

THE F. MATTHIAS ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AND ITS RELATION TO EDUCATION* ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪ ∪

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MAN has ceased to be a natural animal. Everything connected with his life has changed—his environment, his food, his manner of living—all have changed. No longer is he dependent on his physical organism for his means of subsistence. Even where, to some extent, he still depends on his physical organism, as in agriculture and some trades, his muscles are being used in new ways, mainly in mechanical repetitions of the same act. His habits have changed, but he himself, as an entity, has not kept pace with the changes.

The last century has seen the greatest advance of all in man's transition from the savage to the civilized stage in the introduction of machinery to the point where man has conquered the land, the sea, and the air, and, in doing so, has even conquered himself, in that he has failed to keep pace in his own development. In fact a degeneration has taken place. That this has been recognized is clear in the many attempts made, even in our time, to instil into men's minds the "back-to-nature" idea. These have been definite efforts to make man a more natural being than he has become through the centuries of development from the savage state, culminating in this era of scientific achievement in which we live. This is also an era which has necessitated the appearance of the psychologist and the psychiatrist, who must endeavour to help man to undo so much of what he has done to himself and to enable him to understand himself. In brief, man's adaptability to the changes he himself has introduced has not kept pace with those changes.

Still clearer proof of the recognition of the unsatisfactory

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state of man in his mental, nervous, and muscular debility can be seen in the remedies designed to bring about improvement. Among the best known are physical culture, deep breathing, and relaxation.

Physical culture may be described as the attempt to remedy the ills arising from artificial conditions. Bodily defects must result from the disuse and misuse of muscles and energies formerly employed in the natural state to provide a means of livelihood. The remedy is to exercise these muscles and energies for given periods every day in the hope that they will be restored to their natural functions. You have no doubt tried this and given it up. There is no co-ordination with resulting conflict and strife. Some benefits do accrue if the exercises are persisted in, but sooner or later, according to Alexander, other defects must gradually develop which finally outweigh whatever good originally resulted.

Deep breathing is a development from the physical-culture idea. It is the recognition that strenuous exercise may result in new and greater evils than those previously existing. Deep breathing, however, does not go to the root of the matter, which is the eradication of defects. This fact has been recognized by the compilers of the new *Syllabus for Physical Education*, which has recently been issued. In that book occurs the following passage: "No mention is made in this syllabus of what is known as breathing exercises. In Ling's gymnastics, breathing exercises were given a fixed place in the gymnastic lesson. In the light of the latest physiological researches, however, this has been proved wrong."

Relaxation also failed. Practically every person when instructed or asked to relax collapses—that is, there is a general relaxation of muscles, the fact being ignored that many muscles were intended by nature to be tensed and others were intended to be more or less relaxed. If relaxation is persisted in there follows a lowering of vitality which is felt when regular duties are taken up again, and the old troubles reappear in a worse form.

The reason for the one-sidedness of these views has been the general acceptance of the idea that man is body, mind, and soul. More generally, the human being is classified as consisting of two parts—body and mind. Undoubtedly, in his original state man was a combination of both, a unity. Both aspects of his life worked together—in other words, they were co-ordinated. During his transition from savagery to civilization, man's use and development of the so-called mental side proceeded proportionately at a much greater rate than his use and development of the so-called physical side. As new forms of life developed there was relatively less demand on the so-called physical and more on the so-called mental side. This resulted in a lessening in the co-ordination between the two, which reached its peak in this present age, which we ourselves describe as a "complex life." This false distinction between body and mind is almost universal, and is an idea which must be rejected, so that we recognize man not as a being with two sides, physical and mental, but as a complete entity—a psycho-physical organism. This is a conception which requires recognition in practice by educationists more than anyone else, so that we cease to consider our task to be the development of the child's mental side, and realize instead that we are concerned not with the mental aspect and the physical aspect separately, but with a psycho-physical organism.

How, then, is this co-ordination to be achieved? How is the deterioration in the so-called physical side to be arrested and an improvement brought about? The deterioration has taken place mainly in our manner of use of ourselves in those habitual movements and actions which are subconsciously controlled, the way in which we use ourselves when we sit, stand, walk, and speak, for example. Subconscious control is failing us. To improve the position we must turn to a conscious control of our manner of use. This does not mean the specific control which we usually conceive of when we wish to move a muscle voluntarily, but implies the value and use of a conscious guidance and control applied constantly

in all spheres where the psycho-physical organism is concerned. Conscious control is dependent, first and foremost, upon the prevention of wrong habits of use, what Alexander calls inhibition, and second, upon the realization and understanding of the methods or means-whereby by which an improvement may be brought about.

To illustrate this conception, I wish to refer to the manner-of-use employed by children when writing. We are all familiar with the bent backs, twisted bodies and legs, excruciatingly bent fingers, and eyes too near to the books which are to be seen in the great majority of children when they set about the business of writing. None of us like this. A few try to improve the positions of the children, realizing that a manner of use such as this can be nothing but harmful. Watch your class when next you give the order to write, and you will see a clear example of end-gaining. The child's object or end is to write, and immediately each one literally grabs a pen and begins, inevitably adopting that wrong manner of use which all of us will admit is harmful. Why does this wrong manner of use persist? Because no child ever stops to think of the means whereby the act of writing should be performed. He has never been taught to think about it, and, in his endeavour to end-gain, has adopted any means-whereby, in practically every case, a wrong one. You cannot change that manner of use by saying, "Do this instead of that," because the same habitual use will take place in an endeavour to end-gain. The manner of use is wrong. End-gaining comes before the means-whereby. This conception is very fully examined and explained by F. M. Alexander in his book *The Universal Constant in Living*, in which he discusses the means-whereby necessary to bring about an improvement. The first condition is that of withholding action of non-doing—that is, to refuse to end-gain. To achieve this, however, we fail if we employ a *direct* means-whereby. Alexander emphasizes that to prevent misdirection an *indirect* means-whereby must be employed.

"Non-doing," says Alexander, "is not a form of passivity,

but an act of inhibition which comes into play when we refuse to give consent to certain activity in response to a given stimulus and thus prevent ourselves from sending those messages which would ordinarily bring about the habitual reaction resulting in the doing within the self of what we no longer wish to do." We have to learn that on receipt of a stimulus to activity, we must make a decision not to give consent to do anything in response, for this "doing" would simply mean the projection of the habitual responses which result in a wrong manner of use. If the old messages are inhibited, the old response will not be used, and it is then possible to substitute a new means-whereby for the carrying out of the action. This is the meaning and implication of inhibition.

If anything is done wrongly by children, the chief means employed by teachers to put it right is to tell them what to do instead. Thus, to improve the writing position, children are told to hold the pen in a certain way and to sit in a certain way. Now, the one thing that *is* certain is that the children will not use the right way told them by the teacher, because that right way will feel wrong. After all, people never do what they feel to be wrong when they are trying to be right. Furthermore, every child interprets the instructions given to him in terms of his own personal sensory experience. That experience is naturally different in every child.

The most obvious and common way in which man has failed to adapt himself to changing conditions is in this matter of sensory experience. Our sensory appreciation has become unreliable. This is easily seen, for you, as teachers, will know how often a child, when told to do a certain thing, will do it incorrectly. You will find this most common in actions which have to be performed with the hands—the method of holding a pen, for example. The teacher explains and demonstrates, and yet most of the children do a simple thing wrongly, to the great exasperation and irritation of the teacher. Are such children deliberately doing it wrongly? Surely not, for remember, people never do what they *feel* to be wrong when they are trying to be

right. This is the point teachers must realize: those children *think* they are doing what they were told to do, and they feel they are doing it in the right way. Their sensory appreciation is at fault. I have asked many adults to do such an apparently simple thing as to put the head forward and up. Not one I have asked has been able to do it, but almost every one of them actually put the head back. All of them considered they had done what they had been asked to do, and to them it *felt* as if they had done the correct thing. This unreliable sensory appreciation results in our acceptance of certain ways of doing things because they *feel* right, and they feel right because we have always done them in those ways. An adult expressed his opinion to me very firmly that the natural way for a book in which one is writing to be placed is for it to be inclined to the left of the body at an angle of more than 45 degrees. He maintained this because it felt right to him, and it felt right because he had always placed his book in that way.

Two facts of great importance arise from this. The first is the universal confusion between the habitual and the natural or right way. So many people persist in saying that a manner of doing something is natural because for them it has become the habitual manner, and because it is habitual it is, therefore, right—an argument which, of course, will not hold water. The other fact is that it is impossible to do a thing in the right way when it has always been done in the wrong way, because the right way has never been experienced. One must actually feel or experience the right way before one can perform it or even recognize that the old way is wrong. “Do as you are told” is a command frequently on teachers’ lips. The child holds his pen wrongly, and the teacher insists that he hold it as he was told to do. How can he, until he has *experienced*, not merely heard, how to do it? How can he, until he learns to inhibit the habitual response to the command, until he learns to stop “doing” and to think of the means-whereby? I can think of nothing more important for teachers to realize and appreciate than these

facts, (a) that sensory experience is unreliable, and (b) that we cannot do a thing in the right way until we have actually experienced that right way.

What, then, can teachers do? Not very much until they know more about the matter of manner of use and its constant influence for good or ill, until they have some practical experience of inhibition—and the substitution of means—whereby for end-gaining—and of the part played by the primary control. Here it is necessary to say that the Alexander technique cannot be properly understood and its implications fully realized merely by listening to a talk or by reading Alexander's books. You must experience at least this much, your own wrong manner of use, your own unreliable sensory appreciation, and your own tendency to end-gain. This much is possible for those who are sufficiently interested to acquire some preliminary knowledge of the principles underlying the Technique, for they can be given a practical demonstration on themselves which will make the meaning of these three things I have just mentioned much clearer.

Man, know thyself. You cannot take out the mote from your brother's eye until you have first removed the beam from your own eye. It behoves us, therefore, to know ourselves, our own defects and failings, our own bad manner of use, and the consequent influence for ill on all our functioning; to know how to bring about an improvement in ourselves. Knowing ourselves, we shall find it necessary for us to learn to know the children we deal with—not to know them in the way we usually mean, but to know them as we ought to know ourselves. Then will come understanding of the working of the psycho-physical organism, and with that understanding will come the will and ability to help these children that they may live more abundantly.