

Forward and up

by **Pedro de Alcantara**

An introduction to the Alexander Technique

The very essence of change demands coming into contact with the unknown. (1)F.M. Alexander

1.The General Principles

The Use of the Self

Picture, in your mind's eye, a four-year-old girl laughing with delight at something she has seen or heard. Then ask yourself the following question: Is her laughter the expression of a physical or a mental state? You will soon conclude that her laughter contains the whole of her being – her mind, her body, her emotions, her creativity, her perceptions of the world and of herself.

Perform this experiment a few more times. Imagine a concert artist on stage, a driver during rush hour, a mother breastfeeding her baby; then ask yourself whether their actions are primarily physical or primarily mental. In truth, all human beings reveal their whole, indivisible selves moment by moment. Their gestures may be awkward or masterly, executed with a degree of self-awareness or under a fog of distraction; regardless, the essential unity of their lives is constantly manifested in all that they do.

And yet we tend to separate body and mind in our assessment of ourselves and of others around us. Symptomatic of this split is that we see the workings of the body as separate from the behavior of the body's owner, so to speak. "My shoulders are tight," we tend to say; or, "My back is killing me." If we embraced the unity between body and mind – that is, the inseparability of the physical "doing" and the mind that wills that "doing" – we might say "I'm tightening my shoulders," or "I'm misusing my back." This represents a different attitude, one in which we sense and accept our responsibility for our state of being.

Language both reflects and shapes the way we think. To free ourselves of the belief that "the body" and "the mind" operate separately, and of the consequences of this disconnection, we need to free ourselves of our very language. Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) understood this well and chose his vocabulary carefully. On the one hand, he relied on little technical jargon; the glossary of the Technique has no more than half a dozen terms. On the other hand, he refrained from using words which imply a separation of body and mind, like "body mechanics" and "mental states." Instead, he spoke simply of "the self," which "reacts" and "functions." We can say unequivocally that the Alexander Technique is not a method of physical relaxation, of posture, or of the use of the body, but of The Use of the Self – as Alexander titled his third book, originally published in 1932.

Stimulus and Reaction

The laughing child of our example is reacting to something she has heard, seen, sensed, or imagined. Her life is a never-ending succession of reactions to a never-ending succession of stimuli. And so is anyone's, for the flow of life and its excitement never stop. Indeed, to be alive is to react, and to react is both inevitable and desirable. A problem arises when one's reaction is not appropriate or adequate to the needs of the situation. We all know men and women who react quickly, strongly, and negatively to almost all that happens to them. It is as if they are ready to react, always in the same way, regardless of the situation in which they find themselves. Unwilling to sense each situation as it unfolds, and incapable of deciding and acting according to the uniqueness of the situation, they do not so much react to a situation as to their fixed, preconceived idea of what a

situation is or will be. Needless to say, they may well not be aware that their attitudes, not the situation itself, is the cause of the difficulty.

The person fighting a situation with a fixed mind – be it a violinist hacking through a difficult passage backstage before a concert, an annoyed bus driver during rush hour, or a mother impatient with a crying child – shows multiple signs of strain. Each person is different: one is brusque and stiff, another hesitant and timid; one lacks suppleness, another vigor. Most are animated by excessive tension (or, more precisely, by the wrong kind of tension, wrongly applied, and for the wrong length of time). These strains, and the high emotions that underlie them, constitute a misuse of the self. Repeated misuse may well lead to disagreeable feelings and sensations, aches and pains, and – in due course – illness and disability.

End-gaining

Why do we misuse ourselves? Many answers have been suggested, including education (or mis-education), imitation, the stress of modern life, lack of time, and so on. But in his diagnosis of misuse F.M. Alexander again showed his insight. If misuse is what we do, its origin is in what we wish to do. And, by and large, we wish to attain quick, easy, direct results in all that we do. Alexander called the unreasonable wishing that motivates our misuse “end-gaining.” He considered it a universal tendency and thought that it – not education, imitation, or modern life – was the ultimate cause of our difficulties.

End-gaining is so prevalent that we are almost unaware of its presence and importance – it is considered normal. Economic policy and political discourse, for instance, are often affected by the end-gaining of officials who try to produce short-term results (perhaps ahead of an election) despite the long-term costs to the nation. In all the arts, there are creators who aim for “effect.” We watch a movie and become conscious of the director’s effort to manipulate our emotions and extract a tear from our eyes; such a manipulation is a form of end-gaining. A tennis player who, overly keen on the win, smashes the ball into the net, has committed a small act of end-gaining.

And we, human beings of average ability leading our daily lives, sitting, standing, walking, talking, driving, interacting with other people, all end-gain and misuse ourselves. The simple act of moving from a standing to a sitting position illustrates end-gaining and misuse to perfection. People sit down as if they were looking for the chair with their buttocks; the chair itself is their desired end, which they pursue unthinkingly, inattentively, automatically. In the process they tend to contract the head into the neck, lift and round the shoulders, jut the chest forwards, and stick the buttocks backwards. Alexander teachers see the end-gaining of simple daily activities as fertile ground for their work.

Alexander contrasted the “end-gaining principle” with the “means-whereby principle,” his term for the series of intermediate steps and indirect procedures that allow us to achieve our goals in the manner best suited to each situation. In the case of sitting and standing, these may include suspending the action for a moment; becoming aware of the assumptions one makes (most times unconsciously) about where the chair may be and how to reach it; sensing one’s tendency to rush or to block an action; taking some time to execute other gestures, directly or indirectly related to sitting and standing; and other procedures still. In time, these would lead the pupil to sense how he end-gains and how to stop end-gaining, with all the consequences that such a change of attitude entails.

Faulty Sensory Awareness and Habit

Sensory appreciation conditions conception – you can’t know a thing by an instrument that is wrong.
(2) *F.M. Alexander*

Alexander recognized that there exist several obstacles to altering and eliminating end-gaining. Two of these are interrelated. First, most people are unaware of how they use and misuse themselves – they are unlikely to perceive accurately what they are doing and how they are doing it. For instance, when most people see pictures or videos of themselves they exclaim, “That isn’t me! I can’t possibly look like that!” Alexander called this “faulty sensory awareness” – a nearly universal phenomenon that plays a fundamental role in his Technique.

We all learn in school that we have five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Yet we have another sense, of which we are less aware despite its great significance to our health and well-being. Indeed, being oblivious to this all-important sense is one of the reasons we become unhealthy. Muscles, joints, and tendons have sense organs called proprioceptors, which send feedback to the nervous system about the position of a body part relative to the rest of the body, and the effort being made to achieve, maintain, or change that position. The neck muscles are particularly well supplied with proprioceptors. By misusing your head and neck you cause such distortions to your proprioception that it ceases to be reliable, thereby affecting your sensations of position, movement, balance, tonus, tension, relaxation, effort, and fatigue. A vicious circle then develops: the more you misuse yourself, the less reliable your sensory awareness becomes. And as your sense impressions grow ever more inaccurate, your use deteriorates accordingly.

Closely intertwined with faulty sensory awareness is a second obstacle to change: habit. We do not pay attention to what is habitual in the somewhat vain hope of being better able to process and understand what is unfamiliar. We get so used to our gestures, our voices, our smells that we end up taking them for granted, and finish by ignoring them. By neglecting, ignoring, or distorting our proprioception, we risk basing our interactions with the world on information that is unclearly received or understood. Habit, sensory awareness, and the use and misuse we make of ourselves, then, are intimately connected with one another. It was to break the vicious circle of misuse and faulty sensory awareness and to impart kinesthetic information reliably that Alexander started using his hands to touch his pupils during lessons.

Inhibition

Everyone is always teaching one what to do, leaving us still doing the things we shouldn’t do.(3) *F.M. Alexander*

To become a flexible, adaptable, lively human being, one’s first task consists in becoming able not to react habitually and automatically to the endless stimulation of life. The child at play, the wild animal hunting its prey, the athlete preparing to pole-vault all have a degree of choice in what they do. They can wait, sense, process information, and decide on what to do (however quickly or slowly); or they can do before sensing and processing the information at hand. F.M. Alexander named the process of refusing to react in an habitual and automatic manner “inhibition,” and he demonstrated in his teaching that we can enhance, consciously, this capacity that we possess instinctively at birth.

All words play different roles according to context. Before “inhibition” took the meaning that, thanks to the work of Sigmund Freud, most people use today, the word meant the physiological contrary of “excitation” – a body part, for instance, can be excited or inhibited during a gesture. Within the Alexander profession the word “inhibition” does not mean the suppression of natural emotions, as expressed in the sentence “He’s a very inhibited little boy.” Rather, it means the healthy and constructive capacity not to react habitually and automatically to all that happens to us or around us. In not reacting the operative element is giving up the desire to react; inhibition is not so much a matter of suspending a reaction temporarily, but of refusing altogether to react in a habitual manner. When a habit is harmful, inhibiting it becomes exceedingly beneficial. But note that inhibition does

not mean stopping a misuse (the contraction of the neck, for instance, when one opens one's mouth), but stopping the end-gaining that causes the misuse (which may well be a whole pattern of thought and speech).

The wild animal makes instinctive choices when hunting, feeding its young, exploring a new territory, and so on. The hungry cheetah who stalks its prey and waits for the right moment to pounce demonstrates its capacity to inhibit despite the absence of conscious, intellectual decision-making. We too are born with an instinctive animal capacity to inhibit. We can use it as it came to us at birth. We can become conscious of it, which is certainly one of the aims of all education, from potty training to philosophy classes at university. And we can also re-train our inhibitory capacity so that it works reflexively in daily life. Inhibition, like so many human aptitudes, can work anywhere along the continuum from unconsciousness to consciousness. The concert pianist making myriad decisions to do or not to do on stage, some consciously, others unconsciously, others still by learned habit, demonstrates the multiplicity of inhibitory processes in action.

The Primary Control

The hunting cheetah, the laughing child, and the authoritative concert pianist share several characteristics. One of the most striking is that they all display a certain orientation of the head and neck in relation to the rest of the body. The cheetah spots a prey in the distance. Suddenly it points its head forward and up, and at once – quite as a consequence of its pointing its head forward and up – its whole body becomes taut, dynamic, ready to run and pounce.

Alexander called this coordinative trigger, which is operative in all vertebrates, the “primary control,” and demonstrated that the way one uses one's primary control determines one's total coordination directly, and one's functioning indirectly. Watch a young child learning how to stand on his legs or walk. His use of the primary control may be incipient and tentative. And yet, the way he directs his head and neck will eventually determine whether his movements are easy and elegant or awkward and labored. Similarly for the older child skating or riding a bicycle, and, indeed, for all adults in all situations.

The primary control is not a position. Given the right coordinative conditions, all positions of the head and neck can be healthy. A skillful dancer or martial artist can put his head almost anywhere he wants without harming himself. In the absence of the coordinative conditions that give a dancer his elegance and suppleness, however, most positions of the head and neck are unhealthy, some more so than others. Pulling the head back and down, for instance, is particularly harmful, as the head then bears down heavily upon the neck and spine, shortening and narrowing the whole back.

Direction

There is no such thing as a right position, but there is such a thing as a right direction. (4) *F.M. Alexander*

When one shakes a stranger's hand for the first time, one immediately receives a lot of knowledge about the person in question. The handshake contains multiple types of information, such as temperature, force, the shape of the grip, and so on. The touch of the hand may be agreeable or displeasing, firm or floppy, hard and pointy or supple and warm. We might perceive from the hand a quality of contraction or its opposite, expansion. These kinesthetic qualities that we sense intuitively in a handshake are actually present throughout the body – the arms and shoulders, the neck, the whole back, the legs, and so on – in ever-changing combinations of contraction and expansion that

are unique to each individual. Let us call these qualities “directions.” They are independent of bodily positions; two people standing next to each other in similar postures may be directing in different ways, one dynamically elongating his spine, the other shortening and contracting it.

Writing about directions in *The Use of the Self* Alexander spoke of them as “the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms.” (5) Directions indicate an orientation in space, a quality of muscle tone (slack, firm, over-contracted, and so on), and a flow of energy. More broadly, they also indicate the very intention that a gesture carries – hence our ability to make a partial assessment of someone’s personality based on his handshake.

Directions do not necessarily cause movement, but they prepare movement and imbue it with qualities of power, flexibility, stability, and others still. Some Alexander teachers make a distinction between “giving oneself an order” and the kinesthetic direction (an orientation in space, for instance) that results from the order. The distinction helps learners not to do a direction the way they might do other muscular actions (like lifting an arm, for instance).

Healthy direction depends on the opposition between different forces. If you direct both shoulders outwards, away from your neck, then your left shoulder will be in opposition to your right one, with the result that your back will widen – a very beneficial outcome. These opposing forces are operative throughout the body; Alexander called them “antagonistic pulls.” The body is also adept at opposing a force that acts upon it from the outside – for instance, by countering the downward pull of gravity. If not harmonized, these antagonistic pulls distort the body and twist it out of balance; this we see when people end-gain and misuse themselves.

Children and naturally well-coordinated adults direct themselves intuitively, perhaps without being aware that they are doing so. Like inhibiting, directing is an innate capacity that can be re-trained and brought to a higher level of efficiency. And, like inhibiting, directing can happen anywhere along the continuum from subconsciousness to consciousness. Inhibition and direction are closely intertwined. To inhibit is to say, “I shall not do this,” and to direct is to say, “Let me make that possible.” Every one of our actions is determined by the outcome of this double decision-making process.

2. The Practical Framework

The Essence of a Lesson

You are not here to do exercises or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and to learn to deal with it. (6)*F.M. Alexander*

Even though people often seek out the Technique to deal with health problems such as backache, arthritis, depression, and so on, what takes place in an Alexander lesson is a learning process, rather than a therapeutic one. The aim of the Alexander teacher is not to treat or cure patients, but to teach pupils how to inhibit their end-gaining habits and reactions, and how to direct their whole selves with particular emphasis on the primary control.

The Technique has deep-reaching therapeutic effects on both “physical” and “mental” illnesses (and these quote marks indicate that the physical and mental so interact as to be inseparable). Yet these effects take place indirectly, as a result of the pupil’s ability to prevent his or her habitual misuses. In attempting to affect an illness directly, both teacher and pupil risk end-gaining and neglecting the very processes which allow an illness to change and disappear.

In an Alexander lesson, pupils do not learn how to do the right thing; rather, they learn how to stop doing the wrong thing. If an illness or discomfort is caused by something that the pupil does, he or she cannot “be cured” of it by any means other than stopping doing the thing that causes it. It goes without saying that the Technique, effective as it is, cannot address all the needs of an individual. In many situations the Technique is but a complement to therapy and traditional medicine, and in many others – a psychotic episode would be a clear example – the Technique may not be able to play a role at all.

An Alexander lesson usually lasts from 30 to 60 minutes. Unlike in a medical examination, the pupil stays fully clothed throughout the lesson. The activities used in an Alexander lesson are usually of a psychomotor nature: sit, stand, lean forwards or backwards, turn one’s head, say a vowel or a word, walk, lose one’s balance, and so on. There are no set ways of teaching the principles of the Technique. Any and every object may be used as a teaching aid: a saddle, juggling balls, pen and paper, a computer, a musical instrument. The main thrust of the lesson is, simply, for a pupil to face a stimulus and learn how to observe and change his reaction to it, if indeed he deems this change necessary. When a teacher proposes a procedure in a lesson, the purpose is not so much to master the procedure itself but to use it as a means to a greater end. “Talk about a man’s individuality and character: it’s the way he uses himself,” (7) Alexander once said. Each activity in a lesson, however easy or complex, becomes a laboratory to study the use of the self and thereby affect a pupil’s individuality and character.

Re-education, Reason and Emotion

We can throw away the habit of a lifetime in a few minutes if we use our brains. (8)*F.M. Alexander*

To some extent, traditional education consists in leading children from their natural, innate state to a normal one – that is, normal according to the precepts embraced by the society and culture in which they find themselves. Through education, children risk developing those seemingly normal end-gaining habits and their corresponding misuse that, in time, cause them any number of “physical” and “mental” troubles. If the child – now a teenager, a young adult, or a mature human being – then seeks an Alexander teacher, the passage from normal to natural that the Technique entails will correspond to a re-education of the whole person. The key to Alexandrian re-education, then, is unlearning end-gaining habits, thereby recovering one’s freedom of childhood but within one’s adult outlook.

When we find ourselves in the process of end-gaining, we tend to be dominated by urges that are misplaced, mis-timed, or mis-proportioned. Reason and emotion, consciousness and subconsciousness, thought and sensation all co-exist in a complex relationship that is rather less compartmentalized than we sometimes assume. For instance, it is impossible to “think” something about a situation if one has not perceived, felt, and sensed a great deal about the situation. The aim of Alexandrian re-education is not to make reason prevail over emotion, much less to make thought suppress feelings and sensations; instead it is to have them collaborate fruitfully and positively. The person who learns to inhibit and to direct may well appear more “reasonable” to others, but his or her emotions are as lively, as dynamic, as human as those of anyone else.

Verbal Instructions

Verbal instructions and touch are two of the mainstays of most Alexander teachers’ work. In many ways the use of words in Alexander lessons is similar to other teaching situations: explanation, description, analogy, metaphor, humor, and so on all come into play as the teacher helps the pupil understand the principles and practices of the Technique. There is one way, however, in which the

use of words is specific to the Technique. It is in clarifying the notion of direction and in cultivating the links between sensation, thought, direction, and action.

And here words may well be useful in different ways: as mnemonic devices, as triggers for certain experiences, as reminders for one not to do something and perhaps allow something else possibly to happen instead. An Alexander teacher leads her pupil through a psychophysical experience – let us imagine that she places her hands on a pupil's head and neck and changes the orientation of the head in space. At the same time she utters a few well-chosen words to describe what is happening or what the pupil might think, sense, or imagine to allow the experience to come about. One such formulation, which Alexander himself used, is as follows:

Let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen, all together, one after the other.

This may be abbreviated as “neck free, head forward and up, back lengthening and widening.” It may also be said in other ways, with various inflections and intonations, according to the temperament of the pupil and the need of the situation. The main point is not for a pupil to parrot specific words in a rigid manner, but to use them to associate a conception, a sensation, a psychophysical decision, and the actual gesture or movement (or, often enough, the absence of movement) that flows from them. In time the pupil becomes able to “give himself an order” – of which the words are but the verbal component – which triggers the desired kinesthetic direction. Neither the order nor the direction is a willful muscular act; on the contrary; to order and to direct is to stop doing, thereby allowing things to happen – or prevent them from happening! – as the situation demands.

Touch

Faulty sensory awareness presents a stumbling block to learning. “You can't tell a person what to do because the thing you have to do is a sensation,” (10) Alexander said. Using one's hands to impart kinesthetic information is one way of overcoming the obstacle.

Visual observation is an invaluable source of knowledge for a teacher, yet there are aspects of a pupil's use which are hidden to the teacher's eyes but revealed to the touch of her hands. By touching a pupil the teacher can help him prevent certain misuses – for instance, pulling his head back and down, contracting his neck, and shortening his spine as he sits and stands. At the same time she encourages him to use himself in new and inhabitual ways – for instance, directing the head forward and up away from neck, lengthening his spine, and broadening his back.

The overlapping functions of the teacher's hands – “reading” the pupil, preventing his misuse and encouraging his good use, helping him become better aware of how he reacts and, indirectly, of who he is – are hardly independent one of the other. The multiple processes happen concomitantly throughout the lesson. Their effects are also multiple and concomitant: the pupil enhances the antagonistic pulls and connections that exist within himself (for instance, the opposition between the head and the back, the connection between the back and the pelvis), releases wrong tensions (and this release is often the automatic, indirect result of the heightened connections), lengthens and widens his back, and so on. All the while he senses himself anew and afresh, and his new perception of himself leads him to perceive the world differently as well.

The teacher uses her hands in a variety of ways. By steering a pupil through a movement, the teacher increases a pupil's awareness of his general coordination, helping him alter and control his use. This guiding touch, not dissimilar to that of a dance coach, accounts for many of the changes of gesture and thought that a pupil goes through in a lesson.

By using her hands with speed and resolve, a teacher may bypass a hardy pupil's old controls and give him a new, unexpected, startling experience which brings with it sudden insights. Here the teacher's touch is goading more than guiding. Needless to say, the teacher must earn the pupil's trust and consent before engaging in this creative risk-taking.

Although the aim of every teacher should be not to treat or cure disease but to teach her pupils how to inhibit and direct, the touch of an able teacher may well have soothing and healing properties. A pupil may come in for a lesson suffering from a headache, for instance, and leave forty minutes later free from pain. Yet the aim of a teacher is not to make the student feel good, but to help him or her stop doing what is wrong, so that the right thing may do itself. Sometimes the right thing feels very good indeed. At other times, to act against comfortable habits requires sacrifice and self-restraint. Therefore, both teacher and pupil should regard the intoxicating moments of pleasure experienced in an Alexander lesson with equal doses of gratitude and circumspection.

Since an Alexander teacher uses her hands, it is tempting for lay observers to compare the Technique with other hands-on methods such as massage, acupressure, osteopathy, or chiropractic. There may well be points of contact between these various disciplines, which all have their own merits. But, in keeping with the aims and means of the Technique, which are educational rather than therapeutic, the touch of an Alexander teacher has singular properties. These are difficult to describe, and are best experienced individually by each pupil.

A certified Alexander teacher has usually received sixteen hundred hours or more of professional training. She learns how to use her hands according to a sophisticated and precise method, under the supervision of an experienced director of training. Before ever touching others the teacher-in-training develops a fine awareness of her whole coordination, from head to toes. This coordination is inseparable from an attitude and a philosophy, which we call non-doing. The hands of a trained teacher are certainly very sensitive, yet they play a secondary role in her coordination and in her manner of teaching. It is thanks to this set of aspects – the long and disciplined training, the use of her whole self, her attitude and philosophy – that a teacher's hands are effective in teaching a pupil how to overcome his habitual patterns of misuse.

In Conclusion

The Alexander Technique is a teaching method that aims to re-educate a pupil's use of the self, which is synonymous with the way he or she reacts to the stimuli of life. The Technique is applicable in nearly every situation and can be learned by everybody, adult or child, man or woman. The Technique's aims are self-reliance, open-mindedness, and the capacity to wait, sense, and think before acting.

When an investigation comes to be made, it will be found that every single thing we are doing in the Work is exactly what is being done in Nature where the conditions are right, the difference being that we are learning to do it consciously.(11)*F.M. Alexander*

Alexander's aphorisms were written down by his assistant Ethel Webb. They were verbal remarks to his pupils and students and are used here somewhat out of context, but their pertinence and wit remain.

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(1) From Articles and Lectures: Articles, Published Letters and Lectures on the F.M. Alexander Technique (London: Mouritz, 1995), 194.

(2) *ibid.*, 198.

(3) *ibid.*, 196.

(4) *ibid.*, 194.

(5) The Use of the Self: Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning, and the Control of Reaction (Bexley, Kent: Integral Press, 1946), 13.

(6) Articles and Lectures, 203.

(7) *ibid.*, 207.

(8) *ibid.*, 197.

(9) *ibid.*, 198.

(10) *ibid.*, 195.

(11) *ibid.*, 199.

Many thanks to Pedro de Alcantara for permission to use his very good introductory text to the Alexander Technique from his personal website:

<http://www.pedrodealcantara.com/forward-and-up>