

"The Alexander Technique gives us all the things we have been looking for in a system of physical education; relief from strain due to maladjustment and consequent improvement in physical and mental health; and along with this heightening of consciousness on all levels. We cannot ask more from any system; nor if we seriously desire to alter human beings in a desirable direction, can we ask any less".

Aldous Huxley, "Ends and Means"

"The hardest thing to attend to is that which is closest to ourselves, that which is most constant and familiar, this closest 'something' being precisely ourselves ... In The Alexander Technique, a means is to hand whereby this task may be successfully accomplished".

Professor John Dewey.



F.M. Alexander.

"The Alexander Technique teaches you how to bring more practical intelligence into what you are already doing; how to eliminate stereotyped responses; how to deal with habit and change. It leaves you free to choose your own goal but gives you a better use of yourself while you work toward it".

Professor Frank Pierce Jones

"I consider that Alexander's work is probably one of the most underrated achievements of the 20th Century. I think it is surprising how relatively unknown and unrecognized it is, because I am convinced that it will prove to be as important as the work of Newton, of Einstein and particularly of Darwin".

W.H.M. Carrington, Director of the Constructive Teaching Centre, London.

"Change involves carrying out an activity against the habit of life".

F.M. Alexander

**Every Moment Alexander...**

by R. D. Walshe

This is an essay for friends who have some knowledge of Matthias Alexander's work. His 'Technique' is not a therapy but a process of re-education which teaches how to become conscious of the way we use ourselves in everyday life. It rests on two pillars, two brilliantly original discoveries: first, that a particular relationship of the head to the neck and back is fundamental to good body-use; second, that change from habits of poor use can only be effected if habit patterns are consciously negated or 'inhibited' before proceeding to the laying down of new patterns of (educated) use.

### 'The method of Mr Alexander...'

John Dewey, the eminent American educationist, never tired of praising the work of Matthias Alexander. He not only studied but ardently employed 'the Alexander Technique'. When he wrote an introduction in 1923 to Alexander's book, Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual, he took the opportunity to say that people undervalued Alexander's discoveries if they only acknowledged specific results such as improved posture or relief from back trouble: they should instead be giving 'full attention to the method of Mr Alexander instead of its results' and doing so in everyday life. Attending thus to the method would mean continually elevating conscious know-how, or 'means whereby', above anxious, much less conscious 'end-gaining', the pursuit of quick results which is so characteristic of modern times.

Dewey is asking us to make a profound commitment. He had not heard of New Age phrases such as 'present-time awareness' or 'every moment Zen' but in effect he was exhorting us to embark on 'every moment Alexander'. Now, who would wish to go that far? Only an advanced student or a teacher of Alexander could possibly feel inclined to do so, one who has realised as result of many hands-on lessons and much reading that HABIT entangles every human being in subtle bonds, taking over 90% of life, just as parasitic mistletoe can

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take over a gumtree.

Yet Alexander is on the side of the angels, for great teachers from Lao Tzu and Buddha to moderns like Gurdjieff, Huxley and Krishnamurti have urged our careless species to 'wake up', by which they mean to shake off the bonds of habit. And similarly every esoteric sect promises to enhance human awareness, which of course can't be done without attention to lessening the grip of habit on life.

I, as (I hope) an advanced student of the Technique, have decided that I'm ready and eager to take up Dewey's suggestion. I'm fully persuaded that habit limits and clogs my flow of awareness. I remember the ancient Chinese philosopher who declared, 'There is but one disease, obstruction, and but one cure, circulation'. I want to break through the obstruction of habit to the free 'circulation' of awareness. Still, Dewey is asking me to walk a difficult road, and I'm sceptical as to whether his pressured life ever really allowed him to walk it himself other than fitfully. Taken to the extreme, his advice would require us to STOP before every movement or action in order to employ consciously Alexander's method.

Daunting though this prospect is, my recent experiences with the technique are impelling me to take on even more because I must in all logic ask: Why stop only before each movement? No less crucial in our lives are our thoughts and our feelings (including emotions). Efforts to limit habit ought surely to be comprehensive, embracing movements-thoughts-feelings, the whole life. A project indeed! And yet I see it as unavoidable if I am to commit myself fully to taking 'the method of Mr Alexander' into the living of my life... So let me get on with it... I find myself resolving to introspect as often as possible, to watch myself in action as systematically as I can, and to centre my exploration on self-knowing awareness as much as willpower will permit.

#### Waking up from the trance of habit...

My past work with the Technique, intensely practical, has been preoccupied with 'body use' conceived almost exclusively as posture and movement. On the rare occasions when I have been more theoretical, I have said that the Technique is a way of replacing unconscious habitual use of the body with a conscious use which tries to approximate to a scheme of best-possible-use as illumined by Alexander's meticulous research. This body work has been difficult enough even when I could lean on guidance from my teacher, Silvie Collins, but it has also been so rewarding as to keep me wanting to go forward. I know, with boundless gratitude, that Alexander has vastly improved my posture and movement and therefore made life much better.

But now Dewey's hurrah for the METHOD of Mr Alexander has got through to me. I realise how shortsighted I have been in limiting the Technique to movement. My new understanding that habit is the principal obstruction to life-as-conscious-awareness enables me to see that habit invades thought and feeling no less than it invades movement. My task then is to confront the whole of life, seen as a psychophysical trinity of feeling-thinking-movement, and to rescue it from habit.

'We're all creatures of habit.' So runs the old adage; and Mungo MacCallum merely updates it when he remarks in his autobiography that 'by twenty most people are programmed'. Many indeed are by then hooked on one or other of the principal human addictions - drugs, sex, power - as explained incomparably by A.E.Housman:

Could man be drunk forever  
With liquor, love or fights,  
Lief would I rouse at morning  
And lief lie down of nights.

But men at whiles are sober  
And think by fits and starts,  
And when they think, they fasten  
Their hands upon their hearts.

Addictions, of course, are only the most compelling of our many habits; 'sober' for a moment, we are beset by lesser habit-compulsions of thinking and feeling, these two areas being vitally connected in Housman's last two lines. My only quibble is that, usually, feeling precedes thinking. It is more elemental and indeed likely to generate or condition thought, in contradiction of the myth that homo sapiens is 'noble in reason'. 'The mass of men,' said Thoreau long ago, 'lead lives of quiet desperation'. Nearly all of us go rushing on, driven by habitual feelings, while our thinking is only a patchy rationalisation of our feelings.

So I'm determined to win back the 90% of my life alienated by the trance of habit. I want to wake up - and stay awake.

#### Towards 'constructive conscious control'...

Alexander has shown me that this enterprise must be founded on inhibiting; that is, on stopping my automatic response to a stimulus. This was one of his most remarkable insights. In order to change, he tells me, I must first stop what I have been doing - really stop - and only then do the new thing - consciously! If I fail to stop/negate/inhibit the old, it will tenaciously prevail over the new, or it will so modify the new as to make it different from what I had intended. Inhibiting means that I withhold my permission to react instantly and thoughtlessly. It puts me, as conscious self, up front in the driver's seat, in control of my life at this present moment. (It is fundamentally different from the 'repression' or 'suppression' so much discussed in psychoanalysis.)

Academic psychologists have endlessly studied 'the stimulus-response mechanism' (S-R), but it was left to this non-academic Alexander to discover the huge significance for human development of saying STOP between the two stages (S-Λ-R). How did he arrive at this? He had already spent years researching the way he used his body and had found that since birth he (like everyone else) had developed sadly deficient habits of posture and movement. His meticulous observation had led him to his first great original discovery: that a particular relationship of the head to the neck and back is fundamental to good body use. But instead of basking in the glory of that insight, he had proceeded at once to the no less difficult task of searching for a way to teach how to change from bad habits of body-

use to the new pattern. (As Alexander students know, this first discovery is summarised each time they say in full consciousness, as they are required continually to do, 'My neck is to be free, to let my head go forward and up, and my back lengthen and widen'.) The search produced his second great discovery: simply(!) to pause between stimulus and response.

To pause? If one did no more than that throughout the day, taking a second or two between the stimulus and one's otherwise immediate response, one would benefit considerably by being more collected, poised, aware. But Alexander's METHOD proposes even more.

Each day confronts us with a stream of stimuli - outer and inner promptings which 'push us around' and thus run our lives - we say 'it's all go', 'a rat-race', and we're 'run off our feet'. Mostly we react instantly, triggered into MOVEMENT (when the phone rings), or into FEELING (when someone slights us), or into THINKING (when a problem presents). Alexander proposes that we put an end to this reaction habit by inhibiting, saying 'no' or 'stop', and then deciding consciously whether and how we will act.

Let me now turn from generalisation to my own attempts at practice. I find application of the METHOD is easiest in the area of movement because I have done so much work here under my teacher's direction; and anyway, movement is external, physical and visible, whereas thought and feeling are internal, subjective, invisible.

As to thinking, I find its subtlety makes it much more difficult to attend to. The mind is seldom free of some kind of verbal or visual thought, so I have the continual problem of when-to-inhibit. At present I am content to catch my thought-flow when it is being compulsive, trivial, absurd, etc. - that is, in its more obviously aberrant moments. I say 'no' and then decide what I want to think.

My introspecting has made me acutely aware that thinking is usually associated intimately with feeling. In fact the two are often impossible to separate. And just as it is true that verbal and/or visual thought trickles continuously through the mind, so is it true that feelings are always pushing for entry to consciousness - feelings in their diverse forms as sense-perceptions, emotions, desires, and instinctive drives or appetites.

I am finding that the inhibition of at least the stronger reaction feelings (e.g. boredom, anxiety, depression) is generally easier than the inhibition of reactive thought. I find too that work on the inhibition of some feelings can put an end to a nagging train of thought. For instance, inhibiting anxiety of the 'irrational dread' kind (a churning in the solar plexus) can disperse a cluster of 'down' thoughts. All too commonly, I now realise, this or that feeling has been the stimulus of my past thoughts. Now, when I inhibit a feeling, I often notice that it takes away the energy which, as it were, had been generating my thought - I am of course speaking here of unwanted negative thoughts, not of good thinking and feeling which I choose to cultivate. At the same time I realise and accept that the source of some feelings, including several strong and recurring ones, is hidden too deep in my being to locate. Is the source genetic, deriving from, say, the 'collective unconscious' or 'existential anxiety', or is it experiential, the result of 'womb

stuff, birth stuff, oral stuff, anal stuff, oedipal stuff, shadow stuff, anima stuff, parent-adult-child stuff, character armour and all the rest of it' (John Rowan)? The psychologists have never been able to agree on whether to search for the source of neurosis or to deal directly with the neurotic manifestations. I see Alexander as leaving them with this problem, walking around it. His concern is with the person in this present moment, with putting her or him in 'constructive conscious control' instead of becoming engrossed with either the possible causes or the expressions of neurotic/psychotic tendencies. He 'simply' inhibits and then gets on with the thinking-feeling-moving that is required for controlling this moment's situation.

Nothing has brought me more of a sense of being in control of my life than the attention I have recently been paying to my feeling side. I have grown aware of areas of feeling, and I can often put a finger on these areas, literally. Indeed, I attribute some of my success in inhibiting unwanted feelings (e.g. of anxiety, excitement) to my ability thus to objectively locate these areas.

My conviction about the value of inhibiting has been doubled by my own discovery of two powers which (for me at least) attach to the moment of inhibiting: first, that saying NO, or otherwise consciously shifting attention from what I have habitually been doing, always invokes a felt release of solar-plexus tension which opens me to a deep, satisfying, belly-descending breath; second, that I rediscover my attention at that moment, by which I mean that having been operating at a relatively mechanical habit-level, I now experience a rise to the level of self-awareness attention.

This experience prompts me to accept the contention of E. F. Schumacher (in A Guide for the Perplexed, 1977) that human self-awareness should be seen as a higher level than the everyday 'thinking' which Alexander encourages me to view as an habitual operation. I find it to be wider, more inclusive, free of conflict - in short, above the storm. A calm eminence. And to the extent that it lifts me thus above the turbulence of feelings and (related) conflicted verbal/visual thinking, my self-awareness becomes the high ground from which I can best embark on reasoning my way through the problems each day presents. I can at last work to be 'noble in reason'... I am firmly with Alexander when he says that his whole purpose is to bring man to constructive conscious use of the self.

In summary, then:

The enemy is habit - and Alexander's METHOD shows how to beat it. But I don't need to assault habit - simply, I INHIBIT it. This conscious act lifts me to a higher level - to SELF-AWARENESS. There I can elect to think without distraction - to REASON. Reasoning as to MEANS WHEREBY, I send directions to my body. Key direction: 'Neck free, head forward and up, back long and wide'. But I don't then do what feels right - feeling will get it wrong. A teacher's hands need to help my posture and movement. As confidence grows, I extend the Alexander method from movement to feelings and thinking: EVERY MOMENT ALEXANDER. Taking this direction, I hope to find that we are not 'an inherently flawed species' (Koestler) but an incomplete one and that each of us has the potential as well as the responsibility to complete himself or herself by that conscious, constructive, reasonable 'method of Mr Alexander'.