

# THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE AS A FOUNDATION FOR SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

by Brian Tracey

*Enlightenment is not some special state of mind.  
The state you are in when you have 'right posture'  
is itself Enlightenment.*

These are the words of Suzuki Roshi, the foremost interpreter of Zen for the West, speaking to a group of close students some 25 years ago.

Clearly Suzuki Roshi is not referring to some mechanically correct body position when he speaks of 'posture'. He is actually professing to his students his profound confidence in the unity of mind and body. His message is, that though they may not appear identical on every level, mind and body are intimately and inextricably interwoven and interdependent aspects of the unified whole.

We find ourselves however in a culture and historical era where 'mind' has come to be regarded as separate from and senior to 'body', and although the mind is quite fascinated by such concepts as mind\body unity it is rarely willing to surrender its superior position.

Historically we have some of the great minds of our civilization to thank for this predicament. St. Augustine, embellishing Plato's ideas of eight centuries earlier, argued eloquently for a dogma of salvation through transcendence of the 'profane' body. Christian theology prior to this was basically holistic (holy) and the Old Testament is abundant with lines like; "they stiffened their necks so they would not hear the words of the Lord" (Jeremiah 17:23) suggesting an understanding of 'bodymind' unity. The philosophical surgery excising mind from body was completed in the seventeenth century by Rene Descartes. His proclamation, "I think, therefore I am", made a telling epitaph on the tombstone of wholebeing.

## Alexander's Discovery

Late last century F.M. Alexander, himself a product of this polarized culture, developed certain physical symptoms which were to propel him on a journey of discovery and teaching spanning over 50 years. In the process of seeking a cure for the recurrent voice loss that had plagued his acting career, he began to realize that his problems: "were not primarily due to defects in the use and associated functioning of the parts of the organism most immediately concerned, but were the indirect result of defects in my general use of myself which were constantly lowering the standard of my general

functioning, and harmfully influencing the musculature of the whole organism."

In recognizing the "close connection between the processes of use and functioning which worked from the whole to the part" F.M. Alexander was meeting head on the cultural conviction, by now so finely woven into the fabric of society as to be virtually invisible, that held mind to be separate from body. He now realized that it was this belief itself, held within his body as a complex of neuro-muscular patterns, which was causing his health problems.

After a long journey of self-experimentation, he succeeded in distilling this insight into a practical method, of exquisite simplicity, to gradually restore the integrity of his being. The changes in his health and demeanor were apparent to acquaintances whose requests for assistance inspired him to find a way to teach his discoveries to others.

Many benefited from his teaching and as his work progressed, and was refracted through the perceptions of certain of his pupils, notably Aldous Huxley, G.B.Shaw and the American educator/philosopher John Dewey, Alexander came to appreciate more fully its philosophical resonances.

However this recognition never tempted him into abstraction in his teaching methods. His teaching

continued to involve the individual's moment-by-moment awareness and choice. He taught his pupils how to notice the moment when habitual attitudes or movement patterns interfered with the natural coordination (which he called 'use') of mind and body. He showed them how over-concern with results, which he called 'ends', caused them to abandon good 'use' in favor of unconscious inappropriate effort.

He taught verbally and with refined manual guidance how to suspend the habitual way of performing an activity, be it breathing, threading a needle or conducting an orchestra, maintaining the primacy of the dynamic relationship between head neck and back. By suspending the habitual reaction to a given stimulus, a process that Alexander called 'inhibition', his pupils learned how to hold the intentional pursuit of a goal within a matrix of constructive means. Gradually, under these favorable conditions, good 'use' was found to re-establish itself.

T.S.Eliot describes this process in the almost scriptural lines:

I say to you: make perfect your will.  
I say: take no thought of the harvest,  
but only of proper sowing.

We've heard the likes of this before though, only to have it become just another nice idea to amuse the mind. What Alexander discovered was a method of

teaching which, by addressing the mind and body as a unified whole, made it more than an idea. He found he could communicate the principals through a refined manual guidance, informed by his own 'use'.

He attended to his own 'means', suspending any tendency to directly pursue his goal of helping his pupil: he 'made perfect' his 'will', and took 'no thought of the 'harvest'.

He entrusted the harvest to something he on occasion referred to as "the unknown origin", or in characteristically less mystical terms, "the total pattern of response".

To see that this 'total pattern' is more than some remote ideal state, one needs only to observe a healthy infant. While absorbed in exploring a fascinating new world an infant's whole system is available – eyes, neck, back, limbs a concerted whole.

There's no fixing of the breathing no undue contraction of neck and back muscles. The habits that result in poor use have not yet become fixed in the infant's psychomotor system, so that although her motor skills are relatively undeveloped, she is naturally balanced and coordinated.

How is our natural good use lost?

F.M. Alexander wrote about the causes of our diminished 'use' mainly from a sociological perspective regarding it as a by-product of the civilizing process itself.. For a more specific understanding it is helpful to turn to contemporary psychology. Theories on ego formation explain the dynamics involved in the formation of core habits that eventually fragment us and separate us from our inherent coordination of mind and body.

It could be said that the ego is the sum of our habits constellated into a cohesive entity, which we soon come to regard as our essential selves. But for all its attractions the ego really isn't the essence of who we are. It is a construct designed during our earliest years to defend us against perceived threat, or compensate for perceived lack.

The following example of the process of ego formation is related by Hameed Almaas, the founder of the Diamond Approach: "a baby may begin to experience a lack of proximity with her mother. When the satisfying symbiotic union with mother disappears for any reason, the resultant pain may be too shattering for the baby to bear. Eventually she learns not to feel the loss and emptiness. She learns to withdraw energy from those parts of her neuro-muscular system which are feeling pain. She reduces her consciousness of these areas and replaces the experience of somatic aliveness with all kinds of emotions beliefs and fantasies. Over time these become encapsulated in the unconscious,

showing up in later life as attitudes, mannerisms and traits."

In this cameo of early childhood, Almaas is describing a highly simplified version of the kinds of circumstances nurturing certain aspects of ego formation and the neuro-muscular complexes by which it becomes established.

Eventually of course the ego becomes enormously intricate, rich and self-sustaining, holding court in every aspect of our lives. It is to be respected nevertheless, not only because it was our saviour in the overwhelming innocence of our early lives, but more importantly because, as Almaas and others have suggested, it is redolent with memories of our essence, of our selves as wholebeings.

## Ego on the Spiritual Path

The ego structures are of course especially vigilant in our spiritual endeavors which are to a great extent about entering and passing through the very domain from which the ego was designed to protect us – the domain of our wounded innocence. In this respect our woundedness itself is the gateway to our essential nature.

So, to bring life to our wholebeing, it is necessary to dis-identify from the carefully constructed fantasy life of the ego and experience the wounded condition of our neuromuscular system. It is

through the experience of our true condition that deep healing can begin, and we can enter the spiritual path with compassion and respect for ego which is now to become our servant/ally – no longer savior/master. This is rarely an easy alliance.

As usual with new relationships trust grows slowly. The old habits die hard. Ego is there with us on our meditation cushion, frightening us and seducing us. Urging us to try harder! It even insists that we must eliminate our ego in the quest for enlightenment – anything to distract us from this precious moment. Anything to 'protect' us from the simple authenticity of 'right posture'.

In Spiritual work we are engaged in the process of increasing our capacity to perceive, tolerate, accept and eventually celebrate the energy in our systems, and the system at large. The more we can stabilize ourselves in a spacious and grounded condition, the less reactive our ego structures will be, and the more we will be open to the potential of the present moment. F.M. Alexander's work and his gift to us is a completely practical technique to encourage these qualities within everyday life.

Teachers trained in this technique can guide us to embody an open moment energized by the fine tension between our urge to act and our willingness to simply allow. Gradually a new relationship develops between 'doing' and 'being '. It is such a

relationship Suzuki Roshi is describing as, "the state you are in when you have 'right posture'".

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