

FOR THE VICTIMS OF OUR CULTURE:

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

by JUDITH LEIBOWITZ

The Alexander Technique has been widely taught for almost seventy years, yet it is only within the last three years that it has become well known in this country, even to the point of some popularity. Although, for example, performing artists have always been among the Technique's most enthusiastic students, only very recently has it been employed as part of actor-training programs in several American theatre companies. Alexander teachers have taught at the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco (William Ball, artistic director, is a former Alexander student), the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., and the American Shakespeare Festival in Connecticut. Actors and acting teachers have discovered that it is essential to the actor that he find his own "neutral," or correct alignment, in moving and standing. When his "neutral" becomes an organic part of his functioning, he can then rediscover and perform any deviations (character movements) from that correct base without endangering his own body. At the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, Kristin Linklater, a leading teacher of voice training for actors and herself a student of the Technique, included its use in her daily

classes when she was conducting her teacher-training program in a project sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation.

But there is a history that has preceded this recent interest, a history that began in Australia, moved to England, and later came to America. Around 1890, in Australia, an actor named F. Matthias Alexander developed the method out of a need to deal with a personal problem. He suffered from a recurring loss of voice, a serious problem for any actor. There seemed to be no organic cause for his predicament. After a great deal of self-study in a three-way mirror, he discovered that his loss of voice was related to a backward and downward pressing movement of his head. It was, he experienced, a pressure at the base of the skull that preceded the act of speaking. By inhibiting this head-neck action, he found that he could deal with his problem successfully. More than this, he realized that the inhibiting action effected a beneficial redistribution of tension throughout his body. Out of this self-experimentation, Alexander discovered a mechanism for integrated movement based on a particular poise of the head on the spine. He observed that any interference with this poise or balance results in tension, malalignment of the body, and malcoordination in movement. On the other hand, the ability to maintain this poise in movement allows for a release of physical tensions, improved alignment, and muscular coordination, as well as an improvement in body mechanics.

Alexander described the way in which a person deals with his body, both in movement and at rest, as "the use of the self." His discoveries about his own use of self led to the development of an organized technique for the control and change of habit. Using this technique, one can consciously erase what was formerly automatic, habitual use, and, just as consciously, replace that habit with a better one until the new way itself becomes automatic. His discovery of a body-mechanics problem due to habit patterns and his formulation of an approach to solve that problem represent F. Matthias Alexander's contribution to the field of psychophysical education.

We are, Alexander believed, physical victims of our culture. Modern technology has produced enormous complexes of shapes and tasks for our benefit. Yet, to take only one example, hundreds of variations upon the shape of the chair have been produced, many differing enormously in terms of how one must sit in them. Indeed, **we**, not the chair, have made the compromise. We have agreed to adjust our bodies to the dictates of chairs; only rarely do we find a chair that in its design has con- tracted to fulfill the requirements of the human body. In such ways have we permitted the forms and products of our cul- ture to change our body alignments in order to satisfy **their** structural requirements. We have accustomed ourselves to ha- bitual modes of use that are literally disfiguring. Alexander felt that man must now catch up with his culture, and the way to do that is to learn (or relearn) consciously the proper use of his body. The mechanisms for this use exist in our bodies, but they are dormant, buried by the layers of uncon- scious habits. His technique offered the instruments of the awakening process.

Learned responses to movement develop a "set" of unconscious preparations in the body. This set varies for each individual as well as for each movement. Habitual movements continually performed in the same way are each person's set. The dancer, the actor, and the musician, for example, each performs his special skill with established, personal patterns of movement. These are unconscious habits which often may involve undue muscular tension. It is this tension that can cause head-spine malalignment and can prevent free, natural use of the body. Superimposed on the basic and faulty habit pattern are all the particular techniques the artist must learn in order to perform his craft. Consequently, instead of a physical ease and comfort while performing, the artist may experience only excessive ten- sion, pain, and bodily distortion. In this way, unfortunately, habitual misuse of the body can lead to artistic failure.

We may accumulate these problem-making, habitual movement

patterns very early and very young. The first grader, trying very hard to write neatly and correctly, learning to hold the pencil (itself a difficult feat of coordination for many a six-year-old), may very well be working **too** hard. Concentrating with all his might, his shoulders may hunch up, his face may tighten into a frown, his fingers, hand, arm, and whole body may tense to the point of distortion from the effort of working at his task. That six-year-old may be establishing a set associated with the act of writing that will accompany him into adulthood, when the act itself is no longer a problem, but easy to the point of being automatic. But the original and basic neuromuscular responses established when he was learning to write are also automatic. Each time he picks up pencil or pen, the same old reflex ac- tion occurs. It is in ways like this that we develop patterns of use, all more or less distorting and tension producing. As we add to our repertory of accomplishments in life, we build upon the existing repertory of habits. Movement is unconsciously interpreted by the kinesthetic sense in terms of past experience. Unconsciously it judges and utilizes or discards past patterns of motion.

The dance student entering the studio for his class has already established movement habits which will affect his dancing. If he is excessively swaybacked, for example, he will unconscio- usly perform all his exercises in his characteristic swaybacked way, thus intensifying the condition, possibly to the point of ex- treme pain. If, as another example, he characteristically raises his arms by lifting the shoulders while simultaneously both pressing his head down on his neck and exaggerating the arch of his middle back, he will **always, reflexively**, raise his arms in the same way. If asked to correct this, he may be able to raise his arms while leaving his shoulders down, but at the price of great tension in his neck and rigidity in his torso. Consequently, because of the tremendous tension and rigid- ity involved, he might find himself in worse condition than be- fore the "correction." It is important to understand that any activity that is learned with excessive tension always will be carried out with excessive tension, and that any change predi- cated on tension can lead only to more tension.

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. Even after a detailed verbal description of both the misuse and the correction, the student, while trying to effect the change, will revert automatically at the critical moment to his habitual pattern. He will move in a way that "feels right," simply because he knows no other way.

Clearly, words are not enough. The student must be able to recognize what he is changing and be able to transform what was unconscious into consciousness and thus make it subject to change. Repeated kinesthetic experiences of the new use will lead to a knowledge of specific goals as well as specific methods of attaining those goals.

Characteristically, the would-be Alexander student has a physical problem, usually serious enough so that the person must acknowledge that it is a problem, an obstacle to his functioning in his career, specifically, or in his life in general. In the preliminary interview or meeting, the teacher usually makes his assessment of the essential faulty patterns of motor behavior. In his first formal encounter with the teacher, the Alexander student is required to make a conscious decision to do **nothing**. The teacher then presents him with a series of verbal directions which the student repeats to himself. These directions describe what should take place in the body during the movement. The student does not perform these directions, but attempts to inhibit his habitual response. While the student repeats these instructions, the teacher helps him to create the kinesthetic actuality of these verbal messages by leading him through such familiar activities as bending, sitting, standing, and stretching. As the student becomes more advanced he will be escorted through more specialized movement. At all times during these movements, the teacher guides the student's head into the proper poise on the tip of the spine. In this way the student experiences the sensations in movement associated with this particular head-neck relationship. He begins consciously to recognize the improved body mechanics associated with this poise of the head, as well as the dynamic balance of his body in movement and at rest.

With repetition the student becomes aware of his faulty habits. The repeated experience of the new use creates an internal guide, a kinesthetic standard against which he now can measure himself. He has, in fact, experienced his goal; he knows where he is going and what he must do to arrive there. Only when the student has felt and recognized in his own body the correct usage can he feel and know the incorrect. The inner guide, sensitized by training and practice, becomes an accurate informant. The student learns to deal with himself objectively and totally. He discovers that he must not fragment his body into separate, would-be autonomous parts. He also discovers that he can no longer permit himself the philosophical luxury of separating his mind from his body. Even more than this, he begins to realize that he cannot think of himself as an entity unconnected from his whole environment. He recognizes, finally, that each part functions only within, and in relation to, the totality, and that an organism exists only on the basis of a multiple interconnectedness. As the first lesson in this idea of interdependency, the student discovers the relationship between his head and his neck. Without losing this particular focus, his awareness is expanded to include the connections that comprise the entirety of himself. He is prepared then to recognize the way in which he as a total individual interacts with his environment.

The inner guide, so carefully developed in class, can become an organic mode of perception, perhaps like a radar system that **knows** it is a highly sensitive instrument. A man, however, is not a radar system. Most of us have developed over the years a faulty, inefficient, and often painful pattern of habitual, reflexive behavior. The Alexander Technique, through use of a wide range of experience that encompasses the kinesthetic, conceptual, visual, and structural, offers a way to recognize and exchange these habits for more useful and efficient ones. It is a method that can lead to self-knowledge, and it is perhaps here that any comparison between that complex and mortal organism called Man and the radar system happily becomes irrelevant.