

The Alexander Technique and Somatic Education

By Bobby Rosenberg, Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique

“Surely, I argued, if it is possible for feeling to become untrustworthy as a means of direction, it should also be possible to make it trustworthy again” (F. M. Alexander, 1984/1932, p. 1).

After having observed the poor state of his own functioning, including problems involving the voice, breathing, posture, balance, and body expression, F. M. Alexander (1869-1955) investigated and observed that he himself was causing these problems through muscular interference—misusing himself. These undue tensions, being habitual, were not immediately evident sensorially, in spite of their constant damaging effect. Eventually, his research led him to discover a guidance and control system that organizes the body for optimum functioning and coordinates the distribution of psychophysical processes by starting with the head and spinal column—the primary control. In nature this mechanism is automatically activated in response to a stimulus, preparing the organism for action or reaction.

The human being, like other vertebrate animals, relies instinctively and unconsciously upon kinesthesia to coordinate the guidance and control systems, affecting such vital aspects as bal-

ance, locomotion, partial movements, voice, breathing, and other physiological functions like blood circulation and digestion. When the natural conditions are neither defective nor impeded, kinesthesia is the mind-body communication link that helps to assure the most natural and efficient conditions of use and functioning. However, as inefficiency becomes the standard, kinesthesia becomes an unreliable coordinator, reporting to the brain that the new (incorrect) conditions are the correct ones, leading to a vicious cycle of misuse and malfunction.

With the development of civilization, humans have created an unnatural environment and adapted themselves to a sedentary lifestyle with highly developed mental processes, both disintegrators of the natural psychophysical unity, which have brought with them a gradual lowering of the standards of use and functioning. Alexander presented a hypothesis that involves self-direction and guided sensory education, objectives of which are the establishment of a reliable sense register and the conscious activation of the primary control mechanism as the basis for organically structured use of the self. As he understood the conditions

leading to his own generalized misuse, he reasoned that improvement of his use and functioning was dependent upon the recovery of reliable kinesthetic guidance and control. Additionally, he found that this was an impossible task without the recuperation of the primary control mechanism, which he was able to achieve through a long, conscious, and rational process.

The Alexander Technique involves a teacher activating the student’s primary control mechanism so that she does not have to rely upon her unreliable kinesthesia to guide her, the result of which is a recovery of natural and efficient use and functioning. (I have made the arbitrary decision to always refer to the teacher in the masculine and the student in the feminine throughout this paper.) By directing herself consciously and becoming sensorially aware of the new conditions, the student rescues what was originally unconscious—sensory guidance. She gradually becomes able to activate her own primary control, focusing on and analyzing the resultant sensory information, in effect creating a sense register that will guide and assure that the effort needed for any activity is just and efficient.

The Field of Somatics

“F. Matthias Alexander, father of the Alexander Technique, was the first person to take somatic education out of the realm of shamanistic mystery and establish it as a verifiable, pragmatic technique” (Thomas Hanna, 1990-91, p. 4).

Since the times of F. M. Alexander, at the end of the nineteenth century, we have seen a steady growth of practices that invite the individual to participate in the processes involved in the improvement of her body conditions in the integrated, psychophysical sense. Some of these practices developed into therapeutic methods and others into reeducation systems; still others, like Taiji Quan, yoga, and Zen, were imported from Asia and tailored to the contextual interests and needs of the late 1960s, when the term *somatics* took on a special significance.

In the traditional sense, “The term *somatic* refers to the *body*, as distinct from some other entity, such as the *mind*. The word comes from the Greek word *Σωματικὸς (Somatikòs)*, meaning ‘of the body.’ It has different meanings in various disciplines” (Wikipedia).

To place the term in its contemporary context, I have cited the definitions of *somatics* and *somatic education* from the published works of Thomas Hanna:

“Somatics is the field which studies the soma: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception. When a human being is observed from the outside—i.e., from a third-person viewpoint—the phenomenon of the human *body* is perceived. But, when this same human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human *soma*.”

“The two distinct viewpoints for observing a human being are built into the very nature of human observation, which is equally capable of being internally self-aware as well as externally aware. The soma, being internally perceived, is categorically distinct from a body, not because the subject is different, but because the mode of viewpoint is different: it is immediate proprioception—a sensory mode that provides unique data.

“Reciprocity between sensing and moving is at the heart of the somatic process. . . . The human is not merely a self-aware soma, passively observing itself (as well as observing its scientific observer), but it is doing something

else simultaneously: it is acting upon itself: i.e., it is always engaged in the process of self-regulation” (Hanna, 1986).

And,

“Somatic education is the use of sensory-motor learning to gain greater voluntary control of one’s physiological process. It is ‘somatic’ in the sense that the learning occurs within the individual as an internalized process.

“In its purity, somatic education is self-initiated and self-controlled. However, somatic education has emerged during the twentieth century as a procedure whereby this internalized learning process is initiated by a teacher who stimulates and guides the learner through a sensory-motor process of physiological change” (Hanna, 1990-91, p. 4).

As far as I can tell, Alexander never used the word “somatics,” but his frequent references to “kinesthesia,” “sensory awareness,” and “feeling” place him squarely in the center of the field of somatics. In this article, my particular interest is in Alexander’s insistence upon the teacher guiding the student in the recovery of a reliable kinesthetic sense, whereby she can begin to rescue the natural and efficient use of herself.

Hanna Somatic Education

Considered by many to be the “father of the somatics movement,” Thomas Hanna created the Somatic Education system based on the observation that “as many as fifty percent of the cases of chronic pain suffered by human beings are caused by sensory-motor amnesia (SMA)—a condition in which the sensory-motor neurons of the voluntary cortex have lost some portion of their ability to control all or some of the muscles of the body” (Hanna, 1990-91, p. 7). He suggests that instead of therapeutic treatment, a reeducation of the voluntary sensory-motor cortex is the most viable means for overcoming this loss.

As movement and postural habits are developed, the body-mind becomes conditioned to repeat the muscular patterns involved until they become unconscious. The habitual feeling, if indeed it is felt at all, fades into the background and is registered as “normal”; one gradually becomes unable to intervene in the means whereby the movement is achieved, and the unconscious use is repeated. If, as most somatic educators agree, these patterns of use are defective, all activity becomes harmful; hence, the need for sensory-

motor education.

Hanna’s goal is to overcome SMA by becoming sensorially aware of the functions that have been lost via sensory-motor education. He gives credit to many of his forerunners, particularly to Alexander and Feldenkrais. To the first, he attributes “means whereby,” or teacher guidance to help the student become sensorially aware of unconscious involuntary movement patterns while demonstrating the desired muscular response. However, even though Hanna, like Feldenkrais, accepts the need for a special focus on the use of the head, neither seems to have placed much importance on what I consider to be the outstanding contribution of Alexander—the primary control mechanism.

Somatic education is clearly intended as an antidote to the harmful effects of the inefficient use of the human being in modern times. In the 1960s Thomas Hanna, together with many others who had experienced and were exploring the implications of their “body epiphany” (Maupin, 1998), began to use the term “somatics” to refer to the first-person experience of the body, as distinct from the third-person perspective used in medicine and therapy. The Alexander Technique, having been developed prior to the concept of somatics, nonetheless is founded upon the realization that the modern-day human being’s sense register has become unreliable, leading to misuse and malfunctioning of the self. One of Alexander’s principal concerns is the recovery of this sense register—obviously just an earlier way of expressing what the post-Alexander somatics practitioners call somatic education.

The Role of Sensory Education in the Alexander Technique

“The mind has not been taught to register correctly the tension or, in other words, to gauge accurately the amount of muscular effort required to perform certain acts, the expenditure of effort always being in excess of what is required” (F. M. Alexander, 1910, p. 83).

A study of Alexander’s major publications reveals a gradual evolution of what he considers to be his technique. I have focused on his definition of what comprises a lesson, together with a brief theoretical framework—with emphasis on his particular methodology for guiding the student in her acquisition of a new sensory experience.

His first book, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1910), includes the previously printed pamphlets, *Reeducation of the Kinesthetic Systems Concerned with the Development of Robust Physical Well-being* (c. 1908) and *Conscious Control (Man's Supreme Inheritance) in Relation to Human Evolution in Civilization* (c. 1908). This compilation of almost 20 years of experience in the development and refinement of his work contains multiple references to "debauched kinesthesia" and presents a clear procedure as to the teaching and learning of his technique, to which he referred at this point as "conscious control."

What appears here as the "doctrines of antagonistic action and mechanical advantage" (Alexander, 1910, p. 186) later evolved into the much more comprehensive and concise concept of primary control. The inference of a coordinating factor in the human psychophysical organism is paramount to his theoretical structure, and the deterioration of use and functioning in modern human beings leads logically to the need for reeducation:

"By this process of reeducation an effective installation is made of the reflex muscular systems involved through the creation of an intelligent directive power on the part of the individual, thus removing a crude and useless *kinesthesia*, which must be regarded as either debauched or deformed, and establishing one of valid and unflinching function" (p. 187).

As for the causes of the deterioration previously mentioned, it is clearly due to the processes that have evolved in our civilization, including the constant effect of sedentarism on school children.

"The Kinesthetic Systems concerned

with correct and healthy bodily movements and postures have become demoralized by the habits engendered in the schoolroom through the restraint enforced at a time when natural activity should have been encouraged and scientifically directed, and in the crouching positions necessitated by useless and irrational deskwork" (p. 198).

Then, he presents a precise definition of his technique, which I have paraphrased and presented as five distinct but interacting aspects.

1. Active participation: The student must have a clear understanding of her own misuse, as demonstrated by the teacher, and willingness to participate in the process of recovering her good use.

2. Inhibition: The teacher must teach the student to understand the erroneous ideas that result in her misuse, be they conscious or unconscious. He must teach the student to eradicate these preconceived ideas and inhibit her habitual way of directing her actions.

3. Self-direction: The student must learn to consciously send the correct mental orders and distinguish between giving an order and carrying it out in her habitual way.

4. Attention to the process: The teacher must teach the student that, in order to overcome her habitual manner of doing things, it is important to consider the means more than the ends.

5. Guided sensory education: When the student has practiced her mental orders, the teacher must guide the change, bringing about the use of muscles in a coordinated and non-habitual way (Alexander, c. 1908, pp. 16-19).

Alexander considered his second major work, *Constructive Conscious*



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Control of the Individual (1923/1985), to be a much clearer representation of his work than MSI. He dedicates a great deal of this book to the development of his theory regarding sensory appreciation. For an in-depth look at Alexander's thinking, see "Consideration of Three Stages of Man's Development in relation to Deterioration of Sensory Appreciation" (1923/1985, pp. 39-53). This pseudo-anthropological discourse gives us an interesting insight to Alexander's view of the far-reaching influence of his work, and it presents a believable explanation for the state of man's misuse and malfunctioning in modern times.

Having stated his case that unreliable sensory appreciation is a universal problem in our age, he introduces his recently discovered method of "expert manipulation"—what would later be called "hands-on" by Alexander teachers and other somatics practitioners. At this point, his technique "involves correct manipulation on the part of the teacher in the matter of giving the pupil correct experiences in sensory appreciation, in the spheres of reeducation, readjustment and coordination" (1923/1985, p. 122). Describing his teaching technique in updated terminology, he is explicit in the role of the teacher's hands:

"He (the teacher) tells the pupil that, on receiving the directions or guiding orders, he must not attempt to carry them out; that, on the contrary, *he must inhibit the desire to do so in the case of each and every order which is given to him*. He must instead project the guiding orders as given to him whilst his teacher at the same time,

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by means of manipulation, will make the required readjustments and bring about the necessary coordinations, in this way performing for the pupil the particular movement or movements required, and giving him the new reliable sensory appreciation and the very best opportunity possible to connect the different guiding orders before attempting to put them into practice” (1923/1985, pp. 152-153).

Lawrence Gold (2006) has compared the methodology of Hanna Somatic Education with that of the Alexander Technique, which involves a heightening of kinesthetic awareness and exemplifies the somatic principle that “somas perceive by means of contrast” (p. 4). Repeated guided demonstration by the teacher (including the activation of the primary control mechanism) is the key to learning the new patterns and directing them voluntarily. Unlike Alexander, where the teacher substitutes a more efficient pattern for the student’s inhibited pattern, the sensory magnification in Hanna Somatic Education is brought about by the learner’s contrasting her own habitual level of muscle contraction with controlled contraction and controlled release.

The Use of the Self (1932), which is usually considered to be Alexander’s most lucid and well-written book, contains a detailed description of the evolution of his technique. Presented in a style in which the influence of John Dewey is evident, the first chapter concludes with what has remained the procedure for applying the Alexander Technique to the use of oneself. It contains all of the elements mentioned in *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, clearly emphasizing direction, inhibition, and attention to the process. What was earlier referred to as “position of mechanical advantage” now appears as “primary control.” And, although there is no new reference to the kinesthetic problem, he states quite clearly that “I was indeed suffering from a delusion that is practically universal, the delusion that because we are able to do what we ‘will to do’ in acts that are habitual and involve familiar sensory experiences, we shall be equally successful in doing what we ‘will to do’ in acts which are contrary to our habit and therefore involve sensory experiences that are unfamiliar” (1932/1984, p. 16).

Although no significant changes in his procedure are presented in his last book, *The Universal Constant in*

Living (1947), there are innumerable references establishing the importance of the primary control. In an “appreciation,” American anatomist G. E. Coghill succinctly summarizes the procedure from his scientific perspective:

“The practice of Mr. F. Matthias Alexander in treating the human body is founded, as I understand it, on three well-established biological principles: (1) that of the integration of the whole organism in the performance of particular functions; (2) that of proprioceptive sensitivity as a factor in determining posture; (3) that of the primary importance of posture in determining muscular action. These principles I have established through forty years in anatomical and physiological study of *Amblystoma* in embryonic and larval stages, and they appear to hold for other vertebrates as well” (cited in Alexander, 1947, p. xx).

Conclusion

According to my research, a lesson in the Alexander Technique must include active participation on the part of the student, inhibition and direction, attention to the process (or what Alexander eventually called “means-whereby

versus end-gaining”), and guided sensory education. Practitioners of somatic education, as exemplified in Feldenkrais and Hanna, have always recognized Alexander’s contribution of these “means whereby” as essential to their own work, and thus to posterity. What differentiates this technique from other somatic techniques is the causal relationship between faulty sensory perception and the deterioration of the primary control mechanism. In the Alexander Technique, the establishment of a reliable sense register is dependent upon the ability to consciously inhibit habitual impulses while directing the activation of the primary control. I consider the following points to be fundamental to guided sensory education in the Alexander Technique:

- The activation of the primary control is basic to all functions of the human being in activity: posture, movement, voice, and breathing (among others).
- The kinesthetic system, which is dependent upon the proper and efficient functioning of the primary control, is the basis for registering the amount of tension used to carry out any activity.

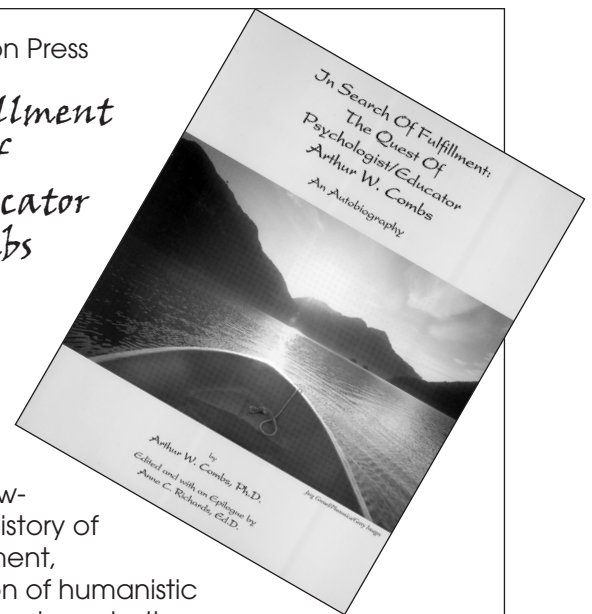
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- In modern times, the unnatural qualities of the human being's activity cause deterioration in the natural efficiency of use and functioning, and the mere desire to improve is rarely successful, due to the corresponding deterioration of the sense register that guides all self-controlled processes.
- Education for the conscious activation of the primary control, which brings about an improvement of coordinated use of the psychophysical self, is a prerequisite for improvement in the use of the parts involved in any activity.
- Sensory education in the Alexander Technique should be somatic in nature (a first-person experience) and guided by a person who has consciously learned to reactivate the primary control as a basis for efficient and coordinated use of the self in any activity.

Looking at the situation very simply, most people have some somatic sense. People are capable of feeling what they are doing, although it is usually applied to activities in a general movement sense (I can feel that I'm walking, singing, playing a piano, etc.) rather than in the very particular method that Alexander and other somatic educators suggest (a muscle contracting or lengthening). In the Alexander Technique the teacher guides the student through the activation of the primary control while

performing carefully selected activities with a constant reference to key muscular reactions that are compared and contrasted on a consciously constructed sense register. These are then used by the student to analyze their effects on her use and functioning. As she recovers her natural and efficient use, she also rescues the reliability of her sensory appreciation.

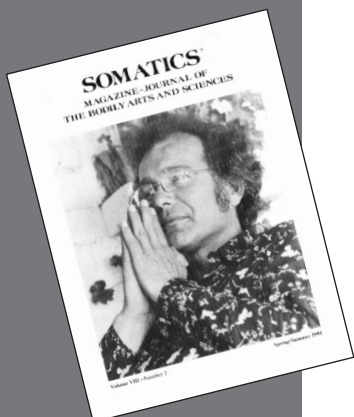
Somatics, as we know it, began at the end of the nineteenth century in the work of F. M. Alexander, even though most other somatic education systems do not contemplate what I consider to be the most fundamental aspect of the Alexander Technique—the activation of the primary control and all it implies. In spite of the fact that many Alexander Teachers are reluctant to classify the Alexander Technique as somatic education, its uniqueness is not diminished by recognizing the undeniable fact that its basic educational process is somatic in nature. ☺

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