

Psycho-physical integrity

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In this article the Principal of The Alexander Foundation maintains that there are two forces active in the human body—one producing "heaviness", the other "lightness"—which have to be brought into balance if we are to respond to life in a healthy, integrated way.

The technique evolved by F. Matthias Alexander is generally regarded as one for altering the postural behaviour of individuals, and indeed it can be so regarded. However, it concerns itself with considerably more than this. It is a technique for altering the reaction of the individual to the stimuli of his environment, and thus it can be applied to the whole range of human activities, whether these be regarded as just thought-processes or processes involving predominantly muscular activity. I say "can be" advisedly, because the process of application is unlikely to be fully automatic, except after a long period of struggle and growth.

Alexander discovered that he was muscularly misusing his neck, head and back, and in trying to correct this misuse he came to the realisation that the physiological knowledge of how men and women used their own musculature was very seriously at fault. As he struggled with his own behaviour patterns, he discovered that the concept of a firm, solid body activated by means of a system of telephone wires from the central exchange was only half the picture. He found that the body was a fluid thing, its various parts held in their proper relationships by a continuous flow of impulses; that these impulses could be, and in civilised men usually were, distorted; and that the lack of integrity caused by this is one of the most important factors producing disease.

These impulses, which are analogous to electrical currents, are small, but their effect over years is very large, for when they are travelling in the wrong direction they produce a disintegrating effect on the various systems of the organism, in such a way that some muscles and groups of muscles will tend to take on work for which they are not intended, some will work improperly or not at all, and others will exert tremendous and deleterious pressures where none are wanted. You may see their effect all around you. The stoop of old age is a case in point. Indeed, the symptoms thought to be of old age are often merely symptoms of misuse or wrongly directed activity.

What, then, are these infinitely small, yet infinitely strong, impulses or forces? Where do they come from? What shall we call them? How can we alter or control them? These are important questions, and to the last only can I give a definite answer. Fortunately it is the most important question. It is possible to demonstrate two forces, or sets of forces, acting in the human body,

over the years in the attempt to establish the truth of his teachings. As I have said, the work was early recognised by the theatrical profession, presumably because they have constantly to display their minds and bodies to the public, and it is a matter of immediate importance to them that they should do so successfully. But certain more enlightened doctors took an early interest in the work and I might perhaps mention in this respect the names of Dr. Peter Macdonald, Dr. McDonagh, Mr. Rugg-Gunn, Dr. Mungo Douglas and the late Dr. Murdoch. All honour to them for their enlightened interest in and support of this work.

A great deal of F.M.'s teaching has been indirectly through his four standard works—in the publication of which Fred Watts has been such a tower of strength and such a keen disciple.

I am not going to give you a list of all those eminent persons in this country and in America who have in various walks of life benefited by F.M.'s teaching and sought to give their support to its wider publication. The late Lord Lytton and Archbishop Temple were outstanding examples, together with such persons as Miss Lawrence of the Froebel Institute, Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Paul Nash, Robert Donat, Professor Raymond Dart and, in America, Professors John Dewey, G. E. Coghill and James Harvey Robinson to mention only a few.

But what is just as important is the large body of ordinary men and women like ourselves gathered here tonight who owe F.M. so much for the happiness and health that he has given us and who are all of us anxious to see that benefit shared by as many of our fellow men and women as is possible.

There is one important historical date that I have so far omitted. It was during this last year that there was set up the "F. Matthias Alexander Society of Teachers" as a central body for the furtherance of the technique and teaching and for the upholding of proper professional standards. To these teachers F.M. has entrusted the carrying-on of his work in the form in which he has passed it on to them.

They are charged with a great responsibility, and in its discharge they should feel themselves bound together in a common partnership of effort to preserve and extend the teachings of their master, F.M. There is no room for jealousies or quarrels amongst such a body of persons—there must be no sectarianism, but rather the tolerance of a common scientific approach to what we all regard as the fundamental teachings of a great leader in the battle for health and sanity in the world—a battle which needs all our co-operation, courage and intelligence if we are to fight through to a victory which can bring future happiness and health to mankind.

F.M.—we greet you as a great benefactor, as one who has discovered and given to the world a truth which can and must be used to increase the happiness of mankind; we offer you always our unflinching support in your efforts; we acclaim you as our friend and teacher—and it is in that spirit that we raise our glasses to you on the occasion of this your 80th birthday.

and, in particular, along the spine. There may, of course, be three, in accordance with Eastern teachings, or more. They may possibly have something in common with the Positive and Negative of Western science or the Chinese Yin and Yang.

Force "A" has a tendency to contract and distort. It is closely allied to the pull of gravity and causes a "heaviness" in the body which is not the heaviness of *avoiropois*. Force "B" has an expansionary or elongatory tendency. It is often referred to, in a general way, as "life". It produces a "lightness" in the body, which I take to be the natural, though not any longer the normal, condition. This lightness is, again, not that of *avoiropois*. It has an anti-gravitational direction. I presume that the natural interplay of these two forces brings about the integrity of the body, which sets the stage for proper health. This, at present, is only an hypothesis, but it is one born of a very considerable experience.

What is certain is that, in civilised man, there is a growing tendency for force "A" to dominate force "B", and the results are, or should be, obvious to all. It is necessary, therefore, in order to bring the body back to a state of integrity, to minimise the effect of force "A" and restore that of force "B". This, though a fairly simple piece of re-education, is subtle and needs the help of a highly skilled teacher, otherwise the attempt to restore force "B" will almost certainly result in a strengthening of force "A".

It is easy for a rough and unskilled hand to pull out or lengthen the spine of the victim (all, of course, with the very best of intentions), and in so doing to stimulate the contracting force, thereby achieving the opposite of what was intended. This, in fact, is what happens in hospitals under the treatment called "Traction". This, I understand, is done by machinery, and I have never seen a patient who was not the worse after having suffered it. What should be realised, and is not, is that it is useless, or worse, to stretch a spine. A spine must learn to stretch itself, and to do so under normal conditions of everyday living. With a good teacher, this may need only a few weeks' training, but the experiences involved are delicate and subtle and must be received individually.

Thus, it is impossible to inform people about them by writing. Alexander has been criticised because of this inability to convey sensory meaning by the written or spoken word, but, in fact, it is an attribute of all subtle sensory experience. No one but a fool would expect to learn much about wine-tasting by reading a book. In fact, words can be dangerous, because people will always try to fit their own meanings to words, so as to make them agree with their previous experience, rather than accept new experience in order to find out the meaning of words.

The Alexander Technique, then, seeks to give its students a new (to them, but really a very ancient) orientation, because we recognise that modern man, when in activity, has very little awareness of such simple directions in space as backwards and forwards, and up and down, in relation to his own body, and

what awareness he has is almost certain to be wrong - even as much as 180 degrees. (This apparently incredible statement is easily demonstrated, and I can assure my readers that I meet confirmation of it every day and all day.) The captain of a ship, the accuracy of whose compass was variable up to 180 degrees, would think twice about taking his ship out of harbour, and he would hasten to have his compass adjusted and checked.

I believe that the science of physiology has not yet got round to recognising this factor of orientation, but this is the fundamental on which everything else depends. Without it physiology is not only Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark but, I quote, "Hamlet with only two characters: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They are a bad lot, you remember, and die in the middle act".

When this factor of orientation begins to be understood, it will do away with many time-and-money-wasting activities, usually labelled research, such as the one about the business executive's chair, about which there was such a fuss in the Press some years ago. The idea was to "research" into the kind of chair best suited to safeguard the health of the busy executive, by putting the least possible strain upon him. If it had been realised that the executive would have an habitual orientation, or use, of his own body, which he would bring to any chair, whether it were a chaise longue or an orange box, and that it was his orientation that counted, and not the place where it was manifested, a lot of useless nonsense would have been omitted, and who knows, the business executives might even have been induced to use their noted acumen to benefit their own health.

I have stressed that an individual orientation of the body, in space, is an essential if the progressive deterioration of man is to be arrested. His thinking about a very large number of other things will have to be re-oriented as well. For instance, the activity called relaxation, as taught and practised, and thought a good thing, must be recognised for what it is - collapse - a bad thing. He will have to think of walking and running, head first, not feet and hips first. He will have to learn not to ask mythical questions such as "How should I hold my head and spine?", and learn to ask real ones, as, "How should my head and spine hold me?" Not "What position should I sit in?", but "How can I use myself best in a sitting position?" These real questions, of course, never get asked. By the time anyone has knowledge enough to ask them, he already knows the answers.

The understanding and practice of the Alexander Technique is a very simple matter (though not always easy), as simple as ABC. It should be borne in mind, however, that A B C is only simple to the Chinese after he has learned what A B C is about.

Author's footnote: While some of the terms here used can, perhaps, be queried on the grounds of strict scientific accuracy, they have been employed by the writer in the belief that they will best convey his meaning. He has had some 30 years' experience of persuading people to understand his concepts in this rather subtle subject, and though the sense of touch, in this context, is by far the more important, words can be of value if both writer and reader realise that they are but symbols, and are easily capable of being misunderstood.