

## Applying Attention To Activity – The Alexander Technique

by **Susannah Kent**

When I told a friend recently that my next article was on The Alexander Technique, her response was, “What’s that?” At the time, I blithely responded that it had to do with improving posture. As I have come to understand it more fully, that response was woefully incomplete. Over the last few weeks of researching and taking lessons, I have learned a great deal more about – and from – the Alexander Technique.

Here are just ten of those things.

### **A Pioneer in Movement Re-Education**

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in Australia in 1869. Despite bouts with “hoarseness and lowered vitality,” Alexander embarked on what would become, at first, a successful career as a Shakespearean orator.

Unfortunately, recurring and, after only a few years, acute loss of voice seemed to end that career. Visits to medical people brought only temporary relief. He began to suspect that, if there was nothing medically wrong with him and nothing wrong with what he was doing, perhaps the source of his trouble lay in *how* he was doing what he was doing.

These suspicions led to an in-depth investigation into his own physical mechanics, researching what he would come to refer to as the *use* of

himself. To Alexander the term “self” meant both his mental and physical functioning, understanding that no activity could be categorized as purely one or the other. At the turn of the century this thinking was revolutionary.



Alexander’s careful observations over many years lead him to discover how he was going and doing wrong and how to improve his own manner of use. This enabled him in time to regain control of his voice and his ability to perform again. And it resulted in a set of principles that address, and serve to resolve, the unfortunate fact that the “majority of people stand, sit and, in general, move in a defective manner.”

Nobel Prize winner, Nikolaas Tinbergen, described Alexander’s exploration and discovery as true scientific enquiry, a work of “perceptiveness, intelligence and persistence, and, as such, one of the true epics of medical research and practice.”

Alexander continued to observe, refine, write and teach his principles of good use until his death in 1955.

## Misuse Starts With the Head

The use of the self is one of the cornerstones of the Alexander Technique. When trying to solve his vocal problems, Alexander's observations led him to discover that his voice worsened when he organized his movement in a certain way, even though it *felt* perfectly right to him. During that period of self-discovery he observed that a "certain use of the head in relation to the neck, and of the neck in relation to the torso...constitutes a *primary control* of the mechanisms as a whole," which primary control Alexander teacher, Graeme Lynn, describes as the "senior organizing function of movement."

During his observations of himself and others, Alexander discovered that, in the majority of cases, when and while a person moves into action, he contracts the muscles of the neck thereby altering the balance of the head and the freedom of the back. Alexander concluded it was with this crucial head-neck-back relationship that most problems of misuse begin.

## Thoughtless Movement (End-gaining)

The notion of "hastening without considering the means whereby we can best achieve our purpose," what Alexander called end-gaining, was, in his opinion, another major cause of the misuse of the self. Alexander observed that a thoughtless approach to activity manifests itself in unnecessary muscle tension.

If not giving thought to our manner of use is a chief cause of misuse, how do we fix it? How do we apply this "thinking to activity," and free ourselves of unnecessary and even harmful muscle tension?

It would take some time before I came to understand, accept and finally appreciate the rather cryptic comment that I heard many times during my lessons, "(Madame), don't do anything."

## The Technique Is About Undoing

If we take the time, as Alexander did, and carefully observe our manner of use when we sit, for example, and find as Alexander did that we pull our heads back and tighten our neck muscles, then the cure, in theory, is simply to undo this pattern of muscular contraction. However, it is likely that we have been sitting down in this fashion most of our lives, an habitual pattern very hard to break, especially as we are not aware of it.

It is also likely that moving in such a manner has come to feel quite right and appropriate to you. But as Alexander discovered in himself, doing something that feels right may actually be doing wrong and doing harm. He came to see that such 'feeling-right-awareness' was defective and, if we relied on such faulty perceptions of feeling, we would continue faulty patterns of moving.

But once we come to awareness of the damaging habit, the next step is clear: we can undo it.

## **Stop and Think Before You Move**

One of Alexander's methods for correcting the familiar right feeling and consequent habitual wrong manner of doing was what he called inhibition of the immediate habitual response to action. Once you begin to recognize how you habitually organize your movements, learning the Alexander Technique allows you to 'stand back and before the action'. Then, as you move, you will apply attention to the organization of the movement in the context of the movement itself, what Graeme calls 'intelligence in action'.

## **Directing Natural Ease of Movement**

The object of any Alexander lesson is to be able to perform any activity without interfering with natural coordination. Over time, and with much observation and experimentation, Alexander came up with a series of mental orders or directions to consciously bypass or vanish, during any given activity, his habitual interference with the natural inherent coordination.

The directions Alexander devised, and ones you will hear in any Alexander lesson, are something like: let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen, to let the shoulders release and float up and off the ribcage, to let the legs release away from each other and forward from the pelvis at the hips.

Alexander discovered that once you allow the neck muscles to release rather than tighten, your head will naturally revolve forward

and up instead of back and down. And as the head goes forward and up, the tension in the torso is released, the back lengthens and widens, and the legs and arms release out. The result is an un-doing rather than a doing: the directions serve to prevent you from doing what you habitually do.

## **An Alexander Technique Lesson Profile**

Unlike bodywork modalities, the Alexander Technique is not a treatment, and while gentle hands-on manipulation does take place, it is not done on a passive individual. The Alexander practitioner is more accurately referred to as a teacher, the session is called a lesson, and the client, a student.

In an Alexander Technique lesson, you are taught to notice how you do things, or your manner of use, and how to stop "directing yourself in a way that is harmful and inefficient."

An Alexander lesson can last from 30 to 60 minutes. In a lesson you are taken through such simple movements as sitting, standing, and lying down, bending, reaching and walking, as the teacher gives both verbal and non-verbal directions, all the while and together seeking the freedom of natural movement.

The non-verbal directions involve gentle manipulations where the teacher may adjust the head to release tension in the neck, gently draw the arm away from the centre, or move the leg such that it releases at the hip.

The verbal directions can include things like "don't do anything; don't try to correct anything; release the

neck; allow the head to move forward and up; let the trunk lengthen and widen; and let the legs release away from the hips.”

As mentioned earlier, the student in an Alexander Technique lesson is not passive. He or she must consciously participate, applying conscious intelligence to habitual movement patterns, while, as Graeme explained, the teacher “works to ease out chronic action of muscles that are doing too much and coax the appropriate degree of activity from muscles that are under-used.”

Old habits die hard, which is particularly true of life-long movement patterns. What one does in a lesson may seem simple enough; actually learning and absorbing what is taught can prove to be quite challenging, even frustrating. But as Graeme wisely pointed out, just as you wouldn’t expect to learn how to play the violin after one lesson, so you mustn’t expect yourself to learn a new manner of movement quickly either, especially considering the years of misuse.

### **Endless Possibilities – The Many Benefits of the Alexander Technique**

Alexander’s work has been around for over a century and has been acclaimed and acknowledged by people from all walks of life, including actors, authors and Nobel Prize-winning scientists. People describing their experience of the Technique often refer to the joy, ease and fluidity that they feel in their actions and that you can also see when little

children move. Most of us lose that, and activities we once did now seem difficult, if not impossible. The Alexander Technique, with its focus on re-educating the use of the self, its insistence on thinking in activity, undoing and releasing, using muscles more efficiently, and seeking the experience of freedom and ease in movement, can have wide-reaching effects.

When I asked Graeme how he might describe the benefits of the Alexander Technique, he replied: “Whether one is in the performing arts or skilled work, is suffering pain, poor posture, inflexibility, clumsiness, limited capability, breathing difficulties, or any somatic limitations where improvement can be conceived, improvement is not only possible with the Alexander Technique as the meta-approach, improvement is limitless because of the open-ended nature of the human nervous system.”

Ultimately the Technique is about improving use. This improvement in the use of the self leads to freer and more comfortable movement and posture, relief from strain and chronic pain, easier breathing, and increased vitality.

It is common for people to remark after a lesson that they feel lighter, freer, and more in touch with their bodies. The Technique’s success in helping people to re-educate themselves to better use has even resulted in a number of universities and conservatories in Great Britain and the United States incorporating the Alexander Technique into their curriculums.

## Insight into a Harmful Habit

My own experience with the Alexander Technique reflects those improvements just mentioned. I certainly had feelings of lightness and ease in movement. My chest and back felt more open and my arms felt as though they floated out from my sides, not the typical pulling and dragging down from my shoulders.



A most valuable aspect of the lessons was that they helped me discover some of the harmful movement patterns I have adopted over the years. Until I had a few lessons with Graeme, who is an exceptionally talented teacher with a wonderfully wry sense of humour, I had no idea that when I sit down, my head draws down into my neck and my shoulders push up toward my ears. This constant pulling, pushing and inevitable tightening has probably contributed to many of the painful neck and shoulder episodes I have experienced over the years. In

fact, it could be the cause of a whole array of muscle imbalances.

It came as a bit of shock to me who teaches other people how to become fit, to discover my own self-damaging movement habits. Nevertheless, what a valuable insight to have gained!

## Practice + Patience = Improvement

You are certain to have a wonderful experience in your Alexander lessons. I thoroughly enjoyed my lessons. But if you want the experience of joyful ease and freedom of movement to be the rule rather than the exception in your everyday life, you must apply yourself. The Technique is not a cure, but if you begin to give your attention to it and use your intelligence – and patience – with the help of a skilled and sensitive teacher, you will find a more natural and efficient way to move – and live.

*Graeme Lynn has been teaching for 15 years. He has certifications from the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique; from the Feldenkrais Guild of North America and International Feldenkrais Federation in the Feldenkrais Method of Somatic Education; from Hanna Somatic Education in Hanna Somatics; from the Body of Knowledge in Hellerwork; and from the Washington State Massage Board in massage. You can visit him on the web at:*

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