

A WAY OF WORKING

By Mary Holland

MORE and more people are hearing about the Alexander Technique, and many will have found that even their friends who are having lessons in the Technique are unable to explain exactly what it is. An interested inquirer might deduce that it is something to do with relaxation or posture. But this is not really so; it is not exercise either; nor is it like Yoga. Finally one might be told "It's no good trying to explain—you will have to go and have a lesson yourself if you really want to understand what it is about". Why is this? One reason is that what one gets out of an Alexander lesson is essentially an experience, an experience of gradually growing into a better state. And to put that experience into words is rather like trying to explain music to someone who has never heard it. So any attempt at a verbal explanation of the Technique will necessarily be limited, but this does not mean that nothing can be gained from it.

The word technique could be defined as a way of working. Usually it means a way of working at an art. Let us consider the Alexander way of working, not in the art of music or painting, flower arranging, or even coarse fishing, but in another art, fundamental to all these, the art of using ourselves. To use ourselves, to live, we have to move. Movement is one of the ways in which we use ourselves as instruments in every activity we perform. As you read this magazine your hands have been turning the pages, and your eyes moving to read. Movement is life. A person learning the skill of violin playing is really learning to use not

one instrument, but two. Of course he has to understand the structure of the violin, how it works, how heavy it is, how to hold it, how to create sound out of it, but it is his hands that have to hold it, his body that has to support its weight, his arm that has to move in order to draw the bow over the strings. And the way he uses himself will to a great extent determine how he uses his instrument.

In daily life our movement is very expressive of our general state. When we are happy and things are going well we feel lighter and freer than when we are depressed. If a friend comes to tell you some good news you can tell that the news is good, before he has said a word, by the spring in his step. Whereas, if the news is bad, he will seem physically more down and heavy. It is interesting how in everyday speech the phrases referring to one's general state, are also fairly accurate descriptions of one's physical state. "I feel very down today", or "She seems on top of the world", and even "They look bored stiff!"

We can't really know how another person experiences movement, any more than we can know how they think and feel. And it is even hard to know what we ourselves think and feel. But movement is more directly observable than thought or emotion, and since the relationship between the three is incredibly intertwined, observation and work on movement can be work on ourselves on more levels than we are consciously aware of. Learning to move in a new way is learning a skill, and it seems that there are some

qualities common to the successful performance of any skill.

You may have noticed that watching anyone doing something at which they are skilled can give great pleasure. The acrobat performing seemingly impossible feats of balance has an ease and enjoyment which are communicated to the audience. The watchmaker working with tiny pieces of apparatus impresses an observer with his infinite care and patience. A ballet dancer can exhibit a real quality of calmness while performing a dance with complicated quick footwork. Inherent in all these other qualities, of ease, enjoyment, care, and calmness, is an ability to take time. The acrobat does not rush, he takes his time to prepare himself before setting off on the tightrope; the watchmaker needs patience, and that means taking time. The dancer has taken time to rehearse her quick movements slowly at first, so that in performance she can keep calm and let them happen.

If we want examples of skill in the art of using ourselves in movement we do not need to look further than at a small child. The ease, poise, balance and range of movement of a two-year-old going about his activities is a strong contrast to the fixed joints and tense shortened muscles that impede movement in later life. Also the toddler will very often take time to think out the best way of coping with a new problem, perhaps an unusually steep step, whereas when we are older we tend to get into habits of rushing and not giving ourselves time to stop and think.

So in learning the Alexander Technique, which very simply is about stopping and thinking, we are not really learning anything new. We are re-learning the good use and coordination that we had when we were small, but re-learning it consciously, so that we won't lose it again. Losing our good use can happen for many different reasons, and at many stages of life. Bad emotional experiences can start the process, or it can even be something more simple like unconsciously imitating the bad use of parents, or other people.

The Alexander Technique came into being because an Australian actor called Frederick Matthias Alexander became aware of his own bad use, and set out to try and find how to

improve it. What started Alexander thinking on these lines was the fact that he found himself in a situation, in which many people before must have found themselves and certainly a great many after: he suffered the frustration of not being able to do what he wanted to do. What he wanted to do, and had done successfully for many years, was to act. And he feared he was not going to be able to continue because he began to have trouble with his voice. In Australia, in the 1880s, a popular form of entertainment was the one-man recital. This is what Alexander specialized in, enjoyed and was good at. But after a few years of successful performing he began to suffer from hoarseness, and loss of voice, an embarrassing condition for any actor, but for a one-man show, disastrous. This was before the days of the microphone and other technical aids. It was really necessary then to have a strong voice to reach the back of the theatre or hall. The first duty of the actor is to be heard, and one who cannot be heard might as well retire. But if he gave up he would be wasting many years of study and preparation, and some years of success. So this was his frustration. He wanted to continue acting, doing what he wanted to do, but he didn't see how unless he could find a way of making his voice more reliable.

If he had been a string player his problem could have been reluctance to give concerts because of not being sure of his bowing arm. Obviously the part on which there is most demand being made, in his case the voice, will be the part that will complain if it is continually being misused. In his search for ways of improving his voice he tried voice teachers and doctors but with no lasting success. Finally in desperation when he was asked to do a particularly important recital he asked his doctor once more for help. This time the doctor suggested that for the two weeks before the recital he should not speak at all to anyone, to allow his voice a complete rest. Alexander did this, and when the evening of the recital came, at first it seemed as though all would be well, but the hoarseness came back and by the end of the show he could hardly speak.

What happened next is an example of something good growing out of a bad experience. He must have been very depressed

and discouraged, but it did make him question very deeply why it had happened. Eventually he asked the doctor "Is it not fair to conclude that it was something that I was doing that evening in using my voice that was the cause of the trouble?" The doctor agreed that it must be so, but could offer no enlightenment as to what it was.

At this point it is interesting to note what Alexander did not do. He did not spend years having more voice lessons from every teacher he could find. He did not go from doctor to doctor, complaining that none of them were any good. Above all he did not give up and follow some other career, and spend the rest of his life moaning about the "fate" which had caused him to give up acting. He decided that if it was something he was doing wrong while reciting that caused his hoarseness, it was up to him to find out what it was. Instead of blaming circumstances, or even bad teaching, he took responsibility for his own state.

When he started he had only two facts to go on: that using his voice in reciting caused hoarseness, while using his voice in everyday speech didn't. So obviously he must be doing something in using his voice to recite that he didn't do in everyday life. And as he could not feel any difference, he thought perhaps it would be possible to see some difference. Being determined to solve the problem on his own he started to observe himself in a mirror.

And whether or not he realized it what he was observing was movement. Speech and breathing are movement, and in dramatic recitations he would be moving his arms and hands too, in making gestures. He watched himself speak as he did in everyday life, which he then compared with how he spoke for reciting, hoping to see some difference, and in the difference find the clue as to the answer. No record exists of what conversations he had with his mirror image, or of what his family thought of this strange proceeding.

After a lot of patient observation he did notice three things which seemed to happen in very demanding passages of the recital. These were that he was stiffening his neck muscles, and so pulling back his head, depressing (putting pressure on) his larynx, and sucking in breath through his mouth

making a gasping sound. Later he saw that he also did these three things when speaking in an ordinary way, but to a much lesser degree. The three things seemed to be part of a pattern of bad use and poorly coordinated movement, which were connected in some way. In trying to find out if any of these actions caused the others he discovered that if he could prevent himself from pulling back his head the pressure on his larynx eased, and his breathing was less noisy. He held later that this discovery was very important because it made him realize how essential to coordinated movement and good use, is the freedom of the neck and the consequent poise of the head.

But the human being works as a unity. It was no good thinking that the problem was solved just by working on one part. He came to realize that the misuse of his neck and head was part of a total pattern of bad use that reached as far as his toes. He established that the way he used himself badly—or misused himself—to speak, was the same way that he misused himself to do everything. The way in which we pick up a cup to drink, the way in which we bend to lift up something, the way in which we sit, stand and walk all go to form our particular pattern of use. And like Alexander, where we all go wrong is in making too much unnecessary and misplaced effort to move.

He discovered after weeks, months, even years of setbacks and new beginnings that what he really had to do was prevent his habitual too quick reaction to the idea of speaking, or of doing anything, so that he would have time to think of allowing the new way of using himself to work. It was not a question of forcing himself to do things differently, it was more a way of stopping doing the wrong things, so that the right things could happen. And when he was able to maintain this new use of himself, and through that the new use of his voice, his hoarseness completely disappeared, and his general health which from childhood had never been good improved, and stayed improved until the end of his life.

The reader might think to himself at this point, that this is all very well, it is nice that Alexander was able to solve his voice problems in Australia at the end of the last

century, but what relevance has this to living and working in the 1970s? Well, luckily for us, Alexander's work did not stop with himself. He devised a way of teaching others, so that his work continues to this day. Originally he had no intention to teach, he had no reason to believe that anyone but himself misused themselves. But it so happened that when he gave recitals after he had sorted out his voice, people were so impressed by his poise, command and control, that they asked him to give them lessons. Later there was a choice to be made, whether to further his own career or to continue teaching, and fortunately he chose teaching. He came from Sydney to work in London in 1904, where he taught very many people, Aldous Huxley and Bernard Shaw among others, until his death in 1955. Some twenty years before his death he started a training course to instruct others how to teach his work. Some of these teachers have in turn trained more, and at present there are about one hundred teachers in England, and many more in America, Canada, Denmark, France, Holland, Israel, Sweden, Switzerland, and one in Australia.

Another question the reader might ask himself, is "What happens in an Alexander lesson? If I went for lessons what might I expect?" What happens in an Alexander lesson is about as difficult to define as what happens in a violin lesson. It depends very much on the conditions and needs of the pupil at the time. It is almost always taught individually. But basically we all have to learn what Alexander learnt, to change our way of using ourselves, to develop an attitude of not desperately trying to achieve a result at any cost, but instead to care about taking the time

to think about how we are going to achieve that result. So the Alexander way of working is first learning not to do, not to try. In a lesson the pupil learns this in a practical way through the teacher's hands. The teacher works with his hands on the pupil – but not in a manipulative way, or anything like massage, rather a gentle guiding of the musculature into a new poised, light, balanced state. If the pupil is successful at non-doing, or in other words allows the teacher to guide him into this poised state, he will notice a change taking place. The degree of sensory awareness varies enormously from person to person, so some will be aware of more change than others. But usually the change is felt as one of lightness and ease and freedom of movement. And from then the pupil has the possibility of choosing whether to go on moving, using himself on this way, or to continue on in his habitual way. Obviously since what we are changing is patterns built up over many years, a permanent change will not be brought about overnight. But the pupil who learns to stop and take time, to think constructively about his ordinary everyday movements will find that this simple procedure can have far-reaching results. Changes in movement can bring about corresponding positive changes in his general state, with consequent effects on his life and behaviour and on those with whom he comes into contact.

And if the pupil is a musician he will appreciate the importance of ease and freedom in movement, and if he succeeds in achieving this in everyday life he will be able in time to carry it through into musical performance.