

THE F. MATHIAS ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

A MEANS OF UNDERSTANDING MAN

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1. Introduction

“No one would deny that we ourselves enter as an agency into whatever is attempted and done by us. That is a truism. It is not so generally said, however, that the hardest thing to attend to is that which is closest to ourselves, that which is most constant and familiar, this closest ‘something’ being, precisely, ourselves, our own habits and ways of doing things as agencies in conditioning what is tried or done by us. Through modern science we have mastered, to a wonderful extent, the use of things as tools for accomplishing results upon and through other things. The result is all but a universal state of confusion, discontent, and strife. The one factor which is the primary tool in the use of all these other tools—namely, ourselves—in other words, our own psycho-physical disposition, as the basic condition of our employment of all agencies and energies, has not even been studied as the central instrumentality. Is it not highly probable that this failure gives the explanation of why it is that in mastering physical forces we have ourselves been so largely mastered by them until we find ourselves incompetent to direct the history and destiny of man?

“Never before, I think, has there been such an acute consciousness of the failure of all external remedies as exists to-day, of the failure of all remedies and forces external to the individual man. It is, however, one thing to teach the need of a return to the individual man as the ultimate agency in whatever mankind and society collectively can accomplish to point out the necessity of straightening out this ultimate condition of whatever humanity in mass can attain. It is another thing to discover the concrete procedure by which this greatest of all tasks can be executed. And this indispensable thing is exactly what Mr. Alexander has accomplished.”¹

Professor John Dewey, who wrote this remarkable declaration, has been described as the father of American education; and he was certainly one of the greatest educational philosophers of all time. Here he defines the essence of our problem in simple terms—the understanding of Man, the understanding of ourselves. He also states shortly and emphatically that in the F. Matthias Alexander Technique a means is to hand whereby the task may be successfully accomplished.

Such a statement, from such a source, must be of particular interest when the topic of human perfectability is under consideration, as it is in this Journal; and it certainly must have some bearing upon the Systematic hypothesis. Moreover, it would appear to have some originality of content and treatment and thus to be a possibly significant contribution to the better understanding of human development.²

In any case, since Systematics, or the study of systems, has been defined as the appropriate instrument for the development of understanding—in contrast to science, the instrument for the development of knowledge—and understanding is a special relationship between different parts of our experience.³ it follows that a systematic appreciation of the work of F. Matthias Alexander could not fail to be profitable.

However, the difficulty of understanding Alexander's work will be explained shortly. Meanwhile, it is surely significant that Dewey regarded it as the concrete procedure for the execution *of* the greatest of all tasks—the return to the individual man as the ultimate agency in whatever mankind or society collectively can accomplish.

F. Matthias Alexander was a unique individual who reacted to an ordinary set of circumstances in an extraordinary way. He has told the whole story in detail in his book *The Use of the Self*.⁴ But to recapitulate briefly: as a young man (born in Tasmania in 1869), he found that his career as an actor and Shakespearian reciter was jeopardized by recurrent hoarseness and loss of voice, due, it was said, to irritation of the mucous membrane of the throat and nose and inflammation of the vocal cords. No treatment except resting seemed to relieve the affliction, although he was assured that his vocal mechanism was organically sound. It therefore occurred to him to ask the simple question as to what it was that he did wrong when he spoke that could be responsible for the condition. This was no rhetorical question, but the starting point of a whole series of practical experiments that led to some discoveries of great practical importance.

2. Alexander's Own Development

I shall not attempt to describe the detail of these experiments here because this has been done very fully by Alexander himself in his chapter "Evolution of a Technique" (Op. Cit.). It is sufficient to say that they consisted of a long series of detailed self-observations made with the aid of looking glasses. However, there is much that needs to be said about the terms used in his narrative, and also about the general application of his conclusions, as opposed to the peculiar circumstance of his own case.

His experiments led him to study processes, of the nature of which he knew very little and, indeed, of which very little is still known by anybody. Even today, the human organism as a whole is largely unknown territory so far as experimental observation is concerned. The nature of the relationship between mind and body is still undetermined. The precise relationship between what we call the voluntary and the involuntary aspects of human behaviour is still unknown; and although we know a great deal more than formerly (a great deal more than was known in Alexander's early days) about the structure and functioning of the nervous system, the exact nature of the processes of willing and wishing, of choice and selection of response, of thinking and feeling, and all the other so-called mental processes of which we are subjectively aware, are still largely a mystery.

It was the realization of this that led Alexander to choose terms for his descriptive needs at once as simple and as non-committal as possible. He saw that the borderline between the voluntary and the involuntary was too blurred to be

capable of a sharp distinction. Yet apparently some acts are done or not done by choice, whereas much of the activity of the living organism appears to be automatic—as it were—to do itself. This latter category of activity he referred to as “functioning”, whereas the process of control of all the actions that he seemed able to control he referred to as “use”.

Thus, in his initial series of experiments, undertaken to answer the question as to what he did wrong when he spoke, he observed that he pulled back his head, depressed his larynx (the cartilaginous structure in the throat, containing the vocal cords), and sucked in breath through the mouth in such a way as to produce a gasping sound. These were obvious faults in vocalization; the sucking-in of breath being an ugly and prevalent fault, even amongst professional voice users; the depression of the larynx, a well-known cause, amongst elocutionists, of harsh tone and strain on the vocal mechanism. The pulling back of the head, however, although an equally prevalent, not to say, universal, habit, had not been previously noted in its causal connection with the other two. He referred to this latter as a “mis-use” of the part concerned because he discovered that its prevention not only reduced the tendency to the other faults but actually led to a discernable improvement in the subsequent condition of his throat and vocal reeds when these were medically examined. This, he said, was the first clue that drew his attention to the influence of “use” upon “functioning”—that is to say, the change in use that he had been able to bring about produced a marked effect upon the functioning of his vocal and respiratory mechanisms. This might be thought to be a truism; but long experience has shown that the great majority of people have no such realization.

The next step was to try and find out what might constitute an improved use of his vocal mechanism; and it was in this series of experiments that he made his most important discovery. He found that the best conditions of his larynx and vocal mechanisms and the least tendency to hoarseness were associated with a “lengthening of the stature.” Thus he first recognized the problem now referred to as the “anti-gravity” functioning of the organism.

It must be remembered that, in his day, modern research into the physiology of posture lay a long way ahead in the future. Nobody had made any systematic study of the inter-relationship between the human organism and its environment. The effect of the gravitational force had attracted singularly little serious scientific interest or investigation. It is, after all, only in quite recent years, since we commenced the exploration of space outside our earth’s atmosphere, that much has been done about it. Then there was no one to point out that “future long distance flights cannot be made without some kind of artificial gravity being provided in the spaceship. Otherwise the astronaut’s blood cells will die and his muscles will disintegrate” (report of a recent space medicine conference)⁵.

Since the dawn of time, men have been experimenting in a practical way to find out how best to use their bodies for all sorts of purposes. It might be said that this is the first lesson that the human infant tries to learn immediately after birth. It moves in the womb but now it has to move of itself without the assistance of the amniotic fluid; from now on it must learn to cope with the force of gravitation on its own. During a long hard course of trial and error, many of our race learn the advantages of poise and balance, freedom of movement, lightness and quickness on the feet. In

doing so, they also experience the benefits that this way of using themselves brings to the functioning of all their organs and systems. But it is doubtful whether they consciously recognize these consequences, in terms of cause and effect. Certainly, until recently no one had made a study of the human being as an organism existing outside a gravitational field; nor yet considered the specific problems of the reaction of the human body to gravitation. Alexander did not do this in these abstract terms: but he found a solution to the problem in a practical way. When he used his voice he saw that he needed, not merely to avoid shortening of the stature, but positively to bring about a lengthening—a maximum use of his anti-gravity mechanism.

3. *Man as a Unity*

As he progressed in his work, he was struck more and more by the obvious unity of the human being. He came to see that “mind” and “body” were not only useless, but positively misleading terms when applied to that living image of himself that he saw when he looked in the mirror. Evidently, the human organism not only functions as a whole, but if we can rightly claim to “use” any part of ourselves, then it is true to say that in fact we use ourselves as a whole. In this way he was led to a conception of an habitual combined wrong use of the whole of his physical-mental mechanisms, brought into play by his desire to speak, or, indeed, to perform any other action. This was the real cause of his condition of sub-acute laryngitis, and of other defects in his general functioning as well.

His attempt to change and improve this pattern of habitual combined wrong use led to the discovery that there is a primary control of the use of the human organism as whole—a concerted way of using all the parts of the individual so the anti-gravity functioning is facilitated to the maximum extent—and this, he claimed, forms the indispensable basis for achieving the highest possible standard of general functioning of all the parts and systems concerned.

He described this “primary control” in detail as involving a certain relativity in the use of the head, neck, and other parts of the body. He said that he must put the head forward and up in order to lengthen the body (increase in stature), but that it was not sufficient merely to do this. He must do it in such a way as to prevent the lifting of the chest and simultaneously bring about a widening of the back. Clearly, such a process requires a practical demonstration if it is to be understood.

However, it may be safely said that it involves a great deal more than a simple injunction to stand up straight or to carry oneself erect. It obviously cannot be reproduced without detailed instruction, or a careful repetition of the experimental process that Alexander himself carried out.

If the process of anti-gravity in living things is still much of a mystery, it is yet obviously one of life’s primary requirements. There can be no doubt at all that each one of us has an anti-gravity mechanism. It works to support us all the time that we are alive. It supports the framework of the body against collapse and makes possible all the vital functional activities. Without it, life would be impossible to sustain, for all our main processes of respiration, circulation, and digestion—not to say, locomotion—would ultimately cease. It is also equally evident that this mechanism works more efficiently in some people than in others: and in the same individual, at some times better than others. In demonstrating a “primary control”, as he called it, Alexander therefore demonstrated, not only the general effect of the anti-gravity

mechanism, but also a practical means whereby the individual may ensure that it will function constantly to the best advantage.

Of course this demonstration of primary control involved many other experiences and considerations besides its anti-gravity aspect. The whole problem of what he called “direction” had to be faced. We regard some of our actions as voluntary and others as involuntary; but precisely how we decide to carry out a voluntary action, and still less, how we do carry it out is largely unknown. The factor of “feeling” apparently comes into it; because in some way, what we call our feelings tell us what is right or wrong, and usually we act accordingly. This feeling is however more than a mere sensory perception; and clearly, the process involves more than we know about the working of the entire sensory mechanism. For example, it is partly conscious—or we should not know about it; but it is largely sub-conscious—an analysis of our motivations usually comes as a surprise to us. Generally, we do not know with any certainty why we “feel” as we do; but we do know that our feelings are not always reliable. However, the whole process is definitely distinguishable, we would say, “in theory”, from what we call “reasoning”; although in practice the distinction is more difficult to maintain.

The direction of what happens with our bodies is governed largely by feeling, and mainly by feeling at a sub-conscious level. This is surely what makes the discrimination between the voluntary and the involuntary difficult, between the deliberate and the automatic, between “free-will” and “determinism” (the body acts even though we are absent-minded). We do, however, appear to have a mechanism of conscious choice and decision, at least in certain directions and this choice of what we will do Alexander calls “conscious reasoning direction”. It works by enabling us (a) to see what we need to do, or what we want to do, or ought to do, (b) to determine the best way of doing it, and (c) to do it. Alternatively, it enables us (a) to see what we need not do, or what we do not want to do, or what we ought not to do, (b) to determine how to prevent it and (c) not to do it.

This latter process Alexander termed “inhibition” and he rightly regarded it as the more important of the two. In life and nature, actions and events tend to flow on by their own momentum, so to speak. One thing leads to another at all levels of functioning, and it is usually more difficult to stop than to start; in fact, we usually do have to stop before we can start. So, this form of conscious direction is the indispensable tool for making change where habit is concerned—and habit, associated with feeling, is far more concerned in all our behaviour than we care to admit. Alexander proved that it was only by this means that he could bring into use the primary control and thus change and improve his own manner of use and general functioning.

In this practical way he anticipated the results of another important line of scientific research still unthought-of at that time. Now-a-days in biology, inhibition is conceived of as a positive process of the nervous system, a mechanism of integration that maintains the integrity of the individual, while affording the basis for diversification and differentiation in growth and action.⁶ Primitively, the muscular system of vertebrates tends to work on the “all or nothing” principle; but by means of a nervous mechanism of control, called inhibition, selective action becomes possible without all the parts getting in each other’s way. A complicated

act, such as playing the piano, would clearly be impossible without this inhibitory control, exercised by the nervous system. In fact, when, by reason of over-stimulation or other cause, the inhibitory control does break down, the result is chaotic.

Alexander's conception of the exercise of a conscious reasoning inhibition is thus related to a fundamental process within the organism in just the same way that his conception of conscious reasoning direction is related to that familiar, semi-conscious, feeling process whereby we seem to carry out our actions. Alexander did not underestimate the importance of feeling, but came to recognize through his experiments that we are led to misuse ourselves—because feeling so often becomes corrupted with serious consequences for our general functioning. Our power of inhibition is frequently swamped by all the stress and over-stimulation of our daily lives. It needs to be developed on a conscious, reasoning, basis; just as our feelings need to be rectified and supplemented by the exercise of a rational intelligence.

Now to summarize Alexander's experiments and their results, he found that the successful use of his voice depended on three factors, inhibition. Primary Control and Conscious Direction, all *of* which have been explained. Without the exercise of reasoning inhibition, feeling and habit dominated his attempt to speak and he spoke as he had always done. Without conscious direction, it was impossible to employ correctly the mechanism of the primary control and thus to ensure the proper action of the anti-gravity mechanism—the mechanism that determines the basic relationship between a living organism and its parts, and between the organism as a whole and its environment; and it is upon this that the healthy functioning ultimately depends. Without all these three factors taken together, it is not possible to gain the experience necessary for knowing how to use the self, and of using it to the best possible advantage, relative to the task in hand.

The words “relative to the task in hand” express the crux of the problem. Alexander believed that by means of his technique we should be able to bring about a fundamental change in our manner of reaction to stimulus. Instead of the desire, the wish, the need, the feeling or the thought, automatically evoking our habitual responses or at least tending to provoke us into a reaction along its own accustomed pre-determined lines, we should be able so to condition the nature of our responses that they would be both rationally and physiologically the best for any purpose. In other words, we should be able to do the best that we could in any circumstances, subject only to the limitations of our rational intelligence and experience; and the necessity of preserving the highest possible standard in our general functioning. This was what Dewey called “the concrete procedure”, to which he attached such supreme importance, and which, following Alexander's example, he tried all the latter part of his life to make use of himself.

4. Response to Alexander's Technique

Is it not surprising, in view of its originality, logicity and anticipation of modern scientific discoveries, that Alexander's work is not better known to-day? In fact, there are many more people vaguely familiar with his name than those who know what he discovered, or what his technique is about.

This slowness of recognition is probably due to many factors. Some people complain that they find his writings obscure and difficult to read. Some find his insistent emphasis on the “self” distasteful. Others dismiss him as some sort of a “health” or “posture” crank and others regard him as a quack, an ignorant pretender to expertise in a non-existent science.

With regard to what might be termed the psychological objections, these are real enough for many of us. The whole topic of “the self is charged with emotion. We are so alert to sense criticism, even an implied criticism, and so quick to resent it; and so many of the self-words suggest reprehension. Few of us are so happy and confident, so self-assured, in the *persona* that we present to the world that we care to look too closely at our personal idiosyncrasies, much less to have them publicly examined, however objectively.

Again, there are others to whom, the body seems to be a tiresome encumbrance to be clothed, fed, rested, washed, transported, and looked after generally, all at the expense of time and energy far better spared for other, more interesting and enjoyable, purposes. To such people, the whole subject is unappealing.

Then there are those to whom the word “posture” is anathema—and somehow the idea has got about that Alexander deals with posture. Indeed, the word has come to have some most unhappy connotations. It calls to mind injunctions to sit up, to stand to attention, to carry out drill movements—smartly. It implies effort, unnatural, artificial, painful effort; effort to a point of agonizing self-awareness and self-consciousness. There is an instinctive feeling that this cannot be right; and yet somehow it has come to be regarded as virtuous, imbued with some sense of moral rectitude. As Dr. F. P. Jones reported, “The idea of a ‘best’ posture seems to be held almost universally in our culture. Everyone we have asked claimed to know what good posture was, though he frequently apologized because he himself didn’t have it.”⁷

Finally, there are the people who feel that any thing personal and individual and subjective must be suspect and cannot possibly be scientific. These people are ready to concede that Alexander may have enjoyed some unusual personal gift; they question, however, whether this gift could be handed on. They are thus self-absolved from any obligation to go further into the matter—to do anything about it themselves—and while they claim to regard his achievement as a unique one, they do not consider it as a serious contribution to science. This view of the matter will be discussed later; but meanwhile, what is not taken into account in the inherent difficulty of the subject itself. This lies in the ratio between the known and the unknown.

5. *Alexander’s Empiricism*

The old philosophical psychology proceeded by a process of deduction from hypotheses often ill founded on fact. The modern physiological psychology, on the other hand, has tended to develop by a process of induction, often from sparse facts and very limited observation. In either way there has been insufficient allowance made for the very small amount that is known in comparison to what remains to be discovered. The advantage of Alexander’s empirical method lies in the fact that he was not forced to assume that he knew what he did not know, he did not need to formulate hypotheses that went beyond the observed facts. He could use simple

terms and simple procedures, paying due regard to all that he did not know, because at each stage of his work his results were subject to a process of operational verification. As in life, one thing led to the next.

The scientific study of behaviour always tends to be vitiated by a preoccupation with end products rather than processes. In pure science, might it not be said that mathematics, physics and chemistry are concerned more with processes than with end-products? Alexander, in his work, was always condemning judgment by results: to him it was always the nature of processes that was significant.

The difficulty of it all has been brilliantly analysed by Sir Charles Sherrington, the great pioneer of modern study of the nervous system, in his book, *Man on his Nature*.⁸ He wrote, "Take this act of 'standing'. Suppose my mind's attention be drawn to it, then I become fully aware that I stand. It seems to me an act fairly simple to do. I remember, however, that it cannot be very simple. That to execute it must require among other things the right degree of action of a great many muscles and nerves, some hundreds of thousands of nerve-fibres and perhaps a hundred times as many muscle-fibres. I reflect that various parts of my brain are involved in the co-ordinative management of all this, and that in doing so my brain's rightness of action rests on receiving and despatching thousands of nerve-messages registering and adjusting pressures, tensions, etc. in various parts of me. Remembering this I am perhaps rather disappointed at the very little that my mind has to tell me about my standing. When it gives its attention to my standing it can make me fully aware that I am standing, but as for telling me how it is that I stand, or as to helping me to analyse my standing, I get extremely little from it. The main thing I get from it seems the unequivocal assertion that it is 'I' who stand".

... If the standing goes on too long I get similarly an unequivocal assurance that it is 'I' who am tired of standing. It seems that this power within me, which identifies itself with me, and calls itself 'I', and wills the body to sit down and the body does so, does not know how the body does these things. For all its effort, and for all the attention it can give, it does not seem able to get inside the act which yet it assumes it does. It cannot think itself into the 'how' of the body's doing these things."

In his later book *The Endeavour of Jean Fernel*,⁹ Sherrington continued the same argument—"It is largely the reflex element in the willed movement or posture which, by reason of its unconscious character, defeats our attempts to know the 'how' of the doing of even a willed act. Breathing, standing, walking, sitting, although innate. along with our growth, are apt, as movements, to suffer from defects in our ways of doing them. A chair unsuited to a child can quickly induce special and bad habits of sitting, and of breathing. In urbanized and industrialized communities bad habits in our motor acts are especially common. But verbal instruction as to how to correct wrong habits of movement and posture is very difficult. The scantiness of our sensory perception of how we do them makes it so. The faults tend to escape our direct observation and recognition. Of the proprioceptive reflexes as such, whether of muscle or ear (vestibule), we are unconscious. We have no direct perception of the 'wash' of the labyrinthine fluid, or, indeed, of the existence of the labyrinths at all. In their case subjective projection, instead of indicating, blinds the place of their objective source.

Correcting the movements carried out by our proprioceptive reflexes is something like trying to reset a machine, whose works are intangible, and the net output all we know of the running. Instruction in such an act has to fall back on other factors more accessible to sense; thus, in skating, to ‘feeling’ that edge of the skate-blade on which the movement bears. To watch another performer trying the movement can be helpful; or a looking glass in which to watch ourselves trying it. The mirror can tell us often more than can the most painstaking attempt to ‘introspect’. Mr. Alexander has done a service to the subject by insistently treating each act as involving the whole integrated individual, the whole psycho-physical man. To take a step is an affair, not of this or that limb solely, but of the total neuro-muscular activity of the moment—not least of the head and the neck.”

This sums up very completely the difficulties that Alexander had to contend with in making his self-observations—and indeed, the practical difficulties of the whole subject—and it is particularly interesting from Sir Charles Sherrington who in his day probably knew more than any other man about the scientific aspects of the problem. Nor was Sherrington alone amongst scientific experts in appreciating the need for some special study of “the whole psycho-physical man”; for Professor Rudolf Magnus, who made the classical series of researches on the factors controlling the changes of animal posture in relation to gravity, and on the muscular tone by which such posture is maintained, described it as a fundamental need of all scientific workers.

Bearing in mind what has previously been said about Alexander’s experimental findings, the following quotations from Magnus’s writings are of interest:¹⁰

“It is possible to impress upon the whole body different adapted attitudes by changing only the position of the head ... the mechanism as a whole acts in such a way that the head leads and the body follows. ... The entire body follows the direction assumed by the head, this being very often moved in a certain direction under the influence of the tele-receptive higher sense organs. This provides one of the ways in which the relation of the body to its environment is regulated.”

“We have in our spinal cord a subcortically acting apparatus which controls and adjusts the position of our body, whether erect or recumbent, in relation to space. This unconsciously acting mechanism by the co-operation of different complicated reflexes restores our body to the normal position whenever it is displaced; it persists in animals even after the extirpation of the large brain. The ‘normal position’ in man or animal is continually being disturbed by different arbitrary movements evoked by the cerebral cortex, but the subcortical mechanism of the ‘righting reflexes’ counteracts these disturbances and restores the body again to the normal position. In this way all the senses of the body regain their precise relation to the outer world.”

“It is also an essential condition for the right interpretation of all sensory impressions reaching the cortex that the body be always brought into the normal position by a purely automatic subcortical arrangement which controls the spatial relation of the body to its environment.”

“By the action of the subcortical mechanisms described in these lectures, the different sense-organs are always brought into normal relation with the external world. . . . The result of all these arrangements is that the sense organs are righted in relation to the external world so that every sensory impression, before being transferred to the cortex cerebri has already acquired a certain special condition (local sign) depending on the previous righting functions acting upon the whole body or parts of it.”

And finally he says:

“The important role played by physiological apparatus in our psychic functions becomes clear from the foregoing. We possess numerous mechanisms acting subconsciously and partly subcortically which prepare the work beforehand for our psyche, and the results of which are *a priori* present before sensory observation and its psychological appreciation start. Since all study, analysis, and understanding of the events in the outer world are conducted through the medium of the senses, the scientific worker surely ought to know what are fundamental mechanisms of his body and of his nervous system which determine the results of his work.”¹¹

From the foregoing, it will be evident that, unorthodox and individual as Alexander’s work was, his findings were not much at variance with other scientific work in the field. Indeed, an account of this aspect of the subject could be expanded very considerably. The way in which his observations agreed with certain accepted principles in biology has already been mentioned: and Professor G. E. Coghill was evidently not amongst those who found his writings obscure when he wrote “I am . . . amazed to see how you, years ago, discovered in human physiology and psychology the same principle which I worked out in the behaviour of lower vertebrates.”¹²

But this is the special province of Dr. Frank Pierce Jones, of Tufts University, whose current research programme, supported by the United States Public Health Service, is investigating the relation between Alexander’s procedures and the body of our physiological and anatomical knowledge, by means of electromyography and multiple-image photography.¹³

6. Operational Verification

However, the final proof of Alexander’s work lies, as he used to say, in its operational verification. It is always both prudent and legitimate to demand proof of a proof; that is, to be shown that the procedures concerned do, in fact, demonstrate what they are supposed to do. The procedures of his technique are their own validation. The repetition of Alexander’s experiments are therefore the only true way of testing his conclusions. But this is not easy. When Professor Magnus wanted to confirm some of Goethe’s findings on colour vision, he actually went to Weimar to borrow the instruments from the museum, so that he could repeat the experiments with Goethe’s own apparatus.

We cannot use the same apparatus that Alexander used, for he used himself: we must make do with ourselves—without his genius. But we do have some compensation, for whereas he had to depend on the mirrors to check his own subjective observations, we have, additionally, the eyes and hands of a teacher.

The technique, as taught, inevitably differs from the sequence of Alexander's own experiments; for it was through observation that he came to understanding and so to a new experience. We have the experience first, at the hands of a teacher, and the observation and understanding follow only gradually. But the technique took Alexander at least ten years to evolve—and more than a life-time to perfect. We usually expect to learn it in about thirty to forty lessons—a matter of fifteen to twenty hours instruction; and then, of course, we learn to put it into practice ourselves.

The new experience comes fairly quickly at the hands of a teacher: it is the understanding that takes the time. The practice of a “conscious, reasoning, inhibition and direction” demands a very complete understanding, as well as a high standard of general functioning. At first, there is very little understanding, very little inhibition, conscious or otherwise; but there is feeling—a feeling of something strange and new at first, then more familiar but elusive, but always pleasurable. This is certainly not what Alexander calls “conscious control”: but then he said that was a goal to be aimed at, not a way easily followed. However, even if we do continue to direct the use of ourselves very much by feeling, we gain some benefit so long as our feeling is rectified by this new experience. But ultimately, if we are to gain any rational control over our actions—to do what we want to do—we must learn to inhibit: and this, perhaps is the most difficult lesson of all.

Of course the technique is individual in the sense that it has to be learnt individually—but what other way of learning it there? It cannot easily be taught collectively because of the need of the actual experience at the teacher's hands. But this statement could be misleading. It is sometimes said that the technique cannot be understood without practical experience; but this is taken as an excuse for neglecting it. Of course it cannot be fully understood; but as our knowledge of man increases, as we understand more intellectually, its significance can, none the less, be appreciated very well.

Since it is the technique of “man as the instrument,” it clearly has a wide range of application in daily life. It applies to all skills and activities; to living itself. It is certainly not, as Alexander emphasized, a royal road or panacea: it is not a new sect in philosophy: nor is it some new secularist religion. In medicine it is an essential factor in complete diagnosis, but it is not mainly a therapeutic technique—as is often thought—for it is not designed to effect remedy or cure except by the indirect means of improving functioning by re-education leading to the prevention of misuse. Above all it is a means of education, and as such its most important application lies in the educational sphere.

Alexander wrote of the word “prevention” that in its fullest sense it implies the existence of satisfactory conditions which can be prevented from changing for the worse. “In this sense prevention is not possible in practice today, since the conditions now present in the civilized human creature are such that it would be

difficult to find anyone who is entirely free from manifestations of wrong use and functioning.”¹⁴

With regard to babies, it is generally assumed that, except in a few unfortunate cases, they are all perfectly fit and healthy from birth, at least to some unspecified age. In point of fact, what Alexander called the “use” of the normal child—that combined habitual use of all the parts of the organism that comes into play in response to any stimulus—often shows the first signs of deterioration soon after the age of two, and in many cases it has deteriorated to a serious extent by the age of five.” What happens after that is common experience.

Prevention of misuse at the age of two is obviously going to be a difficult matter; but if all parents and those in charge of children knew what signs to look for, and what, in fact, to prevent, it should be possible to organise the child’s environment and way of life to some extent so that the stimulus to misuse would seldom arise. But for this purpose, those concerned would certainly need knowledge and experience of the technique personally.

Where a deterioration in use and functioning is already evident, a process of re-education will be required. With young children, a careful adjustment of the environment and whole way of life is probably again the first essential. Then they will need practical help from a teacher’s hands. This help of course needs to be very highly skilled for a young child is a sensitive growing organism, as quick to profit from good experience as to suffer from bad. Also, the whole approach of the teacher to the child needs to be very gentle; for if antagonism is aroused, great harm is done.

Finally, there is education—that is to say, school and the actual learning process itself. From the beginning children learn by a process of subconscious imitation and it is highly important that those in charge should present good examples of use and functioning and quiet reaction themselves. Later on, as the intelligence begins to develop, much can be taught in school about the working of the body in a practical way, both intellectually and through the opportunity to experiment and to observe. A high degree of skill in teaching the Alexander technique will be required—guidance with the hands will be essential to gain the practical experience of the technique—as well as the necessary knowledge to explain and demonstrate, and to cultivate understanding and interest for the development of a reasoning, conscious guidance and control. Thus, sports and games, athletics, music and dancing, as well as all sorts of other techniques and practical skills will find a place in the curriculum, besides the technique itself. Successful achievement will always be the surest recommendation. As for Physical Education—so-called—this will cease to be a matter of exercises on the old-fashioned lines (as indeed it already has in many schools) but it will be replaced by many other varied activities in which, both theoretically and practically, the child will be able to learn something more about the better use of the self.

Equally, in school work itself, advice and help would be welcomed with methods of work and study, the physiological aspects of learning, of memory, etc., the preparation for examinations; as well as handwriting, drawing and techniques of reading.

Thus it is in the sphere of education that the F. Matthias Alexander Technique will find its most important application. People taught on this basis will be able to

answer the question “How can I best set about doing what I want to do?” Their knowledge of the technique will give them such a practical working knowledge of the human organism that they will not be misled into believing that life is normally conducted along rational lines, or that it is only necessary to think rationally in order to act rationally. They will have had sufficient experience in the difficulties of controlling their own reactions to know that the process of conscious reasoning is not easily cultivated and also that it can only be cultivated by means that take into account the functioning of the organism as a whole. They will be able to make some practical use of new knowledge gained and new discoveries made, in whatever sphere; and in understanding Alexander’s primary control, the anti-gravity mechanism, they will understand that “Man is, indeed, a mechanism; but he is a mechanism which within his limitations of life, sensitivity and growth, is creating and operating himself”.¹⁶

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