

# Beyond Posture

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by Anthony Kingsley:

*We fall upwards into the ocean of Life that supports us. It is the actionless act of vital surrender.*

## **Beyond Posture**

It was a truly wonderful Congress, with so many teachers, students and friends coming together from all over the world to explore the Alexander Technique with open hearts and open minds. I presented the Continuous Learning Sessions to a wide range of participants. Each day drew a different content and a different rhythm from me. I was constantly creating and co-creating my thoughts and responses in relation to the group. Alexander principles are best transmitted in practice, in face-to-face and hands-to-person dialogue. As they say, "You had to be there to get it!" Our meetings were alive and spontaneous. Alexander work is essentially relational. And so, if any of the following ideas seem partial or confusing, I invite you to email me or better still, come and meet me in person. I will try and offer a brief flavour of the themes we explored together at the Congress.

## **Choice and the Myth of Conscious Inhibition**

In our Alexander world, a lot of time and space is devoted to the idea that we need to inhibit our reactions, and choose a better alternative. I suggest that it is impossible to choose to inhibit. By this I mean that we are in fact not capable of actively inhibiting our reactions to anything. Inhibition is not under our conscious volition. What actually happens in reality is that when a stimulus impacts on our organism, we either react to the stimulus, or not. There is simply no time to choose. Our neurological make-up does not offer this kind of option. Neural reactions take milliseconds, and the conscious brain can in no way intercede.

You may then enquire, "But what about those moments when I do actually choose my response to a stimulus? Isn't that proof of my successful inhibition?". The answer is "No!" When you find yourself in a condition of choice, this is proof that inhibition did its work. But you, i.e. your personal ego-driven self, did not do the choosing. At this critical moment, inhibition chose you! This experience seems closer to *grace* rather than *choice*.

It is more accurate to suggest that when things work well, inhibition needs to be present *before* the receipt of a stimulus. This idea runs contrary to the received wisdom that we are required to create space *between* the stimulus and the reaction. Once a stimulus has arrived, it is all too late to do anything! Your response at this point will be determined by all the hard work you have done previously. Essentially, our response to a stimulus is conditioned by our psychophysical state at the receipt of the stimulus, and not by what we think we can achieve afterwards.

It may help to see Inhibition as a state or resource rather than an activity of choice. Inhibition is a noun and not a verb. It is a capacity for non-reaction in the face of life – the ability to keep engaged rather than becoming overwhelmed by 'emotional gusts'. (F M Alexander, 1911) And this resource, rather like a muscle in the brain, can become stronger and more easily available as a result of practice and discipline.

This is our work.

## Giving Directions

The idea of giving directions has confused generations. The way out of this maze is to ask ourselves, “Who is the Director?” Do we really believe that the source of our directions resides in the neocortex, our relatively new brain? How can our limited brains comprehend the vastness of the flow of life, much less direct it consciously? It is much wiser, and more true to know that we are directed *by* Nature rather than the other way around. This is the beautiful and powerful realisation that Alexander arrived at later in his life. In a Eureka moment, he commented to his class:

“By Jove I’ve got it. It’s crystal clear! If only we stop doing the wrong, the right will do itself.” (From a personal discussion with Miss Goldie, c. 1990)

This shift in thinking requires an act of faith rather than effortful ambition.

If it is true that we are directed by Nature, then consciously sending the head *forward and up* makes no sense. And where is forward and up? It cannot exist geographically. It can’t be a place, nor an angle, nor a sensation, and not even a relationship. In fact, the less we know about *forward and up* the better.

I have not come across anyone (including myself) who, when attempting to give directions or sending orders, doesn’t glaze over and perform some rather bizarre muscular contortions. As we explore the value of giving directions, we need to question how we are using ourselves when we are carrying out these instructions. In my experience, most people when asked what they are doing while giving directions, will usually report that they are focusing on some postural part or parts, or visualising some energy movement, or trying to sense some uplift or stretch in the neck and spine. But all this can only lead to a harmful form of concentration and effort. Conversely, it may induce a form of self-paralysis that creates a deadening impact upon our vitality. Have you ever had a conversation with someone who was consciously directing themselves? It’s not a nice experience. It feels like the person has vanished!

Our attempts at self-directing, self-stretching or self-releasing keep us safely removed from our true nature, and stuck in comfortable delusions. Nothing of real value actually changes. We end up making more effort than before or we collapse, and we kid ourselves that something transformational is taking place – that we have changed our habits. But we remain essentially the same and our real habits of thought are left unchallenged. And these habits maintain our status quo – detached from the vibrancy and urgency of our living and present experience. We can instead cultivate an attitude of attentive playfulness.

The most helpful element of the classic directions is the “let” or “allow”, rather than the postural details that follow. This was a dramatic shift from Alexander’s earlier request to “put” the head forward and up. I am sure that we have all experienced moments when we are not at all concerned with the postural directions, and instead we find ourselves in an attitude of “surrender”, and of “letting”. We are in the flow. If we chase after the butterfly, it will surely fly away, but if we move towards inner stillness, the butterfly might just alight on our shoulder. And in this sea of surrender, the postural patterns will normalise of their own accord.

I suspect that many excellent teachers know that their experience denies the classical version of inhibiting and directing. Thankfully, we may not always practice what we preach!

The idea that directions are simply a holding or framing in mind or little wishes or a kind of hopeful intention is equally problematic. It shares the same fallacy that the mind should be occupied with some spatial or imaginative *content* of the head, neck and back, thinking *about* one’s directions or some energy

moving along the spine, an idea of “up”. The moment we request our pupils to hold

any particular *content* in mind, we are actually compromising their spontaneity and their ability to fully participate in the present moment.

1. Alexander first used this new formula in *Use of the Self*, 1932, but he does not indicate when he changed his formulation.

The classical version of sending directions may at best serve as temporary and useful distraction that can neutralise the dominance of a habit of thought, like for example the universal habit of end-gaining. But it can never be a strategy for living.

The real ‘change in thinking’ that Alexander was ultimately aiming for, and the real essence of “thinking in activity”, is not intended to lead to an increase in mental *content* and mental clutter, but rather a change in *quality* of thinking. *Content thinking* embodies mere ghosts in a machine, detached from the sphere of true relationship, whereas *quality thinking* offers the potential of a way of being in connection to the world.

Directions can be understood as the ongoing state of harmony or distortion that is present within each of us and at every moment. It is a vital force. We are for better or worse raising or lowering our standard of functioning as a result of this ever-present and ever-changing drama.

Alexander described the giving of directions as primarily preventative, that is to neutralise our unconscious reactions of mind-body distortion. This is *non-doing* in the fullest sense. For example, the direction “stay back and up”, is not simply a spatial demand. It is rather a description of a psychophysical attitude of *alert and relational non-merging* that we are supported in maintaining by the teacher, and increasingly in our everyday life.

On a simple neurological point, we activate muscle contractions from the motor cortex. There is no separate pathway for releasing messages of contraction. The relaxation of a muscle or group of muscles can only take place as a consequence of the stopping of the original signal activation, i.e. prevention and inhibition.

### **Use of Self and Positions of Mechanical Advantage**

The *monkey position* or the *lunge* are not examples of good use. They are at best, ‘positions of mechanical advantage’. In fact, Alexander first used the term ‘positions of mechanical advantage’, to refer to a range of positions, including what we know today as the *monkey position*. Going into a monkey when working on a pupil, is no guarantee of good work. It might help. But, here is the point that Alexander was making: – positions of advantage support and encourage good use, by minimising the impact of other demanding stimuli on the system.

Conversely, I could work with my shoulders up around my ears, which would be quite uncomfortable after a while, and certainly not an advantage. But I might also have rather good use at the same time. Similarly, I could compress my neck and pull my head into my spine for a short period. This certainly would not feel very nice, but it would not necessarily mean that I could not communicate good use both to myself and the person I am working with. I can demonstrate this experience to anyone who is willing to question the primacy of the neck, head and back.

The conscious *movement* of the head back and down is therefore not the real problem. Ultimately, Alexander was interested in the *reaction* of the nervous system that can be witnessed by the unconscious

act of *throwing* or *snatching* the head back and down – a spasmodic movement.

It should be clear that our reactions to stimuli affect the organism as a whole. We are not only affected in parts of ourselves even though we may develop specific problems. We react with our total psychophysical selves, and this includes our neurological, biochemical, muscular-skeletal, respiratory, digestive and psycho-emotional systems. And therefore, the inhibition of our reactions would affect the totality of our biological and emotional health and functioning.

Alexander himself, later on, was at pains to refute any idea that his Technique was about ergonomics, postures and procedures.

“It’s not getting in and out of chairs even under the best of conditions that is any value: that is simply physical culture...” 2

He was very clear about his purpose:

“...it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.” 3

In other words, improving our use is essentially our growing ability not to react to stimuli both from without and from within the organism.

In my experience, the separation of ‘use’ from “positions of mechanical advantage” was a huge relief to me. Initially I found this departure very challenging. But I also experienced myself increasingly liberated from the straight-jackets of Alexanderishness.

## **The Primary Control and Reactions to Stimuli**

The primary control is *not* the head-neck-back relationship. These two things are not identical. In fact, the head-neck-back relationship is not even primary. It is simply one rather accurate barometer of our state of reaction to stimuli. And it lends itself beautifully to observation. But other barometers exist that are no more and no less primary.

The voice is an excellent barometer of our general psychophysical state. When we are disturbed, our voice will always betray us. Let’s not forget that Alexander was inspired to navigate the territory of the psychophysical self as a result of his voice troubles.

The eyes are a wonderful and powerful reflection of the soul. They don’t lie. The breath mirrors our inner world and so too our body language, including our facial and body gestures. The quality and communication of our touch reflects our mind-body state. Hence, the experience that our hands-on work will always deliver our truth. You give what you are. All these processes are what I would call, “parallel processes”. In other words, none of them are more primary than the others. They are simultaneous.

The primary aim of the Technique is to evolve the capacity to not react to stimuli. The head-neck-back is secondary to this evolving stillness. Miss Goldie, from whom I received a number of lessons over many years, understood this very well:

“So the head-neck back is secondary – it comes out of the stopping. You don’t need to know it, but it’s useful to understand it. The practice is in the stopping...” 4

The Primary Control is the unknown and maybe unknowable self-righting mechanism that animates us all. If left alone, and undisturbed, it acts as an ongoing harmonising constant in our lives.

The Primary Control can only be seen via its manifestations. It cannot be witnessed directly nor

experienced as a sensation to remember. There is no anatomy of the primary control.

We fall upwards into the ocean of Life that supports us. It is the actionless act of vital surrender.

2. F.M Alexander, 1995

3. F M Alexander, 2000

4. Fiona Robb, Not to Do (London: Camon Press) p. 5

### **Applied Conscious Control – A Recipe for Disaster**

But aren't we supposed to apply conscious control to our everyday activities? In *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1911), Alexander did indicate that conscious control of the physical machinery and the parts involved, was indeed a method for attaining physical perfection. When we follow this idea, we engage in self-reflection and try to become conscious of how we perform our actions. But this can only lead to self-consciousness and over-control – the dreaded droid!

But by 1941, he refuted his earlier claim. It is no longer an applied method. I guess that by now, Alexander had recognised the pernicious danger of this type of mental manipulation.

“ ... I use the term ‘conscious control and guidance’ to indicate primarily a plane to be reached rather than a method of reaching it.” 5

Now conscious control is a potential plane of existence, an evolved state. It offers mastery or control over human reaction. Like the non-attachment of Buddhism, it is the fruit of hard work and discipline.

### **Alexander's Books and Writings**

Alexander's books and writings are nothing more, and nothing less than a historical record, an evolution of thought and practice of a determined investigator and passionate navigator of the human condition.

Alexander's four books are not the gospels and need not be treated with divine reverence, but rather critical and reasoned thinking. Many of our confusions in the Alexander world emerge from our tendency to view his writings as text books and signposts for our Alexander knowledge base. We fail to see the evolution in *his* technique and understanding. So when we speak in Alexander's name or quote him, we need to be aware that he may have said something different beforehand or afterwards.

In his first book, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, that was conceived before 1910, Alexander was particularly concerned with a position or positions of mechanical advantage. He saw his role as manipulating parts of the musculature and creating mechanical ease and improved functioning. The pupil's role was to ‘order’ these specific parts of the body under the guidance of the Teacher as a prelude to the development of “conscious control”.

Later in his evolution, 6 Alexander formulated his ideas of a “primary control of use”, which acts as a controlling mechanism of the total organism. This was his first attempt at a unifying principle, and it came to replace his earlier emphasis on positions of mechanical advantage.

And later still, he saw his work in terms of gaining control of human reactions to stimuli. But even then, he never really managed to abandon his earlier injunctions.

Ultimately, I am not concerned with whether my work conforms to a discrete period in Alexander's own

evolution, but rather whether it is true. Blind conformity or slavish obedience to Alexander are the real betrayal of his own vision of constant reevaluation if new facts came to light.

My favourite Alexander book is the one that he did not write, but I believe he would write today.

5. F M Alexander, 2000

6. F M Alexander, 1932

### **Fear Reflexes and Teaching:**

I am more and more convinced by Alexander's discovery that, *learning can never take place when the fear reflexes are unduly excited*.<sup>7</sup> This truth has huge implications. It continues to inspire me more and more in my private teaching as well as in my training School. I sense that it is not fully embodied in the Alexander world.

We really do need to take seriously and consider how we engage with our students and pupils. I am clearly not at my best if I upset or frighten a pupil. And this includes making them feel wrong, stupid or judged. Does this happen in my practice? Yes, of course! I have been teaching for 30 years, but I am not always at my best. And when I fall short of my ideals, my teaching suffers. I need to accept and learn from moments when I fail my students and pupils, and I need to forgive myself. There is always an opportunity for repair and renewal, to make amends. I hope it is obvious that if I am unkind to myself, I am no use to anyone.

I make it clear to the pupil that they have no responsibility to succeed, and if things don't work so well, it is my failure rather than theirs.

I am not inclined today to use terms like "misuse" or bad habits. There are really no such things as bad habits; harmful – maybe. They are best understood as necessary strategies for survival that may lessen when the person feels ready and supported. I do not inform a pupil that they are "wrong". I do not urge them to direct themselves "better". I do not request that a pupil needs to direct more or inhibit more or do less. I do not inform the pupil that they have a problem with their heads necks or backs or any other part. Actually, I don't ask them to achieve anything. Any request to try and achieve will simply activate the fear reflexes, and reinforce the end-gaining approach. This is the problem rather than the solution.

Today, almost the only request I make in a lesson is a movement request. I may ask a pupil to bend their knees, or look around the room, or breathe out, or take their heels into the ground, or stay back. These movement or non-movement requests are always understood, easily carried out and rarely evoke fear, anxiety, or confusion. Compare this to classic inhibition and direction requests:

"I want you to inhibit your reaction to the idea of sitting down, and instead I want you to stop, send your directions to your head neck and back, and then whilst continuing to send these directions to yourself, primarily, secondarily and so on, I want you to give yourself the opportunity of achieving your end using the means-whereby and not end-gaining."

This has to be a recipe for psychosis!

It is reported that one day Alexander was particularly excited and informed one of his assistants, "Now I can give it to them if they want it or not."<sup>8</sup> In other words, the essential harmony and vitality in the teacher will communicate something of value to the pupil. The non-doing, the stillness and the aliveness of the teacher is the real influence. This bypasses any self-request from the pupil.

The pupil is informed by this new experience and not by a request from within or from another to

“change”. Even the idea of change is a problem which can lead to a form of self-violence. Change, if it needs to happen is the fruit of not trying to change! What is called for is essentially an attitude of self-acceptance. My own ambitious agenda for self-change may not conform to organic and natural time which has its own wisdom and unknown ways.

7. F M Alexander, 2004

8. Nanette Walsh, 2004

This is why touch is such an essential element in Alexander communication. The beauty of touch is its directness. It is unmediated by interpretation, fantasy, imagination and analytic conceptualisations.

### **Without Memory, Desire and Understanding:**

The human individual is much more complex and ultimately more simple than we can imagine. To hold both the complexity and the simplicity in the palm of one’s hand is truly a challenge. In this spirit, I would like to share a word from a teacher I never met, but who continues to inspire me – the psychoanalyst and philosopher, Wilfred Bion. He urged his students to abandon or suspend “memory, desire and understanding”. (W. Bion, 1967) He encouraged a discipline that fostered the ability to reside in the unknown.

There are echoes here of Keats’ “Negative Capability”..

“...that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason...” (J. Keats, 1817, 1958)

Note Alexander’s description of the necessity for “an ever-increasing ability on the part of both teacher and pupil to pass from the known to the unknown.” (F. M. Alexander, 1985)

We all want to hold on to something. And our pupils urge us to give them that very something to take away with them, to take home and practise or remember. It is of course human to wish to grasp after certainties, but it is sublime to hold the creative space of not knowing.

### **The Alexander Relationship and Emotional Healing**

The Alexander can serve as a vehicle for emotional healing. And the Alexander teacher is a facilitator in this process. The use of the teacher and the use of the pupil both go into the mix. Use is infectious! In good teaching, the use of the teacher must influence the pupil more than the pupil influences the teacher. And like alchemy, when the conditions are ripe, out of the pot comes gold.

The mind-body self is indivisible, and therefore the impulse towards self-righting and growth is supported in the Alexander relationship. In the space between teacher and pupil lies the potential for processing emotional struggles and pain. How does this work?

First we must explore the function of habits of thought. Why do we find ourselves jumping into the future and away from ourselves? Why is the habit of end-gaining so universal? Why is it so rare in our culture for someone to be able to remain in the present? These questions go to the heart of Alexander’s so called habits of misuse.

Under the influence of emotional disappointment and pain, the body reacts in various ways. In early

childhood, we rarely have the resources to deal with too much pain. When the perceived threats to our psychological survival are sustained and strong, we develop certain strategies which include habitual postural patterns in order to defend against being overwhelmed by the experience. These patterns become fixed and get amplified as we react to the general stimuli of living. We become rigid in the face of danger, we hold our jaws against the urge to sob, we twist against anxiety, we straighten up against the fear of depression or collapse and we compress ourselves to minimise too much excitement.

Our postural distortions and preferences are similar in kind to our behavioural and substance addictions. Our habitual patterns help us cope, and enable us to manage ourselves. They are strategies for survival. They will remain and should remain until we feel safe enough to lessen them. The process of withdrawal can be quite uncomfortable.

It is a myth to assume that the action of the primary control naturally brings about a state of being which is nice, easy and pleasurable. Improving use is not a lollipop of instant gratification. Yes, it can sometimes feel this way. But in this same territory of emptiness and ease lives our storehouse of memory and experience.

This is why the move towards freedom and quiet may elicit strong emotions and memories. Lying down work can be a powerful trigger. Minimising our familiar patterns of control can evoke anxiety of 'losing control'. Becoming less of a control freak may well feel threatening.

Deep within the undisturbed and undistracted self resides both terror and bliss, laughter and tears, sadness and joy. The teacher needs to support us in this space of raw and undiluted experience without doing anything about it; to contain it within the embrace of loving stillness. The teacher must have navigated his or her own internal world to a sufficient degree in order to hold the arising experience.

In this role, the teacher is a special kind of friend, and is engaged in a mutual dialogue. Martin Buber suggests that in a genuine "I-Thou Relationship", healing through meeting is possible. (M. Buber, 1970) If the teacher can hold our hand as we are immersed in the pool of unresolved struggles, then this toxic substance can be transformed into meaningful nourishment. This food can in turn be a source for emotional growth. Healing is a product of digesting and processing experience.

Recent research in attachment theory has indicated a mechanism called "limbic resonance".<sup>9</sup> Similar to empathy, it suggests that the capacity for sharing deep emotional states arises from the limbic system of the brain. The powerful attunement and synchronising of two systems can lead to increased health and profound personality changes.

The Alexander Technique has the potential to enrich our lives. It can increase our capacity to tolerate and more fully participate in the tapestry of every day life, with its mixture of heaven and hell.

## **A Distant Horizon Beckons**

If there is truth in the Alexander Technique, then it will be shared by other universal truths. The Alexander Technique as passed on down the line of Alexander Teachers, from Alexander until today, does not hold a monopoly of truth and may indeed hold a number of delusions. Feel free to expand your own horizons without the limitations of received wisdom. There is no holy writ and no holy legacy. You can tear down the carved idols of Alexander doctrine that do not conform to your direct and lived experience. Alexander himself saw the dangers of 'fixed ideas and prejudices'.

You can't be a timid disciple and a brave explorer at the same time.

And yet with all of this, I am deeply aware of how I am just touching the surface of a vast enterprise. I



notice more and more acutely how often I am “not here”, but rather lost in the vortex of reactivity. It's tough for a perfectionist like me to accept the human, and not to aspire to the angelic. I sense that these constant reminders offer me the potential for deepening my self-compassion and hopefully my compassion for others.

Today, I feel more able to sing my broken Hallelujah.

9. T. Lewis, F. Armini, R. Lannon, 2000

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