

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

*“You can’t do something you don’t know
if you keep on doing what you do know.” --- F.M. Alexander*

We were born to enjoy movement. But somewhere along the way, we often lose that natural, inborn buoyancy and ease of moving, and the fun stops. The Alexander Technique is a practical solution for changing poor habits of coordination and “use of the self.” ***It is not a relaxation technique***, nor is it a body therapy that is performed on a passive recipient. It is a partnership designed to re-educate the student in everyday movements like sitting, standing, and walking. The basic principles you will learn in your lessons can then be applied to every other activity you engage in.

The Technique will raise your awareness of how you react to stressful stimuli. You will then learn to be at choice in how you respond. You can expect to notice the inextricable psychological and emotional links to the body and movement. As your movement changes, so too, will your emotional life. Your emotional responses will offer valuable insight into the efficacy of your choices.

The History

Frederick Matthias Alexander was an Australian actor of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He began to lose his voice in the middle of performances. Doctors ordered vocal rest, and the problem temporarily disappeared...until the next performance, when the cycle would start over. So debilitating were these bouts of hoarseness and loss of voice, that Alexander was close to ending the career he loved more than anything. But his career was saved and a technique born with one thought. He reasoned that since there was no illness present, and he recovered when he stopped speaking, *it must be something he was doing to himself* that interfered with the normal functioning of his voice.

Over the next ten years, Alexander engaged in a thorough program of self-observation that led to the creation of his technique. As he observed himself in a mirror, he noticed that when he began to speak, he would pull his head back and down, grip the floor with his toes, and constrict his abdominal muscles and rib-cage, thus limiting his breathing. He concluded that this habit of pulling down and using far more effort than necessary, was adding force and weight to his vocal musculature that they could not withstand. So he set about to change his habit. Thus was born the technique that bears his name.

Key Concepts of the Alexander Technique

Psycho-physical Connection: We now take for granted the concept that the mind and the body are in fact one complex system, not separate from one another, but inextricably linked. However, the concept was revolutionary about a hundred years ago when Alexander introduced his principles. And truth be told,

we still tend not to acknowledge or utilize the fact that what we think has a concomitant physiological response.

In your Alexander lessons, you will have the opportunity to learn to use less effort in all your activities by allowing your thoughts to guide your actions. Alexander called this “constructive conscious control of the individual,” and wrote a book with that title.

You will notice that in the Alexander Technique, we often do not refer to “the body” or “the mind,” but rather to “the self.” This language seeks to reinforce the truth that to regard the two as separate is an artificial differentiation used to focus on how *our perception* of the self may be most noticeable.

Direction: When we direct our thought to guide the natural forward-and-up movement of the self toward something of interest to us, we experience the engagement of the anti-gravity reflexes that enable us to stand up. When we employ too much effort, (as we do in all-too-familiar high stress states), we in fact add weight and force to gravity, thus making it that much more difficult to move than necessary. Our perception that activities require a lot of effort is misguided.

The notion of direction challenges the messages many of us were taught to “stand up straight,” “pull your shoulders back,” “lift up!” All of these states are effortful, rigid, and unnatural. Direction is a much more subtle state that balances necessary muscle tonus with ease.

You will likely experience a light, easy feeling after even your first Alexander lesson. And over time, this state will become your habit.

Inhibition: Alexander’s principle of inhibition is simple but brilliant. It simply means *not* responding to stimuli in a way that interferes with your well-being and natural buoyant use of the self.

You will learn to identify what your negative habits of use are (such as clenching your jaw, tightening your abdominals, etc.), and then will begin to practice inhibiting those responses.

End-gaining: It is noteworthy that Alexander was working at the time of the Industrial Revolution, when the push toward mechanization and high rates of productivity first began to take a human toll. End-gaining refers to the hyper-focus on achieving a goal (our “end”), at the expense of noticing the “means whereby” we achieve it.

Books and Resources

Available online from AmSAT books at www.alexandertech.org:

By F.M. Alexander, founder of the Alexander Technique:

The Use of the Self

Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual

Man's Supreme Inheritance

The Universal Constant in Living

The Alexander Technique: A Skill For Life, Pedro de Alcantara

www.pedrodealcantara.com - The AT for musicians

Body Learning, by Michael Gelb

Freedom to Change: The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique, by Frank Pierce Jones

The American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique:

www.alexandertech.org

Worldwide consortium of Alexander teachers:

www.alexandertechniqueworld.com

Articles online about Dance and the Alexander Technique:

www.alexandertechnique.com.au/dance.html

www.alexandertechniquedance.net