The Alexander Technique:

What it is,
What it is for,
How it works.

an introductory essay
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Introduction

I am often asked what the Alexander Technique *is*, by people who have not come across this work before, which has led me to write what follows. In this essay, I have given suggestions of a few practical experiments and activities, but I haven't even tried to go into any detail as to "how to do it".

Like music, for example, I think that a genuine connection with the Alexander Technique comes about through experiencing it, and sensing the way in which one may be subtly but profoundly changed through that sensory experience. If that experience then leads to finding out more detail, and learning to become some kind of practitioner of the art, then that can wait until the next chapter in the story. This essay represents an attempt at writing the chapter before that …

We go around squeezing the life out of ourselves.
Walter Carrington (1915–2005)

This short quote from one of the first generation teachers provides a simple but vivid description of the problem that the Alexander Technique was developed to solve. The life's work of Frederick Matthias Alexander (born Tasmania, 1869, died London, 1955. He was always known as "FM") was dedicated to discovering the details of how we "squeeze the life out of ourselves", and to how we can develop the necessary skills to do so less and less.

As a young man, in his twenties, FM tended to assume that his poor health and coordination could be blamed on his having been a premature baby who, given the mid nineteenth Century date of his birth and his rural environment, was not expected to survive his infancy. He felt that there was "something wrong with him" which meant that his breathing and other functions did not work properly. On his journey towards a long, healthy and active life, FM realised that his "weaknesses" were not in fact caused by *weakness*, but by *active* interference with *natural* movement, *natural* breathing, *natural* digestion, *natural* circulation, and interference with calm uncluttered clear-mindedness. And in the end he realised that there was nothing "wrong with him", but that he had stumbled upon some universal principles that applied to everyone, whether they were dealing with pain or disability or if, for example, as athletes or performing artists, they were working at the extremes of what a human is able to do. Of course ageing, and more – or less – unlucky genes are real things, with a real impact on our wellbeing, but there remains, in the background, and of fundamental importance, the questions of how we stiffen and interfere with freedom of movement, how our abilities to perceive and process kinaesthetic, proprioceptive and interoceptive information may be actively blocked or distorted, how we (literally) hurt ourselves with pain caused directly by disorganised and usually excessive muscular tension, and how these largely "physical" conditions are necessarily intertwined with our mental and emotional states.

Injury, illness, ageing etc have their effect, but I think it is perfectly possible for many people to age rather more like cats, who often tend to remain strong, quick, fluid, agile, swift to heal, and largely "ageless" until very late in their lives. And for those who are perhaps less fortunate, and who live with serious illness, disability or the lasting effects of crushing life experiences (and in any case, perhaps in the end this applies practically to all of us), the

Alexander Technique provides a foundation for making the best, and most skilful, use of what one *does* have.

Non-Doing

I have already said that FM concluded that the fundamental consideration is to prevent active interference with our coordination; he even went as far as to say "If you stop doing the wrong thing, the right thing does itself". There is a similar idea in traditional Zen practice. Za Zen (literally "Sitting Zen" – a kind of sitting meditation practice) is sometimes explained by saying that, in normal life, we tend to become "agitated" and "muddled" – perhaps partly through what FM (at least a Century ago) called "the hurried pace of modern life". It is as if we were a container of muddy water, and the more "agitated", and the "muddier" we get, the less "clear" our being becomes. The purpose and process of Za Zen practice then becomes one of "letting the mud settle", so that our impulses, our motivations, our being … our life … become gradually "clear". In one sense this involves "Doing Nothing", but this is a Nothing which requires close attention, to keep our habitual "agitation" and interferences quietening down, and to notice when we are more – or less – successful in this. This process of "Attending to Nothing", in the end leads to, and requires, a complete paradigm shift in what we imagine is necessary in order to live in a positive and healthy way. It is as if, in addition to meaningful "signal" in our nervous system, we are also prone to have a lot of "noise" which simply masks and distorts the "signal". Without the noise, the signal becomes clear. From a physiological point of view, it is known that excessive muscular tension ("noise") decreases kinaesthetic acuity (perception of "signal").

You translate everything, whether physical, mental or spiritual, into muscular tension.
FM Alexander

Margaret Goldie (1905–1997), another of the first generation teachers trained by FM, used to emphasise what she called "coming to quiet" which I think is essentially the same as "letting the mud settle", and just as radical and counter-cultural as Za Zen practice.

In a contemplative fashion, and a tranquil frame of mind,
Free from ev'ry kind of passion, some solution let us find.
Let us grasp the situation, solve the complicated plot,
Quiet calm deliberation disentangles ev'ry knot.
WS Gilbert (1836–1911, from *The Gondoliers*, 1889)

Here is an example of "coming to quiet" in practice, which also focuses on the Alexander Technique's emphasis on successful body-movement skills: During a past Olympic Games, I listened to an ex-competitor commentating on a 100m breaststroke final. He said that all good swimmers know that long, smooth strokes that grip the water will get you to the finishing line quickest. He also said that in the last half a length of such a race, even the best swimmers may be prone to "forget" this fact and start "trying to go faster". This results in short, hurried, choppy strokes which weaken one's grip on the water, slow you down, and lose the race. In some self-development practices (including the Alexander Technique!) we are often admonished to "slow down", but this should not be a question of giving up on one's goals, or even, necessarily, of going slower, but of staying calm, being prepared to use one's

intelligence to override those efforts that only *feel* like they should make you go faster, and the temptation to "try", and using that awareness to (in this case) win the race.

Trying is only emphasising the thing we know already.
FM Alexander

The age old seemingly paradoxical advice: *Festina Lente* (Hurry Slowly) is, I would suggest, more accurate and useful than just "going slower".

The Taoist writer Lao Tzu (China, sixth Century BC) would appear to agree with FM's idea that when we stiffen in order to try to achieve something, we rob ourselves of vital adaptability, and we are not acting in a sustainable way. And, as he says, we are unlikely to "prevail".

Humans are born soft and supple; dead they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant; dead they are brittle and dry.
Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding is a disciple of life.
The hard and stiff will be broken.
The soft and supple will prevail.
Lao Tzu, from the *Tao Te Ching*

The "Iceberg of the Nervous System"

If as FM suggested, "the right thing does itself", we must ask by what process this happens. To explain this, we could consider our nervous system as somewhat resembling an iceberg. There is a "tip" that we can see – that we can get at – that represents the part of our nervous system involved with conscious action and intervention. And there is also a much larger and more "hidden" part of our nervous system which looks after "things that do themselves", for example, our heart rate, dilation and contraction of arteries and peristaltic movement in our gut, among many other functions. FM pointed out that this "deeper" part of our nervous system is also significantly involved in processes such as breathing, balance, postural activity, vocal coordination, and fundamental movement patterns such as gait. The corollary of this is that if we try to carry out direct instructions on, for example, "how to breathe properly", "how to do good posture" etc, we will be making the error that seems to be common with icebergs, which is to mistake the tip for a much more significant proportion of the whole than it really is – the peril of which mistake being very obvious! In order to breathe well, for example, it is necessary to be able to "hand over the details" to the deeper part of our nervous system, where "things do themselves", rather than to fall into the trap of "micro-managing" our breathing.

If I breathe as I understand breathing, then I am doing something wrong.
FM Alexander

In Alexander work, the principal function of our conscious input is to monitor, and to take measures to reduce, the interferences that we make with our natural coordination. An example of how we can begin consciously to allow the larger deeper part of the iceberg of

our nervous system to work for us might be seen in the way that specific patterns of muscle recruitment are engaged, and we could do an experiment to demonstrate this:

> Start on all fours – hands and knees. Think of being relaxed in the position, with enough tone to maintain the shape, without "floppiness" or "collapse", but no more than that. Then, unweight one hand and lift it from the floor, so that you are balanced on both of your legs (mostly your knees), and one hand. Then alternate, lifting one hand and then the other, in a slow rhythm – you might think of the way that cats "knead" with their front paws. As long as you don't stiffen, on the one hand, or tend to collapse, on the other, you may begin to feel a complex asymmetrical engagement of certain "core" muscles, with its asymmetrical mirror image happening as you alternate the weighted, and lifted, hands.

I would suggest that this pattern of muscular engagement is much too subtle, specific, precise, efficient, and adaptable to attempt to orchestrate it with the "tip of your neural iceberg" – that is by "doing it" rather than by "allowing it" – and that what (I hope) you are experiencing is an example of the workings, and the responsiveness, of the deeper – hidden – part of the iceberg. Moreover, I would suggest that the result of this "allowed" muscle engagement is also healthier, more sustainably a source of strength, and more immediately responsive to changing forces than any alternative.

This is an example that has to do with balance and stability, but the same principles would apply equally to considerations of strength, postural alignment, the movements of breathing, and so on. In Alexander work, rather than "placing your shoulders correctly" (for example), one could ask the questions, "How am I holding my shoulders in a way that interferes with their natural alignment? I wonder where they would tend to go if I managed to stop tangling myself up?". Or instead of "sitting up straight", which inevitably piles excessive muscular tension (Lao Tzu's "stiffness and hardness") onto an already distorted structure, we might investigate how we may be "jamming" and blocking the natural length, springiness and upward energy of our spine, and work towards letting that jamming go.

Injuries tend to happen when one local part of our structure bears too much of the impact or effort of an activity. The ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn (1919–1991), who danced demanding rôles into her fifties, observed that when she was dancing at her best, she had the sensation that all of the effort was distributed evenly throughout her body and was not localised. In Alexander work we work towards preventing localised "holding" (whether unintended and habitual, or conscious and deliberate) so that our neuromuscular system can work as a whole, and movements become integrated and "whole" throughout the body.

Sensory Awareness

The Alexander Technique, right from the start, is awareness-based and not exercise-based, and our awareness depends upon our senses. One thing I have been thinking about is how our senses are interrelated, and overlap with each other.

It is well-known that our sense of taste and our sense of smell are interrelated – much of the flavour of food is actually sensed through smell receptors. But there are many examples of the overlapping of our senses: what food *looks* like is related to how we anticipate and

respond to its flavour. If we hear a sound, we reflexly look towards the origin of the sound. And always underpinning these "normal" senses are the "intimate" senses of proprioception, interoception, kinaesthesia and touch. All our senses inform and cross-reference with each other, to build a multi-dimensional awareness, and the better coordinated we are, the more this sensory web interconnects with itself. As an example: if you give a violinist a very conventional Alexander lesson, and not even talk about violin playing, they will often play more in tune immediately afterwards, as the kinaesthetic, aural and tactile senses intermesh more accurately. It is as if all of our senses combine, rather like the different colours on an artist's palette, which work together to make a whole picture appear. If a sense is lost – although this is obviously a great loss – the other senses may become more sensitive and attempt to fill the gap. The deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie commented during the Covid pandemic that she did not want to follow the trend towards performing online because she felt that she lost the benefit of this overlapping of the senses, in a "lo-fi" digital environment.

One of the central ideas of the Alexander Technique is that of "unreliable sensory appreciation" (as FM phrased it). This basically means that "what you do normally gets to feel normal", so that if you always have your right shoulder higher, or the majority of your weight on your left leg, this will come to feel "neutral", and if an Alexander teacher then helps you towards something more even, it may either come as a surprising relief, or it may feel very odd – or even "wrong". As one of my students once exclaimed, "I feel like a Picasso painting!". The invitation here is not to give your kinaesthetic sensations less credence (except in the sense of normal scientific caution, that leads one to seek to test one's observations) but to find ways to interlink and cross-reference with other senses in order that a more "fully coloured" sensory landscape becomes available to you.

The Importance of Touch

The refinement of the kinaesthetic sense is often something that Alexander teachers emphasise, but I would argue that it is the sense of touch – the sense through which our kinaesthetic sense (our sense of movement, position and effort) and our proprioceptive sense (literally "sense of self") meet our environment – that the necessary sensitivity and responsiveness may be most clearly observed and experienced. A story about first generation teacher Peggy Williams (1916–2003) illustrates this: Peggy's London apartment was burgled and one of the attending police officers asked Peggy about her profession. Not surprisingly, most of the finger-prints he was finding were Peggy's, and he had never seen finger-prints like this before; they were consistently in focus and precise – not "smudged" like normal finger-prints. Spread throughout her home on the objects she touched daily, I think Peggy's clarity of touch shows not simply a particular way of touching things, but an awakeness, precision and sensitivity in her whole way of living. When I was a student, and on my particular training course, Peggy was the favourite teacher with whom to book an extra lesson, if one wanted to experience the best possible hands-on work. And when we had a lesson with Peggy, it was this quality of clear and conscious living that we benefited from, and learned from, through her touch. I think there is a lot of useful information to be found in the way people touch and handle pottery, children, tools, tomatoes, animals, musical instruments, sharp knives … And this can be a valuable place to start, in beginning to observe one's own quality of movement and engagement with one's environment.

The way in which our sense of touch is the mediator between our internal senses – what I've called the "intimate" senses – and our environment is I think important. FM was clear that his work takes place neither "externally" (alignment of "body-shape") nor "internally" but at the *interface* of our inner life with the external world:

… it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.
FM Alexander

Alexander Technique hands-on work does not involve particular "manipulations" or, for example, the stimulation of trigger points. In fact the whole idea of the teacher "doing something to the student" would be misleading. It is rather that the quiet orderliness of a good teacher's neuromuscular system acts as a catalyst for the student's own "deeper part of the iceberg" coordination. It is important to realise that an Alexander teacher is not "correcting" or "realigning" their student, but rather helps to "wake up" the process in the student whereby the student rebalances *themselves*. This, just as much as verbal explanation and intellectual understanding, is part of the teaching process of the Alexander Technique. Working in this way tends to open up blocked pathways in the student's neuromuscular system, following sequences and patterns that are not really foreseeable or predictable, and which are unique to that student. A good teacher is not one who "knows best, and tells the student what to do", but one who has the ability to follow the "bread-crumb trail" evident, but hidden, in the pathways of the student's nervous system, and to help the student towards the sensory "full colour picture" through which such patterns can become illuminated in the student's awareness.

FM talked about the "inhibitory use of the hands" (he used the word "inhibitory" in an old fashioned sense to mean "preventative") to emphasise that the teacher is not "doing something to the student", but working in a way that helps the student to reduce their levels of interference, which is, in turn, what brings about the changes and improvements in the student's coordination.

It is also interesting that the "current-flow" of this neuromuscular information often tends to move from the more experienced partner to the less experienced partner, regardless of which of them *appears* to be in the rôle of the "teacher" (that is to say, the partner using their hands on the other). I have had clear experiences of being "untangled" and "energised" by very experienced teachers when I have had my hands on them.

Touch is the primary medium of communication and the essence of Alexander work, in the same way that sound is the primary medium of communication and the essence of musical teaching and performance, and this quality of attention to touch is best experienced and learned through touch contact with a good teacher. Of course, the Alexander Technique does not have a monopoly on good touch. Physiotherapists, vets, hairdressers and many others may have really great hands. But I think that, at its best, the level of detail and subtlety of *understanding* of the use of the hands that is available through the Alexander Technique is unsurpassed. Talking about a subject is of course a necessary part of learning and teaching, in order to explain and to clarify ideas, but without sound (in music) or without interconnected physical sensation with a partner (in the Alexander Technique), the essence of the subject is lost.

Conclusion

The Alexander Technique has been described as a "pre-technique". That is, it helps us towards a state of healthy, balanced, calm, sustainable, strong, observant and alert "neutrality", from which foundation we can approach any other activity with our optimal coordination. I once gave a series of lessons to a teenager, who liked to compete in Youth Eisteddfodau (I'm based in Wales). She became essentially unbeatable in the Unaccompanied Welsh Folksong category, not only in her own age group, but in more senior age groups. Her mother commented to me – perhaps only half jokingly – that the Alexander Technique seemed to have given her an "unfair" advantage. She said that as her daughter was "allowed to take the Alexander Technique on stage with her, without anyone knowing!", it had become a sort of "secret weapon" that ensured her success. Through the Alexander Technique, her daughter had become able consciously to get herself "in the zone" – to find her best breathing, her best voice, her best poise, her best performance, and to channel any nervousness towards giving herself energy and excitement, rather than to paralyse her. And then to apply that knowledge and practical ability to her singing. Perhaps not surprisingly, given this sort of result, the Alexander Technique is mainstream in the education of performers, but the Alexander Technique is a body of knowledge and a range of skills that can be applied *in real time* to any activity including sport, craft work, self-developmental processes such as Yoga, Aikido etc, and any kind of movement, from the most everyday to the most skilled. It offers a powerful and successful way of working with pain, injury, illness or disability. It prioritises calm intelligence over the chaos of stress reactions. And for those curious enough to pursue it long-term, to a higher level of skill, it offers a way of aging a little more like a cat.