

## Alexander Technique in the Natural Medicine Magazine July 2016

Written by MARIËLLE RENSSSEN marieller@iafrica.com

**‘From early childhood onward we make many decisions about how to be and how to live. These decisions shape the habits of our bodies as well as our minds. The Alexander Technique’s in-depth approach helps us to move out of unwanted habits and back into choice.’ Mary Cox, psychotherapist, UK.**

The essence of the Alexander Technique lies in awareness of the postural relationship between the head, neck and back so that this natural state of balance brings about movement with minimal effort and allows for general poise and ease.

### HOW DID IT START?

In Australia in the 1890s, Tasmanian-born Frederick Matthias Alexander, a promising young actor whose career was being threatened by voice problems, resorted to self-analysis as medical doctors could not identify the cause of his increased hoarseness during performances. Observing himself before a series of mirrors, he noted that as he projected his voice he would pull back his head, tightening the area around his larynx (which contains the vocal chords). By experimenting, he saw that if he stopped pulling his head back, the quality of his voice improved and the former tightness disappeared. He persisted in reinforcing the new way of holding his body with the result that his voice problems completely disappeared. His self-confidence increased and he felt healthier than ever. He realised that good vocal control relied on this balance between the head, neck and spine, which then translated into natural balance throughout the rest of his body. It prompted him to observe his posture in relation to all his activities for nine years.

Alexander shared his technique with others and after 1894 turned to teaching fulltime in his practices in Melbourne, then Sydney. In 1904 he took his expertise to London, where he practised till his death in 1955. While in London, Alexander’s work was endorsed by respected doctors and even scientists, including neurophysiologist and Nobel prize-winner Sir Charles Sherrington, as it correlated with the latest new studies in neurology and physiology.

He established a three-year teacher training course in 1931. Three years after his death, graduates in his training methods founded the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) in London so that his work could continue. Today the Alexander Technique is taught at all major drama, music and dance colleges in the UK. Many countries worldwide are affiliated to the London-based STAT, including South Africa, which has two training schools for teachers of the Alexander Technique.

### WHAT DOES IT ACHIEVE?

Alexander recognised the importance of breathing naturally and efficiently during voice training, so his teachings focused on the respiratory system; he called it ‘respiratory re-education’. He also saw that the voice and breathing were an integral part of the body’s entire coordination pattern. Students found that an improvement in their respiratory functions led to physical relief in other areas of the body.

**Alexander’s methods teach us to consciously experience natural movements without unnecessary tension –** like those of a child, but to do them with intention and awareness. At birth, a baby’s nervous system is already programmed with specific patterns of coordination that are unrestricted and efficient. However, as that child grows older, his lifestyle or postural habits, hunching over a school desk or computer, for example, are subconsciously modified and become ingrained movement patterns. We all tend to take shortcuts, not using the body as it was designed to move. Such habits can negatively affect our coordination, which

influences overall health, including breathing, posture, and movement, as well as our attitudes. At the same time we increase the amount of tension we hold in our bodies.

Alexander perceived that through continued misuse of the body these new coordination patterns become such a habit that they begin to feel 'right' to us. Therefore, even when we start to experience physical restriction in a specific area, we're unable to judge what posture changes would be appropriate to ease the pain or tension because our starting point from what feels 'right' is a misperception and, in fact, a point of misalignment.

### **'Primary control' and the 'use of the self'**

Through Alexander's approach we're made aware of how each movement *feels* and how it's influenced by our human nature. This helps us 'unlearn' long-term habits and re-educates us to move more easily and more efficiently, the way nature originally intended. He taught that thought drives activity – nerve communication between the brain and the body's muscular systems brings about movement; this applies to conscious and unconscious thought. He spoke of 'primary control', which he said 'depends on a certain use of the head and neck in relation to the use of the rest of the body . . . enabling us to use ourselves in the right way.' This primary control refers to that single impulse that initiates muscle movement in the body – no motion takes place without it. In conjunction with this, Alexander talked of 'the use of the self' – by becoming fully aware of a habitual pattern, we have the *choice* to consciously change it.

### **WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?**

A one-on-one session with a qualified teacher usually lasts half to three-quarters of an hour. A combination of gentle hands-on guidance and verbal communication heightens your awareness of those habits that cause unnecessary tension. Your teacher also addresses individual needs. After a brief discussion on your personal history and any health or postural issues, she or he helps you to recognise in a more conscious way how you stand, sit and walk, and how this 'poor use', in Alexander's words, leads to poor coordination that produces symptoms such as neck, shoulder and backache, hypertension, headaches, depression and many other conditions.

No physical manipulation or bodywork technique is involved. Removal of clothing is unnecessary, although loose-fitting, nonrestrictive clothes do help. While you lie on a firm surface or massage table, the teacher makes very soft, gentle adjustments to your body and limbs to relax muscles, release joints and lengthen the spine. She may gently lift your arm, lightly lengthening and rotating it to ease tension before replacing it, then softly adjust your hip, or your leg. All the while, she talks to you, communicating what she senses, inviting you to experience the various sensations, any feelings of ease or release. To you her adjustments may feel intensely subtle; many people are initially disbelieving that the gentle manoeuvres could have any effect – only to be astonished a day or two later at the physical benefits.

Your teacher will take you through the simplest daily activities – breathing, bending, sitting, standing, lifting objects and walking – making you intensely aware of what the position of *ease* feels like versus the position of *effort* or *restriction*. FM Alexander is famous for saying, 'Let the neck be free to let the head be forward and up so that the back can lengthen and widen.'

Your teacher, by allowing you to experience a restrictive, then a non-restrictive movement, helps you to recognise that precise instant of sliding into a 'bad' habit, to which you learn to consciously say 'No' and willingly correct it. You develop the ability to change ingrained habits on a long-term basis, and this also permeates into other areas of your life. Thus Alexander Technique is a self-empowering method based on a teacher/student relationship rather than a therapist/client one.

## **COMMITMENT**

A firm commitment to the process is needed to practise new ways of moving so that you recognise and accept the healthier option. Some teachers recommend several sessions a week to begin with as constant repetition of the new, constructive way helps you to recognise the old pattern and reinforce the new one. With practice and perseverance, students find breathing freer and easier, their balance and coordination much improved, and energy levels much higher. Remember that muscular tension in one area forces the muscles to compensate in another; an unbalanced posture uses more energy and leads eventually to physical misalignment.

## **WHO IT IS GOOD FOR**

The technique puts you in touch with how your body feels and teaches you to listen to your body. Through a better-coordinated posture, sportspeople like athletes, swimmers and horse riders improve their flexibility, efficiency of movement and timing. Musicians, dancers and actors experience a freer way of breathing, which helps with stage fright, and they learn to enhance how they use their bodies. Children of all ages learn to apply principles of the Alexander Technique in such a way that they're far less over-reactive, leading to a greater sense of well-being.

The Alexander Technique aids a variety of conditions including: asthma, respiratory disorders, joint and coordination problems (osteo- and rheumatoid arthritis), repetitive strain injury, chronic pain, illness or disabilities, muscular stress, tension or poor posture, preparation for and support during pregnancy/childbirth, back pain and sciatica.

'Instead of feeling one's body to be an aggregation of ill-fitting parts full of friction and dead weights pulling this way and that . . . the body becomes a coordinated and living whole, composed of well-fitting and truly articulated parts.' Sir Stafford Cripps, former Chancellor of the Exchequer, UK.

For further information contact:

**SASTAT South African Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique**

[alexanderteachers@gmail.com](mailto:alexanderteachers@gmail.com)