

Section 1 General Introduction

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE © Meredith Page

Frederick Matthias Alexander's Technique is among the finest exports ever to leave Australia. It is now a household name in many countries. It is fully incorporated in the curricula of the world's leading music and drama schools. Many famous and successful people use it and testify to its efficacy.

So what is the Technique developed by the Australian pioneer, Frederick Matthias Alexander?

People sometimes ask if the Alexander Technique is like yoga or acupuncture or if it is alternative medicine or the derivative of an eastern discipline. *It is none of these.* It was developed by a thorough and practical man who had no exposure to eastern philosophies and long before alternative medicine became popular. The purpose of the Technique he developed was not to treat specific symptoms but to address a general pattern he called, '[misuse](#)': a fundamental problem which no other approach acknowledges.

Alexander's Technique is used to relieve and prevent many kinds of back, neck and limb pain, headaches and other musculo-skeletal problems; to reduce tension and enhance performance in the pursuit of complex skills such as the playing of musical instruments, singing, stage performance or sport; to remove strain from activities that are repetitive and strenuous; to manage stress and to restore freedom of movement after accidents or chronic illness. It has even been used to train fighter pilots to enable them to keep calm and make clear decisions under extreme pressure. But its implications are far greater, which you will appreciate after exploring this web site.

In 1973, when Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen received the Nobel Prize for Physiology/Medicine he dedicated his acceptance speech to [Frederick Matthias Alexander](#), declaring, 'Alexander's story of perceptiveness, of intelligence, and of persistence, shown by a man without medical training, is one of the true epics of medical research and practice.'

Before you read on, we will ask you to 'think outside the square' – to put aside any preconceived ideas you may have. Alexander was obliged to do that when he was confronted with a serious loss of voice which failed to respond to medical treatment and threatened to end his promising acting career. He was forced to consider the matter from a fresh perspective. The challenge led him on an odyssey during which he made some remarkable discoveries about human functioning and these later formed the basis of the Technique which bears his name. To understand his discoveries, we need to leave certain presumptions aside and consider some basic facts.

The anti-gravity response

The human organism has always existed in a constant gravitational field. Consequently, our neuro-muscular-skeletal system developed a means of neutralizing the constant force of gravity which we will call the 'anti-gravity responses'. Alexander discovered that his own anti-gravity responses were not working properly. He managed to restore his voice not by relying on conventional therapies but by learning how to get his anti-gravity responses working again. In short, he developed a technique for restoring to full working order our inbuilt mechanisms for expanding in response to the gravitational pull. This does not imply that he learned how to fly. . . he learned how to optimize the working of his [postural mechanisms](#). The unforeseen benefits this brought to his functioning are the reason his Technique soon gained its wonderful reputation.

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts

A living human being is altogether more astonishing and complex than the inanimate remains which are studied on the dissecting table. Our organism consists of 'parts' (mind, emotions, nervous and circulatory systems, skeleton, musculature and organs), but we are far more than a collection of flesh and bones enlivened by chemistry. We also possess consciousness and with it, we can change the sum of the parts because consciousness can be used to exert considerable influence on the organism as a whole. The purpose of the technique developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander is to increase that consciousness. This is what enables us to achieve optimal functioning of the 'psycho-physical' whole we are. It is no abstract dream. It is pure common sense. This informative material has been written and organized to show you why and to give you the opportunity to discover how the Alexander Technique works, what makes it unique and the many ways in which it can benefit everyone.

Section 2 Misuse

Misuse - The Challenge © Meredith Page

The demands of modern life often require our attention to be on things other than our selves. Cars, televisions and computers have made us more sedentary. The television and computer, in particular, lure our attention into a virtual world where we gradually lose awareness of our posture, our breathing and our relationship to the ground. When we lose awareness in this way, we are at the mercy of gravity, which does what it has done since time immemorial: pulls us downwards. Because we are so distracted, 'not home', so to speak, we fail to notice what is happening. Whether we slump or tense, we subject ourselves to great strain and the intricate [postural mechanisms](#) with which we are equipped to counteract the downward pull of gravity cease to operate properly. To add to our woes, we become accustomed to this distortion as though it were normal and comfortable. Our weight-bearing joints begin to wear under the load, our respiratory function becomes impaired and there are consequences for the quality of our emotional and mental well-being. Alexander's term for this catalogue of errors was [misuse](#).

F.M. Alexander perceived that, for better or worse, the way we use our organism as a whole, directly affects our functioning.

When we slump, for example, joints are compressed, producing wear and tear of our joint surfaces and continual pressure on our intervertebral discs. Our spinal curves become exaggerated and the tone of our back muscles changes. There is increased muscular tension and pressure within the abdomen which can constrict blood flow to the organs. This in turn can lead to pooling of fluids in our lower limbs and the development of varicose veins, haemorrhoids, spastic colon and related disorders. The musculature of the ribcage tends to tighten restricting our breathing and preventing an adequate supply of oxygen for physical, emotional and mental functioning.

When we get used to living in a body like this, we waste our energy merely feeding the unnecessary tension. Our [posture](#) suffers and vitality is diminished – with consequences for our mental and emotional health. Down in body, means emotionally down, and down in spirit.

Misuse is endemic in the modern Western world – as are depression and the need for knee and hip replacement. Is this mere coincidence? We need to understand that when we use ourselves poorly, we are harming our general functioning. Misuse begins early but is not recognized. It has become so commonplace that we barely notice it. It is inadvertently encouraged as part of a result-oriented lifestyle which tends to regard the body as a machine, something separate from the rest of us. The devastating effects of misuse show clearly after decades, in midlife and old age, but they are becoming increasingly more evident in the young.

Indivisible unity

After a decade of pragmatic research, long before the notion of an holistic approach to wellbeing became popularised, Alexander was convinced that the integrity crucial to our wellbeing can only be restored by addressing the psycho-physical whole and that treating wayward parts in isolation does nothing to improve, even exacerbates, the underlying condition. To that effect he said that to classify and deal with human ills and shortcomings as purely 'physical' or purely 'mental' has not been and will not be successful. All endeavours to improve the human condition must be founded upon the indivisible unity of the human organism.

When we consider that he was able to bring about a radical improvement in his own general functioning, including the restoration of his vocal and respiratory mechanisms to full working order, it might pay us to heed his advice and to be immensely grateful that he went on to develop a means of facilitating the restoration of psycho-physical integrity in others.

Section 3 Posture and Poise

Good Posture or Good Use?

For many people, the Alexander Technique is closely associated with cultivating good posture. However the term posture is inadequate to convey what it is the Alexander Technique aims to improve. When it comes to posture, it is generally assumed that more uprightness is better and crooked is bad. There is relative truth in this. But striving for uprightness only brings about misuse in another guise: the straining sergeant-major on parade, the rigid achiever, the dancer or model 'bent' on maintaining a certain 'look', for example. Posture is merely a reflection of our use in general in so far as bad use produces bad posture. Correspondingly, when we use ourselves well, our posture gets better. 'Posture' is something static concerning the shape or mishape of the physical body. 'Use' on the other hand is something dynamic, fluid and alive, and concerns the organism as a whole.

The Alexander Technique therefore does not address faulty posture directly – although restoring proper functioning of the postural mechanisms is part of it – it is concerned with promoting a state of *poise* as a basis for all activity: at rest as well as in motion, mentally and emotionally as well as bodily. When poise is regained, posture takes care of itself. When we exercise, or do yoga, or meditate, or play sport or musical instruments without poise, we are only ironing in the harmful effects of the way we have become accustomed to doing things.

Poise - Unstable equilibrium © Meredith Page

We rarely display natural grace in daily life but it can still sometimes be seen on the sports field, in the concert hall, on the stage and in very young children. Poise, a condition of relaxed alertness, is connected with whole-ness and if we maintain it all the time we feel lighter and move more easily instead of feeling heavy and fragmented.

One definition of poise is 'unstable equilibrium', which seems like a paradox. But tightrope walkers have to remain loose and unstable to maintain balance. The moment they stiffen, they interfere with the reflexes they must use to keep them hovering on the rope. The same natural laws apply for we less adventurous humans sitting safely at ground level behind our computers or at the dinner table. The difference is that when we slump and stiffen, losing our unstable equilibrium in sitting, we do not fall crashing to the ground, we just fall further in on ourselves, unaware that this is doing its own kind of damage.

Section 4 Postural Mechanisms

The Postural Mechanisms © Meredith Page

Those fortunate enough to have seen the Cirque du Soleil, will have seen a young Chinese woman skip effortlessly up an audaciously steep and long diagonal tightrope carrying a parasol. Her superb balance and ease of movement gave a fine example of the postural mechanisms at work. They can also be seen in happy children living and playing at ease in their light little bodies.

We are concerned here with a few basic facts which can help us to understand how the postural mechanisms work, why they often don't and how they can be facilitated.

The stretch reflexes

The workings of muscle are intricate and complex and we need to understand certain of its significant properties. When stretched, for example, muscle contracts in proportion to the degree of stretch applied. Like a piece of elastic, the further it is stretched, the more it tenses. If you tie one end of a piece of tough elastic to a door handle and the other end to the door frame next to it and then open the door to stretch the elastic, the harder you pull the door, the harder the tension in the elastic will pull the door back towards its original position. That, very roughly, is how a muscle works.

It is this characteristic activity of skeletal muscle that holds us together. African women walking with heavy pitchers on their heads not only maintain their height, but their bodies actually lengthen in response to the extra weight. In the same way, the force of gravity weights us against the resistance of the earth. The skeletal musculature as a whole responds reflexively to this stimulus with a complex interplay of tension and release, constantly adapting to buoy us *up*. Astronauts living in space for any length of time lose muscle tone and can hardly walk when they get back to earth. Without gravity to stimulate the stretch reflexes, their skeletal muscles atrophy. It is the stretch reflexes which keep earthbound humans buoyant and elegantly supported all the time.

Muscle fibre

Our skeletal muscles are made of fibres which have differentiated into two main types according to their function within the whole of the musculature. These are known as *red (slow-twitch)* fibres and *white (fast-twitch)* fibres.

Red slow-twitch fibres obtain energy by utilizing glucose in the presence of oxygen and that enables them to develop force slowly and to maintain contractions longer. They are relatively *non-fatiguable*.

White fast-twitch fibres are capable of developing greater force and faster contraction and are *fatiguable*. They obtain energy rapidly by utilizing glucose without oxygen. They tire quickly because the utilized glucose produces exhaust in the form of lactic acid. This by-product gives us aching muscles after strenuous exercise. The more fit we become, the more quickly the blood flow removes the lactic acid from our muscles and the less pain we suffer.

Red and white muscle

We are equipped with three types of skeletal muscles. We are held together by *postural* muscles, moved by *mover* muscles and exert power with *strength* muscles. What distinguishes these types of muscle is the proportion of red slow-twitch or white fast-twitch fibres they contain.

Being muscle

The deeper postural muscles which hold us up and hold us together could be called 'being' muscles, because their purpose is to hold us in a state of being, whether or not we are engaging in specific movement. We need these muscles just to be – to sit on a chair or to lie down – to hold us together while we are not doing anything in particular. 'Being' muscles are made predominantly of red slow-twitch fibres. While their high proportion of red slow-twitch fibres enables them to work without tiring, they need constant, gentle activity to maintain their red fibre content. While they are holding us together, the deep core postural muscles of the trunk are also able to sense our orientation to the gravitational field and supply the central nervous system with sensory input which in turn enables it to co-ordinate appropriate responses from the rest of the musculature. A next layer of postural muscles stabilizes us. These supporting muscles act as anchors for the mover muscles of the limbs.

Doing Muscle

The 'doing' muscles on the other hand, provide instant, active power - to run us, lift us, save us from danger and enable us to engage with the world. Muscles which we use for strength are composed predominantly of white fast-twitch fibres for short bursts of intense activity and they fatigue quickly. These get bigger and tougher, the more they are used. Muscles we use for movement are composed of both red slow-twitch and white fast-twitch fibres. The mover muscles need repeated (phasic) exercise to maintain their red slow-twitch fibre content. If, however, they are subjected to high levels of prolonged activity, they tend to lose some of their red slow-twitch fibre content because their white fast-twitch fibres are being recruited more often.

Holding an upright military stance requires deliberate effort and the mere *thought* of having to exert effort will recruit more of the muscles' white fibres. When activity of this sort becomes habitual, the proportion of white fast-twitch fibres being used increases, changing the structural composition of the mover muscles, making them

more fatiguable. That is one of the many ways in which thought and habit can exert a direct influence on the matter of the body.

Some people are born with a preponderance of slow-twitch muscle and that makes them better at endurance sports. Those endowed with more fast-twitch muscle are better at sprinting. It is to build up fast-twitch strength muscle that some athletes, particularly those in the sprinting sports, take steroids.

<http://www.howstuffworks.com/muscle.htm>

Give-and-take

Whenever you decide to make a move – to stand, to walk, to lift something or to dance or play a musical instrument, the supporting (slow-twitch) muscles of your trunk and the prime-mover (fast-switch) muscles of your limbs and extremities combine in patterned responses to enact your decision. They are capable of an astonishing variety of actions. To do this, your muscles are paired into complementary groups, each group performing the opposite task of its counterpart. We have *flexors* for bending and *extensors* for straightening; *abductors* to lift our limbs away from our bodies and *adductors* to draw them in towards the body; *rotators* to twist our limbs in one direction and *anti-rotators* to twist them in the reverse direction, etc.

When one group is active it is called the *agonist* and its counterpart is called the *antagonist* and they must work in concert to move us gracefully and efficiently. They achieve this by working in what is known as a *positive antagonistic relationship*: a give-and-take arrangement in which every action of the agonists is balanced by a *release* of the antagonists. So when your bender muscles are active, your straighteners reciprocate by relaxing and vice versa.

When our use degenerates, what tends to happen is that unreliable sensing inclines us to apply indiscriminate force in performing our actions. Whether unscrewing a bottle top or hitting a tennis ball, our tendency is to mobilize the agonists and antagonists at the same time. The reciprocal relationship between the two gets out of kilter and we lose finesse in our movements. This can be seen in the musician who, under the pressure of performing, tenses the muscles of his neck, jaw, shoulders, buttocks and legs with less than desirable results for his wrists, hands and fingers. However, it is also something many of us do just standing up from a chair.

Chaos

When we slump while sitting and try to prop ourselves up with our arms leaning on the front of the seat or wait in a queue shifting our weight from one leg to the other to relieve the strain of standing, or brace our shoulders to hold ourselves upright, we are co-opting our fast-twitch muscle into performing the role of slow-twitch muscle. The rapid onset of tiredness demonstrates the inappropriate engagement of fatiguable muscle for these tasks. At the same time, the stabilizing and supportive slow-twitch muscles of our trunks, which should be holding us up, are weakened through lack of

use because their work has been taken over by the wrong muscles. Their function is also to supply the central nervous system with sensory input to provide it with information about our orientation in the gravitational field. The feedback they provide in their weakened state becomes distorted. The central nervous system, responding on the basis of their distorted feedback, 'thinks' they need help to hold us up and a vicious cycle is set up in which our tired mover and strength muscles try even harder to do just that. Gravity wins, our postural mechanisms lose and we end up with muscles in some parts doing too much work and muscles in other parts doing too little. In other words, our bodies no longer have a balanced distribution of muscle tonus. The excessive tension in the musculature as a whole then exerts undue pressure on ligaments and joints.

Muscle length

At its optimal length, muscle is in a poised state ready to contract fully when needed. When we resort to using the wrong muscles over and over, two things happen. Their fibres become chronically shortened and the muscles lose some of their contractile power. The musculature in general shortens, pulling us down and ruining our posture.

Remedial treatment for chronic muscle tension and joint problems in isolation, will not alter the underlying pattern of misuse that produced them. That pattern is not just a matter of muscles, tendons, ligaments, bones and joints. It is encoded in the entire psycho-physical network. Competitive people suffer from over-tense muscles because thought (mental attitude) and feeling (strong emotion) are translated into muscle tension. That is why it is said that by the age of forty we get the face and body we deserve.

Consciousness and muscle

One of the unfortunate legacies of the Age of Enlightenment is the mind-set introduced by Rene Descartes : "I think, therefore I am." The resultant 'Cartesian split' led to the valuing of 'mind' (more specifically, the *left* brain,) over 'body' emphasizing mental development and regarding the body as irrelevant. Nowhere is this more poignantly symbolized than in the bodies of school children being weighed down and damaged by schoolbags loaded with 'knowledge' in the form of heavy text books. Under the subtle influence of this mind-set we prefer to live 'in our heads'. Amongst the catalogue of disasters such an attitude generates is radical loss of body awareness. The operation of our postural mechanisms happens 'in the dark'. We do things on automatic pilot without registering how we are doing them, remaining unaware of muscular activity until something starts to hurt. The prematurely distorted bodies of book-toting school children is one example. Repetitive strain injury of the wrist, arm and shoulder incurred by computer operators using a mouse for hours at a time is another. Their attention is absorbed by what is happening on the screen while they make repeated demands on the fine mover muscles of the hand, forearm, upper arm and shoulder, without being aware of the feedback the fatiguing muscles are sending them. They just keep staring at the screen and manipulating the mouse, unaware that

their muscles are protesting. A mouse weighs next to nothing, yet it only takes a few hours of this 'careless' activity for the muscles of the hand, arm and shoulder to become strained.

This can happen because most muscle activity goes on outside our awareness. In the average person the conscious activity of the brain constitutes about one millionth of all brain activity. When our minds are busy in the virtual world of the computer screen or the television, we pay even less attention to what is happening in the rest of us.

The Alexander Technique aims to bring this sort of activity into our awareness, to make what was unconscious, conscious and to broaden our field of attention so that we can have a direct influence on what is happening and we can make changes. All it takes is a choice to be aware and to apply some basic bodily common sense and we could eliminate most repetitive strain injury along with our faulty posture.

The organs of balance

On either side of your skull, inside the bone which surrounds the inner part of your ears, is an ingenious little device known as a labyrinth. The labyrinths together constitute your *vestibular system*. Its proper functioning is essential for motor coordination and postural control.

The vestibular system enables your body to sense whether it is upright or lying down and whether it is standing still or moving. It is designed to detect the position and motion of your head in space. It has two components, the *otolithic organs* and the *semi-circular canals*.

The *otolithic organs* sense your orientation relative to gravity. They contain hair-like sensory nerve cells in various orientations. Attached to these are tiny chalk crystals . When you bend your head forwards, backwards or sideways, gravity pulls on those particular chalk crystals which are orientated towards it. The pulled chalk crystals stimulate the hair-cells to send signals to your brain to let it know which way your head is positioned in space.

The *semi-circular canals* sense the motion of your head through space. These are three tiny tubes shaped like the letter C. One lies flat and the other two sit vertically at right angles to it and to one another so they can register all three dimensions of space. Together they work like an elaborate spirit level constantly monitoring the shifting position of your head. They contain hair-like sensory nerve cells and fluid. When your head moves in a particular direction, the fluid lags behind because it resists change in motion and puts pressure on the hair-cells, stimulating them to send signals to your brain keeping it constantly informed as to which way your head has moved.

The coordination of the rest of your body depends on the information supplied by your vestibular system. (<http://www.howstuffworks.com/balance.htm>)

When the semi-circular canals are positioned correctly in relation to gravity, their basic orientation is such that the flat one at the bottom is horizontal to the ground with the other two being vertical. Dr T.D.M. Roberts, an expert on the physiology of the postural mechanisms, found that in over thirty different species of mammals which he studied, the head was poised in such a way that the bottom semi-circular canal was horizontal to the ground. However, when he studied modern humans, he found that for the most part, they carry their heads in such a way that the bottom canal is tilted at an angle to the ground. Interestingly, Roberts found that if he stimulated his human subjects to be alert, they brought their heads slightly forward and up, bringing the bottom canal back to horizontal and their posture responded accordingly.

The primary control

A century or so before Dr Roberts conducted his study, F.M. Alexander was busy studying his own misuse. One of his milestone discoveries was that a particular relationship of his head, neck and back to one another was integral to the optimal coordination of his whole body. He observed that his own head-neck-back relationship was disturbed. In particular, he noticed that undue tension in the muscles around his neck and the base of his skull was pulling his head back and down in relation to his spine. He noticed too that this break in integrity of the relationship of his head with the rest of his body had an adverse affect on his general posture as well as on his breathing and on the functioning of his voice.

The vestibular system described above is located on either side of the atlas joint where the skull pivots on the topmost spinal vertebra. It follows that constant interference with the poise of the head must affect the functioning of this sensory organ.

Because the head-neck-back relationship seemed to have such an effect on his body as a whole, Alexander called it the *primary control* and stated that good coordination and functioning could not be achieved unless it was working properly. It was his eventual success in being able *consciously* to release his head and neck from excessive tension, keeping his head poised freely on the top of his spine, that enabled him to move without strain. From that time, he began to enjoy a new quality of coordination, one hallmarked by lightness, ease and grace.

Science has not yet revealed all the secrets of neurophysical functioning, nor do we fully understand how the postural mechanisms work. What we do know, however, is that we can promote the efficiency of these mechanisms or we can ruin it. Thanks to Alexander's pioneering endeavours we know that a satisfactory head-neck-back relationship is essential for good coordination and we know how to improve it to promote what he called *good use of the self*.

Good use

The Alexander Technique promotes optimal muscle length and restores reliable sensory appreciation. You learn to allow gravity to activate your muscle systems, replacing the habit which imposes excessive strain on your body. No extra force is needed, for example, when standing up from a chair. Just bringing the body up against the pull of gravity is enough to activate the stretch reflexes so that the body lifts itself. To stiffen the neck or push hard with the thighs or brace the shoulders (which most of us do) is unnecessary and disrupts the natural mechanisms. This is like going uphill in a car and instead of allowing the engine to do the work, trying to push it from behind the steering wheel.

You can learn to trust and make use of your innate anti-gravity responses. You can release your muscles from habitual shortening and your joints from the grip of excessive tension. You can regain a balanced distribution of tension throughout your body and an integrated musculature. You can learn to carry your head in poise. You can change your basic patterns of misuse and engage with life, and its demands, without the likelihood of screwing yourself up or needing new hips by the time you are sixty. You can play a musical instrument or sport with freedom and accuracy without incurring repetitive strain injury. You can even sit behind the steering wheel of your car in peak hour traffic without losing your cool. All you need do is have a course of [Alexander Lessons](#).

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Section 5 Who was F.M. Alexander?

Who was F.M. Alexander? © Meredith Page

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in Wynyard, Tasmania in 1869. He was not a robust child but suffered from chronic respiratory problems. Though he had a passion for horses and became an excellent equestrian, he rejected the usual bush pursuits. He preferred reading and reciting Shakespeare in the quiet of his bedroom. Over time, he grew so accomplished at dramatic recitation that he decided to make a career of it. He first took on a clerical job in a tin mining company on Tasmania's west coast to earn sufficient funds to travel to Melbourne to become a professional recitationist. Once there, he acquired a fine reputation and before long was performing on stage in the prominent theatres of the day.

Alexander's success was clouded by the onset of hoarseness which intensified with the demands which performing in large theatres (before the advent of the microphone) made on his throat. It was when his voice failed halfway through a performance for the king and queen that he decided to consult a specialist. The problem was diagnosed as 'clergyman's throat'. He was advised to gargle frequently with saline solution and rest his voice before major performances. This treatment failed. Determined not to abandon his career, he decided that if the doctors could not help him, he would help himself.

The evolution of the Technique

He had an idea that something he was doing in the act of reciting was causing his voice to fail so he decided to observe himself in action to see if there was anything obviously wrong. He bought a mirror and watched himself reciting. To his amazement, he discovered that what he saw happening in the mirror was altogether different from what he thought and felt he was doing. In the effort to project and control his voice, he was contorting his body and his breathing. Each time he tried to speak, he pulled his head backwards, pushed his larynx towards his chest and sucked in air with a loud gasp. Until he saw these distortions in the mirror, he had been unaware of them but he readily saw that they amounted to misuse of his natural equipment. He soon drew a connection between this 'misuse' of himself and the failure of his voice which led to his assertion that *the way we use ourselves, directly affects our functioning*.

Next, he bought two more mirrors, placing them so he could watch himself from all angles. It was then that he realised that what he was seeing was a pattern, a total bodily response which was triggered the instant he acted on the desire to speak. He knew he would have to free himself of this habitual response if he was going to restore the full function of his voice. So he set about trying to eliminate the faults he observed.

Unreliable sensory appreciation

This proved unexpectedly difficult. He became confused when he tried to change what had become a strong habit, one to which he was attached, a way of using himself that *felt* right. He discovered that his way of judging the success of what he was doing was based on the way it felt and he was shocked to discover that this 'feeling' sense was unreliable.

Through his observations, Alexander began to understand that the faults in his use were being locked in by his unreliable sensory appreciation. He realised that all his attempts to carry out movements of any kind were prejudiced by this 'debauched kinaesthesia', as he called it, and that his unreliable kinaesthetic sense was misleading him. This perception raised a new demand. He would need to develop a reliable means of monitoring what was happening in his body: a raised consciousness.

It took him ten years to learn, step by step, how to dismantle the way he was using himself and to rebuild it from scratch. He left speaking alone at first and began by maintaining a broadened field of attention while he carried out the simplest acts (such as raising an arm.) He found that paying attention in this way liberated him from the dictates of his habit, giving him choice. It also enabled him to map out and formulate the process which led to the discovery of two vital principles which became the cornerstones of his technique.

Inhibition

He discovered that our ideas about action are a constant influence on the way we perform those actions – that there is a circular relationship between thought, feeling and action: the thought of an action constellates a particular muscular response which is set or programmed in by repetition. The set manifested as the pulling back of his head, the depressing of his larynx and a gasping for breath whenever he attempted to speak. By experimenting, he found that if he could succeed in preventing the tightening that pulled his head out of alignment, he could also prevent the other two features of the set. This alerted him to the primacy of the head-neck-trunk relationship in organizing the body as a whole - the *primary control*, as he called it. He realised that to improve his use, he would have to find a way to stop his habit of interfering with this primary relationship.

The key to this essential prevention lay not in trying to control his physical parts directly, but in exercising choice. He perceived that he needed to change his *idea* of the action in order to make changes to his habitual postural response to it. The only way to break the cycle between thought and action was to exercise *conscious control* over it. So he experimented with thinking about speaking while not allowing himself to do so. This broke the cycle. Once he had learned to suspend the action, he could stop relying on instinctive feeling for guidance. He could then experiment step by step with

allowing appropriate muscular responses to take place. He called this act of deliberate stopping, *inhibition*. *

At first the new sensory experience of stopping his habitual response was confusing. He was accustomed to being guided by feeling. He persisted – against his habit – with his new method of using conscious choices to make changes. He learned how to prevent the habitual interference with his natural head-neck relationship and to take conscious control of his movements to improve his use.

Direction

While he was experimenting with inhibition, Alexander discovered a second basic principle of good use. He saw that an action, like a story, has a beginning, a middle and an end. His instinctive tendency had always been to put the most energy into the beginning of an action in order to achieve the end, regardless of what he was doing to himself in order to achieve it. In his words, habit had led him to end-gain, to mis-direct his energy in pursuit of the result. Once he learned to inhibit his initial habitual response and delay the desire to achieve a result, he could set about *directing* his energy consciously by keeping the whole of the action in mind. He learned that he had been trying to get to the end of the story (the result he *thought* he wanted) and failing to pay attention to the middle section (the means by which he gained it).

Alexander realised that if he paid attention to the means, rather than focussing on the end, the result would come by itself. His goal was to speak without depressing his larynx which he could only do if he could speak without arousing his old pattern. He had to maintain awareness of several things at the same time. He had to suspend his automatic response to the intention to speak and he had to keep his neck free while deciding whether to proceed to speaking, or not to speak, or to do something else. He called this process *direction*. **

Non-doing

He found that directing his actions in this way enabled him to change his use for the better in everything he did. When he transposed this procedure to other activities such as standing up from a chair, he found that if he inhibited *trying* to stand up but maintained poise and *allowed* his head to lead the movement, he could rise effortlessly. This brought an unprecedented ease and sheer delight to movements which he had previously experienced as laborious and stiff.

It took time for him to learn to apply Inhibition and Direction all the time and to get used to the unfamiliarity of his new conscious use, but he relished the liberation it brought him and continued to apply his new method to all his activities. His voice was restored and the respiratory complaints that had plagued him all his life left him for good. He found himself enjoying increased vitality, wellbeing and an invigorating new sense of purpose.

The Breathing Man

His colleagues in the theatre noticed the changes in him and many of them began to consult him about performance problems such as stage-fright and gasping for air to project the voice. He became known in Australia as 'The Breathing Man'.

Several doctors persuaded him to go to London to introduce his discoveries to the medical establishment there. He gained considerable support from some of the leading medical men of the day. It was his earnest hope that his Technique would one day be incorporated in medical training, especially after he had come to the conclusion that: "The so-called 'mental' and 'physical' are not separate entities and for this reason, human ills and shortcomings cannot be classified as 'mental' or 'physical' and dealt with specifically as such. All training – whether it be educative or otherwise or whether its object be the prevention or elimination of defect, error or disease – must be based upon the indivisible unity of the human organism."

Alexander published his first book, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, in 1910. Within a short time, leading actors, musicians, writers and public figures were flocking to his door and he soon had a flourishing practice. Among the luminaries who consulted and learned from him were the playwright, Sir George Bernard Shaw, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps, the author, Aldous Huxley and the American philosopher of education, Professor John Dewey. Huxley introduced Alexander as a thinly disguised redemptive character in his novel *Eyeless in Giza* and enthusiastically endorsed Alexander's theory in his philosophical essay *Ends and Means*. John Dewey considered Alexander's work of great significance for education.

A second book, *Conscious Constructive Control of the Individual* was published in 1923

In 1931 Alexander established a three-year training course in London to train others to carry on the work after him. (During that decade Wilfred Barlow, Marjorie Barstow, Walter Carrington, Margaret Goldie, Patrick Macdonald, Peter Scott, Irene Tasker, Sir George Trevelyan, Dick and Elizabeth Walker and Erika Whittaker all graduated from the training course.)

A third book, *The Use of the Self* was published in 1932. During the Second World War, the 1940 blitz on London forced Alexander to leave for the United States where his brother, Albert Redden Alexander, taught the Technique in Boston. The finishing touches were put to a fourth book, *The Universal Constant in Living* in 1941.

At the end of the war Alexander returned to London to resume both his teaching practice and training course. Though he never returned to these shores, Alexander remained a staunch Australian, an enthusiastic race-goer, liberally quoting from Banjo Paterson and negotiating life with his own brand of pioneer spirit, dash and genius. He continued teaching 'the Work', as he called it, until the end of his life when he died in his sleep in his 87th year in 1955.

* A practical example of *inhibition* can be seen in the ability of exceptional tennis players to think on their feet and to change the course of the ball in a nanosecond, at will, rather than being compelled to slam it back defensively.

**The sport of archery demands this same faculty of *direction*. The archer does not have to push the arrow to the target. He must compose himself and maintain a certain field of attention which includes both his drawing of the arrow in the bowstring, his steadying of the bow and his aim on the distant target - all at the same time. At a certain moment there is a fusion of the archer's awareness with the distant target whose bullseye effectively draws the arrow to itself. The archer remains poised and, when ready, commands the tips of just two fingers to move a fraction of an inch to release the bowstring and the energy release sends the arrow effortlessly to the waiting bullseye. Should the archer strain or tense, he will break the connection and miss the target.

Section 6 Alexander Lessons

ALEXANDER LESSONS © Meredith Page

[F.M. Alexander](#) discovered that it is possible to employ one's powers of conscious choice to great advantage. Deciding what we will or will not consent to do gives us the freedom to respond appropriately to the stimulus of the environment. In our capacity for conscious choice we find our essential autonomy and humanity. This is the greatest benefit the Alexander Technique offers. Releasing more of our potential carries the human race forward and boosts our wellbeing. On the other hand, when we are bound by habit which curtails further development, we get intellectually, emotionally and physically stuck. That is why we cannot demand wellbeing as a right. We have to create it. Most people who endorse the Alexander Technique will verify that it produces unanticipated improvements which are not confined to the body. It makes life more fun.

Not treatment or therapy, but re-education

Specific complaints and problems are not the direct concern of the Alexander Teacher. You should not see yourself as the patient of an Alexander Teacher. You do not go to an Alexander Teacher for treatment, but to be a *pupil*, learning how to change the way you are using your whole Self [*sic*]. You will go through the same process of psycho-physical transformation that Alexander did. The difference is that in the hands of a skilled teacher, making the necessary changes takes only a fraction of the time it originally took Alexander. This is a complex learning process which addresses the psycho-physical whole: mind, feelings and body, which Alexander insisted comprise an indivisible unity.

The implications of indivisible unity

When Alexander first tried to show his colleagues what he had discovered, he tried instructing them verbally, explaining what he wanted them to do. He soon discovered that this did not work. They could not apply his instruction the way he intended them to because their habit of use got in the way. Because we are indivisible psycho-physical unities we cannot have a habit of body-use without that same habit being encoded in the rest of us. Our flesh and bones embody the habit that dominates our thinking and feeling. When we are down in spirit we become down in body...and vice versa.

The people Alexander was trying to help had little choice but to translate his instructions via the medium of their habitual thinking and the faulty sensory appreciation which accompanied it. For example, when Alexander told them to stay still, they clenched their muscles. When he told them not to try hard, they slumped. Whatever he asked them to do, they endeavoured to enact their idea of it and this enactment manifested as an instant muscular configuration. Alexander recognized

that preconceptions are not simply mental activities but are embedded in the fabric of our neuro-muscular systems. He realized that a broadened field of attention was needed to monitor these preconceptions and their influence. He saw that this field of attention must include an awareness of how our musculature is responding to our idea of performing an intended act. We need encompassing physical and mental awareness in order to change our habitual way of doing things.

Alexander saw that he would need to provide the awareness his subjects did not yet have, that he needed to give them an immediate experience of performing their actions in a new way. Instead of using words, he decided to make contact with his hands.

Non-doing

From that moment, his work took a new turn. He discovered that when he put his hands on people he could transmit the experience of his own improved psycho-physical use to them directly. Their bodies, unhindered by interfering thought, responded spontaneously to the contact. Alexander realized then that the vicious cycle imposed on the organism by habit could be broken by approaching the body directly - as if the body already knows how to organize itself, *if we would only allow it to do so*. What is required is that we learn to think differently. The psycho-physical re-education facilitated in Alexander lessons is centred not in learning how to do it, but in learning *not* to do, to get the faulty habit out of the way so that the right thing can happen. This is why the Technique cannot be learned from a book.

The Alexander Teacher

Your Alexander Teacher will have spent three years on an approved training course undergoing an intense psycho-physical re-education. He/she will need to achieve a high standard of use in order to be able to impart the principles of Alexander's Technique. Central to the training is the use of the hands in receiving information from a pupil's body, transmitting a certain quality of experience and facilitating muscular release. A skilled teacher's hands are light and inviting and do not force or manipulate. After a lesson people feel 'put together', lighter, freer, more poised and spatially aware.

The changes which occur can be profound and can lead to discomfort temporarily as the musculature reorganizes itself. This reorganizing process is sometimes experienced as a mild and diffuse ache in various places where the redistribution of muscle tonus is most keenly felt such as between the shoulder blades or along the tops of the shoulders. There may also be shifts in kinaesthetic sensitivity which can be mildly disorientating. If this does occur, there is nothing to be concerned about. These are simply the affects of the body's response to change and are to be welcomed. They will soon pass.

Primary Control

During this process the gentle physical contact your teacher uses imparts a stimulus which supports you while your own anti-gravity responses are not working optimally. This also enables the teacher to facilitate release where it is needed. At the same time, you will be receiving feedback from the contact which will give you a better sense of yourself as a whole.

Attention will be given to increasing your awareness of your head/neck relationship. Freedom in the positioning and movement of your head on the top of your spine is essential for the overall co-ordination of your body. Often we hold subtle chronic tension in the muscles of our necks and at the base of our skulls which interferes with the natural poise of our heads. Excessive tension in the head-neck region causes malcoordination of the rest of the body, producing the experience of disconnection among its parts. In time you will be able to keep your neck muscles free and this will promote a change in the total pattern. Keeping your head/neck balance free is essential for restoring reliable sensory appreciation in movement.

Inhibition

As you may already have realized, the teacher will also be doing more than getting your body working more efficiently. That cannot actually happen until your habitual patterns are addressed. These patterns have become encoded in your neuro-muscular network so they are also encoded at the level of mind and emotion. What we believe, the internal imaging we make, our idea of ourselves, is transduced into muscle tension and determines the quality of our actions and experience.

One of the really liberating aspects of Alexander lessons is learning to use consciousness to gain command over our thoughts and emotions. This comes with the increasing ability to inhibit: to be able to suspend our reactions to stimuli from the environment until we choose in our own time, calmly and collectedly, how we want to respond – rather than being slaves to the telephone, the clock, the television, the traffic lights, the boss, the kids, the angst ... This is possible once our bodies are no longer bound by patterned responses.

Direction

Your teacher will help you to identify your habitual responses so you can inhibit them. Once this is achieved you can decide consciously to perform your actions with a minimum of exertion. Your teacher will give you a fresh experience of performing everyday acts in such a way that you can prevent wear and tear while achieving your goals. The ability to direct your energy efficiently will become second nature to you and you may notice that it becomes easier to apply yourself to difficult tasks in general.

Once these positive changes replace the old patterns, muscle tissue that was previously over-tense resumes its optimal length. Tension is redistributed so that joints are no longer subjected to strain. Instead come buoyancy, ease in movement and an improvement in co-ordination. Complaints associated with misuse – such as aching joints, back pain and anxiety will diminish in intensity or disappear altogether as the pattern which produced them is reorganized.

A practical approach

The Alexander Technique is a practical method of re-education and your teacher will suggest simple procedures for you to practise at home to reinforce the benefit of your lessons. You will find you want to put the Technique into practice in your daily life. Many people experience increased vitality as their use improves because energy that was being expended in strain becomes available for their enjoyment.

Who benefits from Alexander Lessons?

The Alexander Technique is for everybody. It first became known amongst musicians, actors, dancers and athletes because of the improvement it brought to their professional skills. Nobel Prize Laureate Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen thought so much of Alexander's Technique that when he addressed the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique in London, he said that it was the key to an evolutionary step for mankind. He thought, quite simply, that everybody should take Alexander lessons and that if they did, many of our most pressing issues would be resolved. But that is up to us. Whether you decide to try the Technique because you have aches and pains, or want to refine a skill, or to change your posture, or calm down, or just for the sheer pleasure of it, you will soon discover the benefits for yourself.

Section 7 How Many Lessons?

Why is it important to have a course of Alexander Lessons?

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Because of the reputation it has for improving general functioning and well-being, the Alexander Technique is sometimes mistakenly thought of as a 'therapy'. It is often lumped in with other alternative or complementary disciplines and regarded as a form of treatment for specific illnesses and complaints. It is important to understand that it is *not* treatment and that if you approach it on that basis you will not derive maximum benefit from lessons.

The Alexander Technique addresses the widespread problem of habitual [misuse](#). Because Alexander was ahead of his time and his discoveries are only now being taken seriously, most people, including many health and sports professionals, have no idea that they are misusing themselves and therefore have little idea of the degree to which their misuse directly affects their general functioning.

The Alexander Technique gives us a means of dismantling this habitual misuse and restoring optimal use of our neuro-muscular-skeletal systems and the [postural mechanisms](#) which operate them. The benefits to the entire Self - including mental, emotional and physical functioning - which come with an improved use of oneself cannot be overestimated.

Many people with chronic back pain, headaches, joint problems and neck and shoulder trouble, amongst other things, are interested in the Alexander Technique because they have heard that it 'cures' these conditions. Unfortunately – perhaps ironically – because these complaints tend to disappear as one's use improves, the Technique is seen as just another form of treatment for physical complaints.

Almost 100 years ago, Alexander carefully considered what to call his method. He chose the word 'technique' - 'a technique of psycho-physical re-education' - rather than *therapy*, because he did not want people coming to him as patients expecting him to rid them of their physical problems. As he saw it, many physical problems were a consequence of the larger problem of misuse. Misuse inevitably leads to backache and poor posture but it also damages less tangible things such as joy and enthusiasm for life that are so important for our wellbeing and development.

When the emphasis is on fighting physical complaints, the offending parts are isolated, and attempts are made to fix them as quickly as possible with local intervention - some form of manipulation or medication. What needs to be understood is that this approach will not alter the conditions which produced the problem. Unless one's use is improved and changed, the condition will return. What is needed for a person to heal is a change in his overall condition.

That is where the Alexander Technique is unlike any other approach. It will rebuild your 'use' and restore optimal functioning of your postural mechanisms. The faulty conditions which produced the problems in the first place will gradually recede. But such changes do not come about overnight. They require time and your participation. Once you learn to recognize the unconscious habits that have led to malcoordination and malfunctioning of your postural mechanisms, you will discover possibilities of ease in movement that you never knew were possible. The painful physical conditions caused by your misuse will leave you.

Most people can make basic changes in about 20 lessons, which should be taken over a period of some months. Ideally the first half of these lessons should be taken at short intervals to keep up momentum, reinforce learning and to prevent the old bad habits from creeping back. Later they can be taken with larger intervals of time between as you learn to manage your own progress. It is useful to consider the occasional refresher lesson after the initial course is completed. When you consider that most of us have been developing our bad habits for decades, it is remarkable how willing our bodies are to change and re-organise posturally, given the right stimulus.

A course of Alexander lessons spread over a year is relatively inexpensive and investment in prevention considerably reduces the cost of healthcare. If music students were to have the benefit of Alexander work during their training, as is now commonplace in Europe and America, repetitive strain injury would not be such a common occurrence and the students' confidence and skill would improve significantly. The same applies to sports men and women and the increasing number of people sitting at computers for long periods.

There is no obligation to sign up for a full course of lessons. You can take a few to test the method for yourself but you should consider having at least ten lessons before you assess what it is doing for you. Most people notice some improvement immediately; but the deeper changes and benefits come about more gradually as the lessons build on one another. It is this re-educative process which leads to transformation through learning. It is important, therefore, to step beyond the notion of paying for a 'quick fix' and to see Alexander Technique lessons as an investment you are making in your future.

Section 8 About the Author

Meredith Page, the author of these articles, was trained by Walter and Dilys Carrington in London and qualified as an Alexander Teacher in 1978. She worked closely with the Carringtons as an assistant trainer for a further ten years. She has taught the Alexander Technique for twenty-five years and practised in three different countries. More recently she attained champion status in her sport of clay target shooting. She divides her professional time between running a private practice and teaching the Alexander Technique at tertiary educational institutions.