

# ALEXANDER'S QUEST: A Means to Healing

Meredith Page

## The shape of things to come

My grandfather was the owner of an old Italian violin. The first time I took it out of its case and held it in my hands I was struck by how beautiful it was. The instrument had an ingenious shape, an organic wholeness about it, reminiscent of a woman's torso. Elegant as it was, there was not one part of it that had no function. The back had been carved from a single piece of pine and when I ran my hands over it it resonated, hummed, felt alive. The wood was eggshell thin, so fine that it ought to have been transparent. It felt as if it were breathing. That is why, I mused, it could concentrate sound waves inside itself and amplify them to a single tone of such poignance. No other musical device can enthuse or lament with such immediacy as this instrument can. Who thought up the design, I wondered? I knew Stradivarius had perfected it but how did its first designers know where to bulge the wood or place the curves to produce that inimitable sound? Plato taught that all things exist as ideas or wishes before they take form. That is the way things are created. Perhaps, I reflected, Love, driven to taking form, had created a most exquisite means of giving voice to itself in inspiring us to fashion the violin. What wish then, I wonder, inspired the formation of the human body, and for what purpose?

## The 'knowing' body

I first realized how fluid and dynamic the living body is many years ago when I discovered that, contrary to my beliefs at the time, the cramped posture I had developed in my adolescence could be changed: that my body *knew* how to accomplish this change by itself. I was alone at the time and at a loss to know what to do with my life. The best word I can find to describe my state is 'down'. Down in spirit, in mind and body. Life, it seemed, was only tolerable if I braced myself against it. In this state of gracelessness I put myself in the hands of a teacher of the Alexander Technique on the advice of a friend. My first lesson began with a simple experiment. The teacher placed her hands lightly on my neck and with my volition, gently freed my head from the fixed position in which I unwittingly held it. No one could have prepared me for what followed. Though I was standing quite still, inside me, a bigger shift took place. My neck suddenly lengthened by itself. I grew taller and the ground pushed tangibly back up at my feet in support. As I 'came down to earth', a sense of weightlessness suffused my limbs. My breathing became effortless and with it came the overwhelming experience that I was finally in one piece: connected, whole. The bout of coughing which ensued as my chest expelled fluid that I didn't know had been sitting in the bottom of my lungs, did little to diminish the sensation of expansion which filled me. In twenty minutes, twenty years of accumulated anxiety which had pulled my body down and in on itself, dissolved. When I left the room

I was no longer 'down'. I was 'up' , almost two inches taller, having regained the height I had lost.

### **Our supreme inheritance**

There had been no imposition, no force. Somehow this person was able to transmit a stimulus which my body understood ahead of of my mind – which came lumbering home much later. In an event which seemed more alchemical than physiological, my fragmented system had realigned itself in a matter of minutes by attuning to my teacher's more integrated and ordered body. I felt like a violin which had just been tuned by a master. As I continued over the following months to have more lessons, layers of chronic tension that had built up in my musculature melted away. At the same time, I experienced a re-ordering of my emotional and mental make-up. In those months, as my stature expanded, I jettisoned my oldest fears, became bold, no longer fled from challenges and could even stay free enough under pressure to play the piano and talk in public, things I had never been able to do. Instead of fighting one another, my mind, emotions and body were becoming aligned and co-ordinated. Could it be that they were not separate entities? I went home and read Alexander's book *Man's Supreme Inheritance* and decided there and then to train to become a teacher of his technique.

### **A lamentable state**

I looked back and saw that I had lived, since my adolescence, at the purely material level. By that I mean that I was totally identified with my *physical* body. In my view I was nothing but matter, enlivened by electrical impulses and held together by chemistry, an accident of nature dominated by the second law of thermodynamics. When I looked to the future, I saw that my health would inevitably decline as the matter of which I was made, slowly wore out. It was the *quantity* of my life, how much of it was left, and not the *quality* of it which bothered me. As far as I was concerned, my brain produced my consciousness. I lived 'in my head', as they say, preferring my constructs, beliefs and opinions to direct experience. The word soul was an abstraction to which I could not relate. My mind was hungry for facts and proof of things, especially ways of fighting off any threats to my precarious existence. My emotions were chiefly concerned with alerting me to what made me feel good and what did not. Deep inside, I was perpetually terrified. Not surprising then that as many people do, I tried to keep my body, this 'traitor' which would eventually let me down, far away from me. Not surprising that without my attention, it became less animated, began to wilt and with it, all sense of meaning from my life.

### **'Blueprint' for wholeness**

It was in this state of captivity, as a prisoner of my own beliefs, that I had presented myself for my first Alexander lesson having exhausted most known means of

help. In hindsight I can say that I could never have found my way through this dilemma with my intellect or from books. My mind was not to be the organ for this order of transformation. It would have to involve my body. In that first lesson I had an undeniable *experience* of being lifted beyond the patterns of thinking, feeling and doing already encoded in my manner of being. That experience had put me in touch with an 'intelligence' existing within me, 'beyond' or 'behind' the body I had fossilized with my habits, waiting for me to embody it like the wish embodied in the violin. That this part of myself, hidden beyond my mind and emotions, deep within my body, had become conscious, amounted to nothing less than a religious experience in the truest sense of the word, *religio*, meaning 'reconnection with the source'. It filled me with wonder and turned my perception of reality inside out.

### **Ask the right questions**

Frederick Matthias Alexander was the man who had made it all possible. His now famous research was initiated by the same sort of dilemma in which I had found myself. The loss of his voice had threatened to put an end to the vocation he loved. Restoring it was the only thing which would deliver a sense of purpose and meaning to his life. He was faced with an existential problem for which there was no known solution. He began with a hypothesis: Something he was doing while speaking was causing his voice to fail. He reasoned that if he could discover what it was, and stopped doing it, he might solve his problem.

Though not a trained scientist, he embarked on his research with a rigorous and methodical determination. Nobel Laureate, Professor Nico Tinbergen, in his oration made a special dedication to Alexander, calling his enterprise 'an epic of medical research and practice - all the more remarkable for being carried out by a man without medical training'. Indeed, Alexander did not come to his enquiry with any preconceived ideas or beliefs. He came to it with a great deal of innate intelligence and a burning need. Most importantly, when his experiments failed, he did not give up. He stuck to his goal for a decade until he finally arrived at a solution. His initial aim of restoring his voice was accomplished, but with it, came much more. In that process, he had undergone a transformation: he had taken an evolutionary step.

### **What did he find?**

The first key to Alexander's regeneration lay in his discovery that keeping his head freely balanced on the top of his spine was crucial to the co-ordination of his body as a whole. He noticed that the quality of this head-neck-body relationship 'determined' the quality of co-ordination of his entire organism. When the head-neck-body relationship was distorted and fixed, so was the rest of him. Once he had developed enough awareness to keep his neck free however, his body followed suit. Whereas it had been 'torn apart' as groups of strained muscles clashed haphazardly with one another in

uncoordinated discord, like an orchestra without a conductor, there was now, so it seemed, a guiding principle to which his body was responding, bringing itself into a new state of buoyant, co-ordinated interconnectedness. He had discovered what he called 'the primary control', the organizing principle, the conductor of the orchestra, which when consciously and properly employed, ultimately re-integrated his fragmented body. He soon realized that the state of disorder which had produced his throat complaint was none other than his own habitual 'way of being'. The comfortable, the easy, the familiar ways, would have to be put aside or else things would remain the way they were and more than likely, worsen over time.

### **How did he do it?**

He trained himself to say 'no' to following the path of least resistance and, instead, to use his power of choice to withhold consent from his habitual actions. The budding first principle of his technique arrived when he learned that he could *inhibit* : successfully employ his faculty of conscious decision-making to keep his habits in check. Habitual patterns are like riverbeds. As soon as it rains the water tends to flow into the well-worn pathways. So it is with our vital energy. If we do not inhibit for a moment before acting, our energy will inevitably flow into the habitual pathway and we are then committed to endless repetition of the habit thereby entrenching it and leaving ourselves no other option. When Alexander actively refused to allow this to happen, he effectively starved his habitual patterns and soon found he could make better use of the energy that became available. This led him to a second vital principle. He would learn to use the energy economically, to *direct* it in such a way that it increased his options and brought him the best returns. He saw that an action, like a story, has a beginning, a middle and an end. He would be able to use the energy more efficiently if he kept the whole action in mind and not just put all his effort into the beginning. He learned to pay attention to the purpose of the action, to establish clearly for himself where he wanted to end up, as you might aim at a target. You do not then have to push the bullet. You maintain your connection with the target and squeeze the trigger. The energy release sends the bullet to where you have aimed it. When he took command in this way, he found that his body could expand, rather than contract, in relationship with the force of gravity bringing about an ease, even a delight, in movement. Then he became aware of a new kind of tension. The tension that comes into play between where one is and where one wishes to be. He discovered that he could harness this creative tension, instead of excessive muscular tension, to perform his actions. This meant that the mere intent to stand up from a chair was enough to bring him to his feet without the *usual* strain provided he did not force the movement and provided he kept the whole action in mind. The more he used his will in this way, the more it became available to him and it had an extraordinary influence on his physical body. He practised these principles of inhibiting his patterns and directing his energy until they became second nature to him. As he embodied them, a

more elegant, co-ordinated use of his body *as a whole* replaced the restricting, fragmenting habitual use of which his throat problem had been a symptom.

### **A self-organizing principle**

Unlike the machines with which the human body has so often been compared, his animate body had been able to regenerate itself. He discovered that as long as he used himself consciously, he was connecting to an interior force or 'knowing' which *informed* and *animated* his physical body, aligning and releasing it into its full buoyancy, poise and vitality. His throat problem disappeared once his postural mechanisms were allowed to operate without interference. His colleagues, intrigued by the transformation they saw happening in him, soon inundated him with requests for help. He began to experiment with conveying his discovery to them. He quickly saw that it was not possible to teach it intellectually, by speaking about it. Instead, he discovered that his hands could impart the experience directly. When he consciously employed this Self-organizing principle, it became active in the people he was touching because it was already there, dormant under their habitual patterns. That, in essence, is how the technique he evolved 'works'. It gives us a means to employ this principle at will, to conduct our own orchestra, if we so choose. That is why we should not call the technique a therapy as such. It is a means to development. That it has a therapeutic effect is secondary to the fact that it is first and foremost a *means of increasing consciousness* and that it is this overall expansion of consciousness which is responsible for the benefits that practising the technique undoubtedly brings to our well-being. In that sense the teacher is an 'infector', a conduit for the transmission of a certain experience. A teacher is not 'doing' something to the person being taught in the sense that a therapist would.

### **Where does it bring us?**

It is worth mentioning that successful musical conductors lead very long and productive lives, functioning professionally often well into their eighties or even nineties at which time, they are usually regarded to be at their best. Most of them are healthy, vital and purposeful people. They invariably display physical grace and excellent posture. Whilst many of them have gravitated to the Alexander Technique before today I surmise that they may be amongst the few of us who do not need it because in pursuing their chosen vocation they have already embodied the same principles. I am now a practitioner of this technique myself and while, from the way I have described it, you could draw the conclusion that there is something mystical about it, it is from the pure common sense of it that I draw the most inspiration.

My first lesson began with what is now fashionably called an 'epiphany' and it led me on an odyssey through the worlds of alternative therapies and spiritual disciplines in search for the source of what for me had been nothing short of a miracle. My twenty-six years of practical teaching have eroded my desire to find *the* answer. I am satisfied that

the Technique has given me a means to maintain good functioning and to live my life consciously.

### **The indispensable condition**

I received three gifts from my training to become a teacher of Alexander's technique. The first was the realisation that my body is my greatest ally, my best medicine. The second was discipline: learning the value of 'sticking to a decision against the habit of life'. This was made largely possible by the third gift: the awareness that discomfort is meaningful. It is in the body that we experience sensations, the most compelling of which, I suppose, being the experience of pain. It was misery, mental, emotional and physical, that led me to take my first lesson. Worse than these however, was the existential dread which had driven me out of my body. My attitude towards pain changed during the course of my training when I realized that it is not always a sign that something is wrong. During those three years I had rather a lot of it. It slowly dawned on me that the physical transformations taking place in me were always preceded by pain, just as my choice to embrace the Alexander Technique had been. Yet I must stress that at no time was any force applied to my body. This pain was cyclical and a part of the natural process in which my body was, apparently of its own volition, participating. As my muscle fibres gradually regained their length and my stature decompressed, it hurt. I often had the image of a butterfly emerging cramped from its chrysalis and wondered if it experiences this kind of pain as its wings un-crush themselves from their crumpled state. This pain was not only physical either. As each 'piece' of my body 'fell into place' a parallel process was taking place on the emotional level and in my thinking. There were bouts of emotional pain when fear, anger and other tempestuous feelings would surface whenever I experienced muscular release. I speculated at the time that I had somehow frozen these emotions in my tissues and as the tissues 'thawed' the feelings became conscious as my body became more 'transparent'. At the thinking level, I encountered many a mental stalemate as my beliefs and constructs about the nature of things clashed with my new experiences, leaving me confused and uncertain. The habitual pathways of my mind were being erased and re-routed so it seemed.

### **Reorganization**

After the bouts of physical pain, emotional upheaval and mental confusion however, an expansion and new found freedom at every level followed. My body became buoyant, energized. Many of my withheld emotions evaporated. My powers of concentration grew. With each step in this process, I also noticed, that my awareness in general had increased. My learning capacity grew, I became emotionally more secure and learned new physical skills with an inspiring ease. I was learning how to learn, becoming more conscious altogether and this expansion was connected with the slow dismantling of the habits or patterns which had previously dominated my manner of living. My

favourite quip at the time was 'this work puts you together while it's tearing you apart'. It has been that way ever since. The only phrase I can find to describe what had happened in me, was 'a total self-re-organization', clumsy as that sounds. It was then that I became incontrovertibly aware of the scope and meaning of the word 'whole' in the expression, 'the whole person'. I realized how often I had misunderstood the function of pain within that whole. I had judged all pain: physical, emotional and mental discomfort, to mean that something was wrong. It never occurred to me it could also be a sign that something, for once, was very right. I had always been so desperate to alleviate it that I failed to perceive that in doing that I was actually avoiding healing. Consciousness comes only at the point of discomfort, someone had once said.

### **The clue**

As individuals we are reflections of the milieu in which we have grown. In a culture such as ours, where we have the tendency, still, to perceive ourselves as material entities, separate from one another and the environment in which we exist, avoiding pain intensely, all we can do is to use the mind alone to try to control our biology and stretch our biographies, trying to come to terms with 'life without meaning'. Behind our awesome technological achievements though, lies a deep dread. If we were to take this dread seriously and really admit it I believe it would propel us into a very different experience of life, that it could show us the way. It is visible in the tendency of many of us to lock our bodies into a holding pattern and then vacate them, fleeing to the false sanctuary of our minds. Habitual pulling back of the head, Alexander's original problem, I believe, is the most obvious bodily sign of this. It is endemic today, particularly in the posture of the so called affluent peoples and worryingly, in our children. In this pattern, the head goes its own way, pulling back from life, splitting off from the part of us that experiences. We complete the picture by fixing our ribcages. That is how we 'keep control' in the presence of intimacy, not to mention, pain, suffering, fury, dread and despair. We retreat from them, withdrawing our attention from what we hate to feel by cramping our breathing. We 'go out of our bodies' to close ourselves off from what irks us but in so doing, because the Self is an undivided unity, we throw the baby out with the bath water, artificially closing ourselves off from our inner resources of compassion, empathy, courage and healing. Then the connection to our vitality is also closed. I believe this withdrawal of our attention from our cell tissue is tantamount to closing off its nourishment. To stay healthy, our bodies need us in them otherwise there is no integrity anymore and everything literally and figuratively, falls apart. To put it another way, consciousness, body awareness, is an indispensable prerequisite for genuine well-being.

### **The unexpected boon**

We can not hope to redress this lamentable condition by treating the body, the emotions or the mind in isolation from one another. We need to acknowledge the reality of our wholeness and step beyond the beliefs which keep us suffering unnecessarily. I believe Alexander intuited this dire need and left us a remarkable legacy. He did not give us anything we do not already have. Nor could he fulfil all of our expectations. But, in acknowledging the fact of 'psycho-physical unity' and attempting to restore it, he did give us something we did not expect. The unexpected epiphany I myself had, precipitated not just the falling into place of the bits and pieces of my body, an improvement in endocrine functioning and the learning of complex new skills, but my first conscious experience of our wondrous natural self-organizing capacity and the intense yearning to connect to the source of the hope I had tasted and to share it with everyone else in my life.

**'Anyone can do as I did if...'**

Alexander said a curious thing: 'Anyone can do as I did, if he will do as I did, but...' Thirty years have passed since my first brush with his technique and they have been as unpredictable as they have been enthralling. For all of us, the process of healing is not different from development, the process of becoming who we actually are. It begins with the acknowledgement that we are in misery in one form or another, perhaps the greatest of all being, that in spite of our technological achievements and an abundance of material quantity, we find the quality of life still eluding us. When we wish for that which makes life worth living to animate us once more, we wish no less for the return of the prodigal body through which, like the violin, we may give of ourselves to the world. That is the way to the existential satisfaction for which we yearn. If we make the choice to follow this deepest of wishes we could, as Alexander did, reverse the decline brought about by living out of habit and instead unfold into the unfettered expansion and creativeness that is our supreme inheritance . . . into the *conscious* union of body and soul T.S. Eliot called 'a condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.' If, unlike Alexander, we allow ourselves to be daunted by that cost, it would pay us to remember: by the time we are forty, we have the face we deserve. Our biography becomes our biology.

*For of the soul, the body form doth take  
For soul is form and doth the body make*      **Edmund Spenser**

This article is dedicated to Dilys Carrington in whose hands I first discovered  
how wonderful it is to have a body...  
And to Walter Carrington who, having had the discipline to do as Alexander did,  
has done so much for so many...

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