running and jumping. It concludes around the age of seven with the development of *fine motor control* – the ability to stabilise the body as a whole in order to permit the precise, focused movements required, for example, to play a musical instrument. In both children and adults there is a basic but highly evolved drive which tends to integrate every aspect of a movement into a harmonious whole.

Naturally, there is an interplay between this innate coordination of movement and our voluntary actions (what we choose to do and how we choose to do it). We can choose (or learn to choose) to use ourselves in a way which favours a healthy equilibrium, or we can choose (in ignorance) to use ourselves in a way which causes inner conflict and physical harm.

It is a question, in other words, of transforming doing-which-interferes with the working-integrity of the self, into doing-in-accordance with the working-integrity of the self.<sup>2</sup>

The skill of choosing that which favours healthy equilibrium is the skill of Alexandrian inhibition and direction; if we inhibit and direct skilfully, sensitively and appropriately, the natural overall pattern of healthy musculoskeletal balance becomes ever more reliable. This conscious access to the “working-integrity of the self” Alexander called the ***primary control***.

The primary control is an infinitely complex psychophysiological phenomenon, the details of which it would obviously not be possible to orchestrate consciously, so the importance of inhibition (deliberate prevention of interference with the innate process) is clear. However the natural hierarchy of the primary control, whereby the head, neck and back work as an integrated core which supports the limbs, breathing and other functions, is available to us consciously through the sequence of our directions.

The cultivation of the primary control is a process which might be compared to gardening. A plant cannot be forced to grow, but rather it is in its nature to grow and flower; it is the job of the gardener to provide those conditions, both preventative (inhibitory) and positive (directional) which enable the plant to fulfil its potential.

The subtle neuromuscular impulses of the primary control require above all an overall orderliness, or quietness, of the entire nervous system if they are not to be drowned out by the background noise of mis-directed muscular tension.

Margaret Goldie (1905-1997) used to quote one of Alexander’s verbal summaries of the inhibition and direction required to optimise the working of the primary control:

**Choose to be quiet throughout your whole body, with particular reference to the head and neck.**<sup>3</sup>

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1 For example the *grasping reflex* in which a baby automatically curls her fingers around a small object brought into contact with her hand.

2 *The Expanding Self*, Goddard Binkley, 1993, page 96.

3 *The Alexander Technique in Conversation with John Nicholls and Sean Carey*, 1991, Chapter 7 “Teaching the Tools of Self Help”.