

# An Introduction to the Principles of the Alexander Technique

by Tim Soar © 2008

## Introduction

The Alexander Technique has to be experienced in order to be understood. No amount of written explanation can ever communicate the "flavour" of the Alexander Technique – imagine trying to describe the taste of a banana to someone who had never eaten one.

What follows, therefore, is not a complete account of the Alexander Technique, but a brief look at some of Alexander's ideas and the conclusions to which he was led in the course of his life's work.

## Unity of mind and body

*You translate everything, whether physical or mental or spiritual, into muscular tension.*  
FM Alexander, 1869-1955

At the end of the 19th century, when Alexander was developing his Technique, the idea that the mind and the body might be regarded as indivisible would have been a radical one. However, Alexander's insistence on this point arose simply out of practical necessity – he came to understand that he could not hope to solve his voice problems unless he stopped thinking in a dualistic way. He illustrated the impracticality of thinking of the mind and body as separate by pointing out that it is impossible to imagine any activity – from arithmetic to athletics – that is purely "mental" or purely "physical". He thought it important not to talk of how you "use your body" and preferred the phrase "**the use of the self**". Today, perhaps through greater familiarity with Eastern disciplines, most people are more comfortable with the idea of the unity of the body and mind, but we should not forget that Alexander was a pioneer in this area.

## Use affects function

*Life is movement; skilled movement connotes skilled living.*  
Professor Raymond Dart, 1893-1988, Palaeoanthropologist and student of the Alexander Technique

The quality of our use of ourselves has a profound effect on how we are, 24 hours a day. Many examples of under-performance, as well as posture-related or tension-related pain, and injuries, are unwittingly aggravated, or even caused, through habitually poor use. Learning improved use through the Alexander Technique can lead to surprising improvements; even people suffering with the most intractable conditions often report reduced pain, increased stamina and greater strength. The Alexander Technique does not treat pain and disease, it teaches greater skill in movement and reaction, which in turn enables our natural vitality to assert itself.

## Learning to stop

*[We must learn to] drive a wedge between stimulus and response.*  
Marjory Barlow, 1915-2006, First generation teacher of the Technique and Alexander's niece

By learning to receive any stimulus, initially, by becoming still, neutral and non-reactive, we give ourselves the chance to respond in a creative and intelligent way rather than with the equivalent of a "knee jerk" reaction. Developing the ability to meet increasingly difficult situations calmly and without expectation, can make stress symptoms a thing of the past.

The neuromuscular systems of most people have a high level of "background noise" - destructive muscular tension, chattering thought patterns, breathing that is actively restricted – which is linked with a state of over-reactivity and needs to be quietened in order that the subtle impulses of a healthy nervous system are not "drowned out".

## Prevention of interference with natural poise

*If you stop doing the wrong thing the right thing will do itself.*  
FM Alexander

The freedom of movement, easy breathing and good postural alignment of healthy and happy young children demonstrate that the coordination of these functions is built-in and natural. To try, for example, to "breathe properly" or "stand up straight" is anathema to the Alexander Technique – the appropriate muscular activity is simply not available to direct effort – what is important is to remove interference and distortion and then to recognise the rightness of whatever remains.

Alexander called the preventative skills (learning to stop, learning not to distort ourselves, learning not to force things, learning not to rush) involved in his work **inhibition**.

## Direction

*There is no such thing as a right position, but there is such a thing as a right direction.*  
FM Alexander

If a small child asks to be picked up and carried or cuddled, there will be a willingness and a lightness throughout her body, despite the fact that, in allowing you to lift her completely off the ground, she cannot possibly be helping you to take her weight. On the other hand of course, if the child wishes not to be lifted, or is perhaps very sleepy, she may feel almost impossibly heavy and tiring to carry. Clearly, the difference between these two situations is not in what the child *does* so much as in what she *wishes*. In the language of the Alexander Technique we would describe this difference of intention by saying that in making herself "heavy" or "light" the child's **direction** of herself is different.

Alexander realised that much of the stiffness and lack of agility that people experience can be overcome by learning to direct ourselves more consciously and skilfully. Students of the Alexander Technique learn specific sequences and patterns of direction that encourage a light, easy, balanced way of moving that minimises wear and tear on all parts of the body.

As we learn to release unwanted muscular tension that blocks our new directions, subtle shifts of balance and alignment become available to our conscious wishes in a way that is quite different from conventional attempts at postural correction.

## The core of the body

*Choose to be quiet throughout your whole body, with particular reference to the head and neck.*  
Margaret Goldie, 1905 -1997, first generation teacher of the Alexander Technique

Alexander discovered that a hierarchical pattern exists in the direction of different parts of the body relative to each other. He discovered that improved direction of the head, neck and back – our postural core" – worked as what he called a **primary control** – an overarching influence – over all the systems of the body, as well as psychological processes.

The Alexander Technique teaches an enhanced awareness of the relationship between the head, neck and back, and uses this awareness as both a diagnostic tool – a way of noticing when we are misusing ourselves – and, through more skilful direction, a means for bringing about improvement in seemingly intractable problems elsewhere. Over a long period of study and practice of the Alexander Technique, a person's head/neck/back becomes transformed. It becomes subtly and delicately poised, but at the same time it builds great strength and becomes the axis around which all movement and behaviour is organised.

Most people interfere with the natural poise of the head, neck and back in a way that is reminiscent of a reaction to shock. In the movement known by physiologists as the "startle pattern", the big muscles of the neck are contracted so that the head is retracted back and down into the shoulders. This has a "knock on" effect compressing the entire length of the spine – imagine a railway locomotive stopping suddenly and all of the following trucks, right back through the entire length of the train, knocking

into each other. Following on from this, the shoulders are raised, the ribs fixed and the breath held; the knees, if flexed, are knocked together. You can often see some or all of the above happening just by watching someone making a very simple movement such as getting up from a chair or picking up an object from the floor. Learning the Alexander Technique gives us the skills necessary to avoid this damaging distortion of our core, and by providing the opportunity to use our spines in a lengthening way, enables us to move without stiffness and with increasing poise and ease.

## Endgaining

*You are not making decisions; you are doing kinaesthetically what you feel to be right. ...  
"Trying" is only emphasising the thing we know already.*

FM Alexander

Imagine you are a competitive swimmer, racing over, say, 100m. You know that you stand a good chance of winning the race – the gold medal, the prize money, and the success are all within your reach; all you have to do is swim as fast as you can ...

Technically good swimmers understand that the fastest way to swim is to use long, smooth, even strokes that "grip" the water and do not waste energy. However, in the stress of competition, even the best swimmers may be tempted to "forget" this knowledge and resort to making the sort of effort that makes it "feel" as if they are trying hard to swim fast. This inevitably results in short, jerky strokes that waste energy and actually slow you down.

Alexander saw this kind of unthinking approach to activities and problems (an approach he called **endgaining**) everywhere from individual efforts to breathe properly to the making of national political policy. He came to see the habit of endgaining as the primary source of the misuse of the self and a fundamental and practically universal human failing. He realised that relying on the *feeling* of appropriate effort was a recipe for failure, and that we need to take a more reasoned approach, in which our understanding is dominant over our feeling, if we are to succeed in our efforts to perform at our best.

## Unreliable sensory appreciation

*Sensory appreciation conditions conception; you can't know a thing by a instrument that's wrong.*

FM Alexander

Alexander observed that we often misinterpret what we feel to be going on in ourselves. This can lead to a vicious circle of misuse wherein our misinterpretation of sensory information leads to distorted use of ourselves and the greater our distortion of ourselves, the greater the misinterpretation of sensory information.

In the example of the swimmer, above, I have given an illustration of how feelings of appropriate effort may be unreliable. In addition to this, most people's awareness of how they move is uneducated. Like an untrained musical ear that can hear only the melody but not the underlying parts with any accuracy, our kinaesthetic awareness of ourselves often fails to register important details.

A large proportion of kinaesthetic information is gathered from nerve endings in muscles. Such information, if it comes from muscles that are habitually over tightened, tends to be incomplete and misleading; if we wish to develop good awareness, then the release of unnecessary muscular tension is essential. Good use is dependent upon reliable feedback – concerning position, movement and force – from nerve endings in muscles, joints, connective tissue, and other proprioceptors.