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The Alexander Technique has continued to mature since the death of its founder, F. Matthias Alexander in 1955. At present, there are Alexander teachers throughout the world, with the greatest American concentrations in New York and California. The numbers are increasing. The current teacher training class in New York (a two-and-one-half-year program) has twenty-three students, and the one in San Francisco has another fourteen. Teachers are also being trained in Chicago and Philadelphia. While these numbers indicate a steady increase in the popularity and availability of the teaching, it still appears very small in comparison to the more popular psycho-physical approaches to movement and body integration such as the work of Moshe Feldenkrais or Ida Rolf. There are several reasons for this. First, there is no manageable package, form, or series of exercises connected to the Alexander Technique. It is a work which is never completed, and there is no graduation from it or limit to the mastery that can be attained through it. Secondly, the Alexander Technique has a tradition of low visibility. For a variety of reasons, F. M. Alexander was never aggressive in promoting the Technique on a massive scale, and he established a style which still holds amongst Alexander teachers. In part, this was due to a reality that exists as much today as it did for Alexander. The Technique is rarely taught in a group. Since it depends on an experience which is held in the body of the student, the touch of the teacher is essential to it, and can best be communicated on a one-to-one basis. Above all, the Alexander Technique demands a level of responsibility on the part of its students which is not essential in other disciplines. Students must have a reason to study it. It does not sell itself, and requires commitment and involvement. Missy Vineyard, an Alexander teacher in Baltimore, Maryland, expresses this responsibility as follows: "The source of the Technique is the student, not the teacher. You can't make people want to learn it. Proselytizing never works."

Despite all the reasons to the contrary, the popularity of the Alexander Technique is steadily and quietly increasing, and the Technique is growing with the times while remaining essentially the same. Although F. M. Alexander's writings do encapsulate an unchanging ideological canon, Alexander teachers do not treat them as gospel because their cumbersome style does not adequately communicate the essential experience of the

and all the teachers working today have either trained with F. M. Alexander himself or with someone who trained with him. It is the experience of contact with the man that is communicated through time and not any limited set of teachings.

The second generation Alexander teachers are largely open to outside teachings, and a great number of them are involved in other related disciplines such as Tai Chi Chuan, Bioenergetics, Acupuncture, Judo, Hatha Yoga, or the work of Elaine Summers, Moshe Feldenkrais, Irmgard Bartenieff, Lulu E. Sweigard, Andre Bernard, Collette Barry, and a host of others. Many of the teachers incorporate elements from these disciplines into the form of their work, although these "eclectics" cause great dismay to the purists who would do the teaching only as F. M. Alexander did it. The fact that there is a conservative and a radical element in the teaching is a sign of health, indicating that the body of the teachers is large enough and strong enough to support diversity. As a result, the teaching is both growing in its manifestations and remains unswerving at the core. It is both changing with the times and maintaining a teaching for all times.

Essential to the timeless teaching of the Alexander Technique is an understanding of the functioning of habit in the human body and of the dynamics by which it may be altered. When conscious actions slip below the level of consciousness, they become habits. A child learning to tie his shoe laces may find it easy to picture the organization of loops and turns but the process of holding the loop at one end of the lace while wrapping the other end around and forming another loop challenges his muscular coordination. Over time, he practices the action with repeated effort until it becomes habitual and no longer demands such mental effort. Later, what once required great care and attention is done without any conscious thought, and it is difficult for the child to remember what it is that he does to tie his shoe laces. The same process occurs with other repeated practices which require conscious effort to learn, and are later done without thought, such as writing, driving, typing, etc. Such habits are labeled "good" because they are done without mental effort, thus freeing the mind for other work. Often these habits serve us, but more often, we acquire habits which sabotage the efficiency of our normal functioning. These work against our intentions and are considered to be "bad" habits.

The Alexander Technique is aimed at re-educating habitual misuse of the body by bringing inefficient, stressful, or uneconomical use back up to the level of consciousness, and then consciously altering it. As a result of nine years of meticulous self-examination, F. M. Alexander was able to develop a comprehension of habit and its alteration based on conscious control which is as profound and extensive as that of any philosophy of education. The extent to which conscious control could be used to alter the human physiology seemed unlimited to Alexander. After considering the ability of

an Indian Yogi to stop the beating of his heart for short periods of time, Alexander concluded that "there is no function of the body that cannot be brought under the control of the conscious will."¹ Like habits, the control of the movement of the breath or the beating of the heart resides below the level of consciousness. Also like habits, this control can be brought to the level of consciousness as a result of carefully pointed attention, and can be consciously altered. While we do not need to think about breathing to breathe, we also have the option of breathing consciously and of altering our breath. With greater attentiveness, we can similarly alter our heartbeat or the flow of the blood to certain areas of the body. Being an evolutionary theorist, Alexander saw the application of conscious control as a tool in the possible perfection of our species. "I claim further that by the application of this principle of conscious control there may in time be evolved a complete mastery over the body, which may result in the elimination of all physical defects."²

Of course, the Alexander Technique is not aimed at conscious control of the heartbeat, but rather at the use of consciousness to alter habitual misuse of the musculature. It makes students aware of the options available in their movement and provides them with the freedom of being able to change if they so choose. Normally our usage of the body is so oriented toward results that we cease to be aware of the processes involved in achieving them. Alexander observed, for example, the tension visible in the bodies of young students straining to learn to write. He noticed that children who learn to write with inefficient use of their bodies will perpetuate that harmful use as long as they are doing that thing; they call writing. "A child who tries to guide his pencil by futile movements of his head, tongue, and shoulders may be preparing the way to ills so far-reaching that their origin is often lost sight of."³ Thus, normal actions like writing, sitting, and reading may be rich in misuse of the body, and it is the aim of the Alexander Technique to provide the student with the sense experience and the state of mind needed to recognize and alter such misuse.

Recognition does not come easily. As stated by Judith Leibowitz of the New York branch of the American Center for the Alexander Technique, "teachers of the Alexander Technique have recognized that a verbal description of a malfunction is not enough to help a student change his manner of use."⁴ As a result, Alexander teachers use their hands to guide students in order to give them the experience of their misuse and also of the proper organization of their bodies. At first, students have to suspend judgement about the feeling of their use. As F.M. Alexander noted, feelings cannot be trusted because they are victims of the habitual. What feels right is what is most familiar. At this point, a mental effort is needed to overcome years of conditioning. As consciousness connects with experience, with the aid of the teacher as guide, this concentration can slowly be reduced until the student's habits are re-educated and can again sink below the level of con-

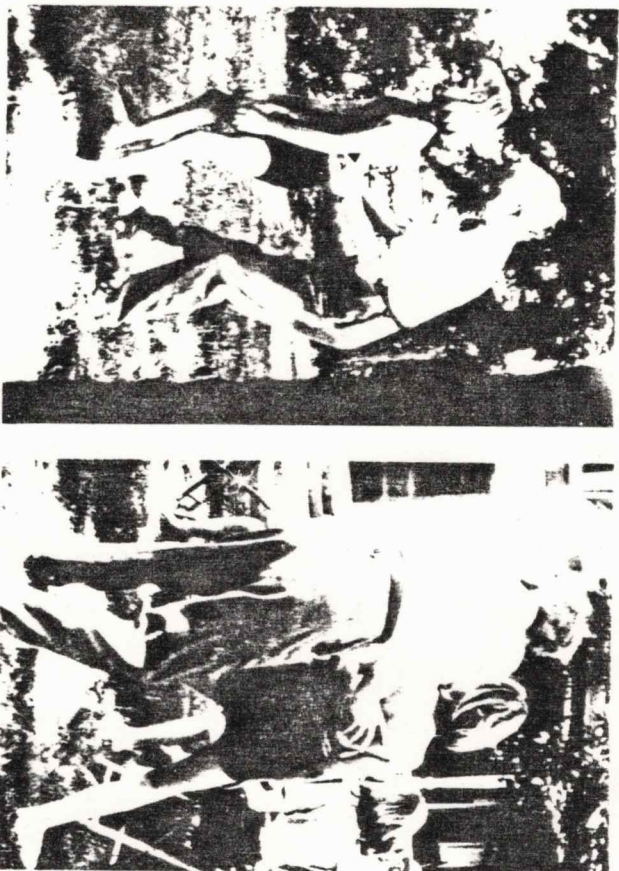
sciousness. In effect, inefficient habits can be transformed into efficient ones through conscious control, becoming habits which will support the body in all its normal activity. As a result of Alexander work, a student's feelings will be transformed along with the habitual use, thus becoming valuable guides once again. "Surely, I argued, 'if it is possible for feeling to become untrustworthy as a means of direction, it should also be possible to make it trustworthy again.'"⁵

Along with the use of conscious control, students of the Alexander Technique slowly discover that experience supersedes belief. As a student in the first training class for Alexander teachers, Lullie Westfeldt expressed amazement that work on the organization of her head, neck and back could aid her in freeing up an ankle frozen by an operation she had had subsequent to contracting polio. As she states, "bit by bit, however, as I continued to have new experiences, my old belief and orientation began to die, and the day came when I no longer wanted to have my feet touched."⁶ The process involves developing a new set of beliefs based on experience. Along the way, consciousness and feeling are brought into play. Attention is also essential to the process.

Along with the emphasis on conscious control, one of the distinguishing features of the Alexander Technique is the use of inhibition. What Alexander understood by that word was not suppression in the Freudian sense, but rather volition. When a student does a movement, the teacher can make him aware of an entire constellation of unsupportive habits which accompany that movement. With this awareness, he then becomes capable of doing the movement without them by voluntarily inhibiting them. But the process is difficult, because it is through that group of habits that the student knows that he is actually doing the designated movement. In effect, what is required of him is that he do something that seems like *not* doing the movement.

An example will help clarify this point. Troup Mathews, an Alexander teacher, showed me a short super-8 film of F.M. Alexander working with students in London. In this film, we see him guiding a young man in and out of a chair with his hands placed predominately on the man's head, neck, and shoulders. As the man finishes his movement from sitting to standing, however, Alexander's hands move down to his chest and back. What he does with his touch is to guide the student into inhibiting his habitual completion of the process. The student has a tendency to finish standing up by allowing his weight to settle between the legs and to shorten his lower back, although such shortening of the spine may sabotage, in a small but measurable way, the aliveness and efficiency of his body. In the same way, this student tends to pull his chin up as he gets in and out of a chair, thus collapsing the cervical vertebrae, and Alexander's hands on his head guide him in inhibiting this habitual action. By repeating the experience, he is able to learn that it is possible to sit down and stand up without shortening his

spine. As Missy Vineyard states, "Inhibition involves being aware and then having the choice to say 'no' to any one route." For the student in the film, the process he is involved in probably has little feeling resemblance to what he normally thought of as "sitting down" or "standing up", although the results are the same. In effect, he is asked to do something other than what he normally did when asked to sit or stand. Joel Kendall, a New York Alexander teacher, describes the process in the film as follows: "Inhibition is a decision by the student to stop a neuro-muscular pattern which goes into effect when the stimulus to stand comes into existence. The student builds up an ability to learn how to stop this pattern." The inhibition Joel talks of demands learning to *not* do something which is written by habit into the neuro-muscular system. This is essential to the Alexander Technique. While a lengthened spine is considered a desirable end, no amount of doing, in the normal sense, can achieve that end. Effort will get you nowhere. Length comes only through released muscles.



During World War II, F.M. Alexander moved his children's school from London to the United States. These pictures, taken in 1941, show Alexander working with children in his school in Stowe, Massachusetts. Alexander was 71 years old when the photographs were taken. He returned to England in 1943.

There is no standard set of exercises, physical movements, or practices in the Alexander Technique. The emphasis is rather on a state of mind and a way of doing that involves a continually renewed willingness not to achieve any results. For Alexander, the emphasis lies on the "means whereby" rather than on "end-gaining." When I asked Judith Leibowitz

what text she would recommend to someone interested in learning how to use the Alexander Technique, she recommended Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Zen is one of several kindred doctrines which stress non-doing and a state of mind which supersedes any movement toward results. F.M. Alexander's student, Aldous Huxley spoke of a perennial philosophy—a repeated pattern of thought which is shared by the mystical traditions of all the world's great religions. The Alexander Technique, with its emphasis on experience over belief and non-doing fits into that tradition along with Zen, Tai Chi, the Teaching of Carlos Castaneda's Don Juan, and a host of other teachings.

Central to F.M. Alexander's observation of the human body is his sense of its organization around the spine. He concluded that the entire body operates with greater ease and vitality when the spine is lengthened rather than compressed. The most consistent obstacles to the length of the spine occur in the neck and lower back and normally accompany each other. Of course, the natural curves of the spine allow for a certain elasticity in the spine and its ability to withstand shock, but exaggerations of those natural curves become inefficient and produce strain. Starting with self-observation, Alexander noted a wide-spread tendency to lock the knees, hyperextend the back and shorten the neck by carrying the chin forward with the face directed upward. As an evolutionary theorist, he considered these misuses to be a product of mankind's current condition and indicative of a situation to be overcome as conscious control takes over in guiding our evolution. Since this shortening of the spine is normally a habitual misuse, the teacher needs to bring the student's awareness to it at the time that he does it. At the same time, the teacher guides the student with his hands, directing him toward a proper organization of the back, neck, and head, and acquainting him with the feeling of it. This guidance is normally accompanied by a series of words which serve as verbal cues for both the physical release desired and the non-doing state of mind which accompanies it. The words, *let the neck be free to let the head go forward and up to let the back lengthen and widen* often cause problems for those who struggle over their literal sense.

These directions are given in such a way as to combine their meaning and connotations with the kinesthetic feeling and their structural sense. As they are repeated with practice, they act like mantram in ingraining themselves into the experience they suggest and expanding in meaning and significance. Other words might do, but the essential is not semantic but rather experiential. The words are cues for kinesthetic experiences and states of mind. They are not visual images but rather the projection of directions as a thought process. The teacher assists in coordinating these projections with the experience itself of lengthening and widening.

A proper head, neck and back relationship (called by F.M. Alexander the "Primary Control") is so essential to the Alexander Technique

that critics of the Technique have often based their opposition on the seeming single focus of the work.⁷ The experience of students over the past seventy-five years corroborates Alexander's findings that the focus on freeing the head, neck and back does bring benefit to such seemingly unrelated areas as the voice, the hands, knees or ankles. This is due primarily to the centrality of the spine in the organization of the entire body. By starting with the head and neck, the rest of the spine finds its length and upward direction, and the limbs of the body function in opposition to the spine. In walking or sitting down, for example, the knees move forward with the energy directed down the upper legs away from the spine. As the lumbar spine lengthens, the lower back seems to move backward in opposition to the forward movement of the knees. Everything is connected. With the head poised at the end of the spine like a ball balanced on the end of a stick, the neck remains free and lengthened and the lower back lengthens and widens correspondingly. F.M. Alexander observed that problems in one part of the body cannot be corrected without changes which reverberate through the entire system. Conversely, if the central core is organized well, everything else will find its place in relationship to it.

Alexander students often refer to experiencing the freedom of the neck, the movement of energy up and out the top of the head and the lengthening and widening of the back as "getting their directions." "Directions are decisions in time and space to continue the primary organization of a neck that's free of tension, a head that's balanced forward and up, and a torso that's long and wide," says Joel Kendall. The process of making such a decision eventually becomes habitual as re-education of the body and the feelings advances, but it is only done through the repeated inhibition of those things which normally compress the spine and shorten and tighten the body. In effect, the student learns through the use of consciousness to not do those things which previously resided out of the reach of consciousness. This learning comes as a result of the repeated guidance of the teacher and the application of awareness to the process. Effort or the desire to achieve results does not aid in advancement in any way. In fact, they can only hinder it. As a result, what students do when they "get their directions," is actually nothing. They cease doing those things which shorten, tighten, and narrow.

In a lecture to the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique at the Medical Society of London (November 12, 1963), Patrick MacDonald echoed F.M. Alexander's contention that the proper organization of the head, neck and back is a natural gift to man which is lost through the process of socialization. "The Primary Control is a mechanism we are all born with, and is with us all our lives whether we are instructed in its use or not." When a student "gets his or her directions," they are merely allowing the proper organization to exist as it already is rather than altering it through unconscious strain. Getting directions is simply a matter of learning how to

let the Primary Control be and then staying in balance. It involves stopping the old patterning through inhibition and then deciding to function in this particular coordination. Nothing is made to happen. Not-doing naturally brings about lengthening and widening because a person who is properly released is long and wide. Paradoxically, getting directions is something a person cannot do.

While the Alexander Technique is as useful to plumbers and businessmen as to actors and musicians, it has traditionally been studied by a greater concentration of people in the performing arts than those involved in other disciplines. Missy Vineyard, who is teaching the Alexander Technique at the 1978 American Dance Festival, speculates that "dancers and other performing artists come sooner than other professionals to the recognition that their use is preventing them from going where they want to go." It is certainly true that a large concentration of Alexander teachers come to the Technique by way of dance: Pamela Anderson, Maya Clemes, Aileen Crow, Joel Kendall, and Missy Vineyard, to mention a few. Many of them work extensively with dancers. Sadly, most of the dancers who try the Technique do so in order to correct injuries sustained as a result of the improper use of their bodies in dance classes rather than to prevent such injuries. Frequent on the list of grievances are knee problems, low back pains, and a general lack of vitality and energy. For most of them, the experience of dancing was the antithesis of the non goal-oriented Alexander work. They were previously straining to be "right" in their dance classes, imitating movements with no notice of their thoughts or the tensions and stresses they were building. Frequently, they would work until the point of pain and beyond. "Dancers often believe that if you don't feel pain, you're not working," said Pamela Anderson with regard to her own dance experience. On the other hand, Judith Liebowitz speaks for the Alexander Technique when she says that pain is a warning of improper use. According to her, "nothing should be painful."

There is no Alexander look or ideal physical type other than a comfortable, easeful and energized body. Similarly, there is no set of exercises or movements with which one can practice the Technique. It involves a quality, not a quantity; a way of doing, and not the end or product of doing. As Aileen Crow states, "the Alexander Technique is not about holding one correct form, but about what's going on inside. It is not about getting in and out of a chair, but about developing an awareness which encompasses the entire body." This is equally true of the movements in a dance technique class or any other activity. What is essential to bring to movement is consciousness. Peggy Hackney's work with the Bill Evans Dance Company exemplifies this point. Although she studied some dance in college, she was late in committing herself to full-time dance work. Her experience as a student of the Alexander Technique gave her a basis to work with which did more than compensate for her lack of other dance experience. "I was able to