

Use Affects Function

It is tempting to think of our problems and limitations only in terms of their obvious symptoms – a frozen shoulder, a migraine, a panic attack, abnormal spinal curvature, asthma – or more subtle symptoms – lack of confidence, stress, fatigue or the inability to play a particular passage of music or otherwise perform at our best.

It is equally tempting to try to solve such problems in a piecemeal fashion through, for example, surgery, exercise, manipulation or drugs. There is, however, always another factor which should be taken into account: the extent to which a person's habits (habits relating to movement, muscle tension, breathing, perception and reaction) interact with the more obvious symptoms of a problem and so make it worse (or better) than it might be. In the Alexander Technique we speak of how well (or badly) people "use themselves" or the quality of a person's **use**, to describe this process.

Of course, the Alexander Technique does not reject the therapeutic approach, but it does offer a parallel course of action which is valuable in a number of ways.

- The Alexander Technique aims to create the best possible general conditions in the body and so works preventatively against weakness, ageing and disease.

- Many people feel themselves to be "in a rut", perhaps seeking the same treatment for the same recurring problem over and over again, or perhaps getting stuck at a certain point in their study of a musical instrument. The Alexander Technique can often break this kind of vicious circle.

- By encouraging you to become more able to monitor *yourself* (rather than being "mended" by a therapist), the Alexander Technique is farther reaching than many other systems.

The Alexander Technique takes an educational approach which can be applied to every kind of activity; it defines that which lies at the heart of good coordination and provides a practical method through which to improve our awareness and skill in this area.

This does not mean that your teacher will tell you what to *do* in order to "move properly", but rather that she will encourage you to enter into a process of self-reassessment, in the course of which the quality of your movement will be improved.

The educationalist Maria Montessori (1870-1952) pointed out that

Education is not something that the teacher does, but it is a natural process which develops spontaneously in the human being.

The Alexander Technique asks us to accept that our current modes of action, perception and reaction may represent distortions of ourselves, that we may be "getting in our own way" to a significant extent and that our awareness of this fact may be incomplete. This rude awakening is tempered by the effectiveness of the Alexander Technique in changing this situation and by the fact that most people actively enjoy their Alexander lessons. The majority of students find, as their use improves, that one, or a combination, of the following happens.

- As their habitual distortions of themselves lessen, their problems decrease and become more manageable.

- With better conditions in their body generally, the symptoms of their problem come within their body's capacity to heal itself, and slowly disappear completely.

- Their problem turns out to be caused entirely by poor use and improves quickly, sometimes dramatically so.

By side-stepping the issues of diagnosis and cure, the Alexander Technique demonstrates a radical approach to managing functional shortcomings which, by virtue of its remarkable subtlety, offers insights which extend into the highest reaches of skilled activity, such as the performing and creative arts, athletics and disciplines such as Tai Chi.