

Introduction to the Alexander Technique

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How use doth breed a habit in a man!

— Shakespeare

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in 1869 on the island of Tasmania off the southeast coast of Australia. As an infant he was sickly but grew into a bright, precocious youngster with a tendency to ask too many questions in school. This disrupted the other children, so the local schoolmaster tutored him privately. Alexander's close relationship with his teacher, who loved the theater, was an important influence. As a teen he dreamt of becoming an actor but as the oldest in a large family, he was expected to help with the family finances. At seventeen, Alexander left home and took a job as a bookkeeper at a tin mining company. But after a few years, his longing for the theater prevailed. Alexander began taking classes in elocution, acting, and violin. Soon he was giving recitals to highly favorable reviews. And then, suddenly, his prospects dimmed when he developed a strange hoarseness in his voice.

Seeking medical help, Alexander's doctor advised him to drink tea with honey and not to speak for several weeks to give his voice a rest. After following these instructions his voice improved, but when he returned to performing his hoarseness returned as well.

"Keep drinking tea and honey and resting your voice," his doctor instructed.

"Why should I?" Alexander countered. "My voice gets better when I don't speak but gets hoarse again when I do. Doesn't this suggest that I'm doing something harmful to my voice when I speak?"

His doctor agreed this was a reasonable theory.

"Then why should I keep doing as you suggest? Resting my voice only helps if I don't speak!" The doctor admitted this was a fair point but had nothing more to offer. Unwilling to abandon the new career on which he had staked so much, Alexander resolved to solve his problem himself.

Using two mirrors, he watched his profile as he spoke and noticed something surprising. Each time he began to speak, he saw his head move back and downward on his neck as his neck thrust forward, and he gulped awkwardly for air.

Alexander was not certain if this odd mannerism was related to his vocal problem, but he decided to stop doing it. When he tried, however, he was startled to discover that he could not prevent it. Every time he spoke, this unconscious way of moving reasserted itself. It seemed he had an unconscious way of using his muscles over which he had no control. He could consciously decide to speak or not, but he could not prevent himself from tensing his neck muscles, pulling his head back, and gulping for air as he spoke.

With further observation, Alexander discovered that this way of moving his head and neck acted like a current running through him, accompanying everything he did. He also realized he had not been aware of this tension as it happened because he did not feel it. He concluded that his way of moving was damaging his vocal mechanism. He needed to learn to prevent this, but how?

Reviewing his progress, Alexander realized that he had several unconscious beliefs about his body. He believed that he would know it if he was doing something harmful to himself. He believed that as long as he was not sick, his body would function normally. And he believed that, with sufficient practice, he could make his body do what he wanted. But his observations in the mirror disproved them all. He had not felt what he was doing with his neck muscles, and so had not been aware of his tension as he spoke. He had actually been damaging his body by this unconscious tension, causing his hoarseness. And he could not make his body do what he wanted.

Continuing to observe himself in the mirror, Alexander saw that whenever he had a mere thought to speak, this previously unconscious misuse of his body reasserted itself. This meant that his thought of speaking played a central role in how he spoke, which brought to light another wrong belief—that his mind and body were separate. He had assumed that a physical problem arose from his body, and a mental problem arose from his mind. As such, he had believed his hoarseness was a physical problem. But this idea of separation was clearly wrong. He saw in the mirror, unmistakably, that his thought of speaking produced a response of excess tension in his body.

Alexander realized he was trapped in a chicken-and-egg sort of problem. In order to prevent his misuse and restore his voice, he would have to change the whole of himself, mind and body: how he thought and how he moved. But where should he begin?

First, Alexander tried to do the opposite movement with his head and neck. Instead of thrusting his neck forward and pulling his head back, he pushed his neck back and pulled his head forward. While this produced a change in his appearance, his voice did not improve. Next he noticed that any change in the way he usually moved his head and neck felt wrong to him, while his old way of speaking (which he now understood to be wrong) felt right. Not only was he unaware of his tension habit, he could not accurately perceive what his body was doing. His way of speaking was tied to his mind's misinterpretation of physical sensations, warping his judgment. This meant that physical sensation was an all-important bridge, linking his body's movements with his mind's perception. His incorrect self-perception and physical misuse were tied together. He was locked in a vicious cycle of misuse, faulty perception and judgment, and further misuse.

Alexander decided that instead of doing the opposite movement with his head and neck, he would try thinking the opposite thought. Since telling himself to speak triggered his faulty way of moving, he tried telling himself not to speak. Watching in the mirror as he repeated this self-instruction, Alexander was astonished to see that his muscle tension melted away. His neck lengthened upward. His head shifted forward and up on the top of his spine. His spine lengthened and his ribs moved more readily, helping him to breathe. Although these changes felt wrong to him, he could see in the mirror that his body appeared more relaxed and more upright, and his head did not pull back and down on his neck.

In neuroscience, excitation is the term that refers to the activation of a neuron, which can stimulate a muscle to contract. Inhibition is the term that describes the opposite—a signal that causes another neuron not to be activated, thus preventing the contraction of a muscle. Alexander had stumbled onto a remarkable skill he later termed inhibition. This was an appropriate choice. By telling himself not to speak, he learned to prevent the neural activity that triggered his unwanted physical behavior.

This was a welcome success, but there was still a problem. He had not yet succeeded in speaking, only in inhibiting the muscle tension that was triggered when he thought of speaking. In time Alexander learned that his first task was to inhibit his thought of speaking, since this restored a more normal way of moving his head and neck. Then the challenge was to speak—but without disturbing this new and better use of his body. To do this he acquired another skill that he later termed directing. Alexander gave himself specific verbal instructions that described this new and better pattern of movement: he thought of letting his neck lengthen, letting his head move forward and up on his neck, letting his torso lengthen and widen, and letting his knees release forward from his torso.

Using these new thinking skills, Alexander found that he could prevent his old tension habit and maintain the new coordination of his head and neck as he spoke. While speaking in this way felt strange to him, there was no denying the change he saw in the mirror, and the improvement he heard in his voice.

At the time Alexander had no idea how inhibiting and directing produced such remarkable changes. Years later, he drew from the research of a scientist named Rudolf Magnus to formulate a theory. Magnus's work showed that vertebrates have an array of reflexes designed to assist in coordinating the animal's posture and movement that are triggered by the changing position of the head on the neck, and the head's position in relation to gravity. In Magnus's words, in vertebrates “the head leads and the body follows.”

Alexander's self-experiments demonstrated the practical side of this research. His misuse of his head and neck was interfering—not just with his voice—but with innate mechanisms designed to assist in coordinating his movements. This in turn marred the overall functioning of his body. By inhibiting, he prevented this misuse. By directing, he maintained the new relationship of his head, neck, and spine as he spoke, and as he moved in all his activities. Later, Alexander described this discovery a primary control of the use of himself. In time he noticed that his self-perception shifted as well. The new way of moving felt right to him, and the old way felt wrong. In some unknown way, his mind's interpretation of bodily sensations had become more correct.

Alexander returned to the stage amid wide acclaim. Special compliments were paid to his vocal skill. Then he began to notice that many other people had similar patterns of misuse of themselves, and he began teaching others what he had discovered. Soon his students were reporting significant improvement in a wide array of symptoms, which impressed their physicians. In 1904 Alexander moved to London carrying letters of recommendation from several Australian doctors who admired his work. In a short period, he was teaching his new method to leading figures of the London stage, wealthy patients of respected London physicians, and members of the upper echelons of British society. Alexander relinquished his dream of becoming an actor and devoted himself to teaching his method, which late in his life he described as the study of human reaction.