

# THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

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Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) was an Australian actor and Shakespearean reciter who suffered persistent loss of voice during performance. Although the treatments prescribed by his doctor, combined with rest, succeeded in restoring his voice, this was only a temporary solution. The problem returned as soon as he went back on the stage. Alexander put it to his doctor that the cause must lie in the way he was using his voice, in something that he was doing. Although the doctor agreed, he couldn't say what was wrong. Alexander decided, therefore, to find out for himself.

Over a period of years, beginning in about 1892, Alexander made careful observations of himself and experimented with the way in which he spoke. He did this with nothing more elaborate than a simple arrangement of mirrors. He discovered a pattern of habits which were putting a strain on his larynx and which were responsible for his vocal problems. Through his efforts to change his habits and restore his voice to its proper functioning, he discovered a great deal about human co-ordination and created the method which is taught today as the Alexander Technique.

The particular habits which were the source of Alexander's problem included the tendency to pull his head back and down upon his spine, depress his larynx, and gasp in air through the mouth. These habits were not difficult to discover, though he had not noticed them before. What was really difficult however, was to change them. His repeated failures forced him to reconsider some common and basic assumptions about how the human organism works.

One such assumption was the idea that specific habits can be dealt with separately. Alexander discovered, to the contrary, that specific habits are inseparable from the whole. The way he used his head, neck, larynx and his breathing were all tied up with everything else he was doing. He found that the solution was to change the way he co-ordinated his actions as a whole. When he improved the quality of his co-ordination, the specific habits improved as a consequence. This illustrates the principle of *psycho-physical unity* which is central to the Alexander Technique. The individual always acts as a whole, which includes all mental and physical processes.

Alexander also had to reconsider his reliance on the sense of feeling. For he saw that at critical moments he was not doing what he felt he was doing. Even though he felt he was speaking without pulling back his head, the mirror showed otherwise. He had discovered the unreliability of *sensory appreciation*. He learned that to change his habits, he had to rely on reasoning, for the sense of feeling only enables the repetition of familiar, habitual actions. It could not guide him into a new experience. In the Alexander Technique, you maintain a series of thoughts to direct your co-ordination, rather than relying on the sense of feeling.

The Alexander Technique is a method you can use to change your habitual patterns of co-ordination. It is a skill which you can apply in any circumstance. The first step is *inhibition*, which is the refusal to act immediately. The second step is *direction*, which involves thinking of the optimum pattern of co-ordination. This optimum pattern consists of a certain relationship between head, neck, back and limbs, which is referred to as the *primary control*. The third step is to analyse the conditions present and the fourth is to make a conscious choice, whether to go ahead with the original intention, do nothing at all, or do something different. These procedures must be unpacked and expanded with the help of a teacher in order for them to be accurately understood.

The improvements in Alexander's voice, and in his health in general were striking. He was soon in great demand to teach his technique to other actors and singers. As they learned to correct their habits of co-ordination on a general basis, they too experienced greater control in performance and an improvement in functioning in all areas. Poor co-ordination and the chronic strain it entails is associated with problems as diverse as backache, migraine, arthritis, digestive disturbances, circulatory disturbances, breathing disorders, acne, eczema, insomnia, anxiety, neurosis and depression, to name a few. When he saw that improvements in co-ordination led to corresponding improvements in health, that *use determines functioning*, Alexander realised that he had discovered something more important than vocal development, and gave up the stage to devote himself to teaching full time. In 1904 Alexander came to London, armed with letters of introduction from prominent Sydney doctors and specialists who urged him to seek wider recognition. Later he also took his technique to the United States. Between 1914 and 1924 he spent half of his time there and half of his time in London.

The Alexander Technique is fundamentally educative, in that people learn to improve the way in which they use themselves in any activity. They learn a skill which gives them greater control over themselves. Yet, as Alexander discovered with his first pupils, it is very difficult for people to put this into practice with only a verbal explanation. He evolved a way of putting his hands on people to guide them away from their fixed habits and into a better co-ordination. This use of the hands is often misunderstood. It is not therapeutic, but is instructive for the student who is learning to put the technique into practice. Alexander also discovered that individual attention was of utmost importance. Lessons in the Alexander Technique are given on a one to one basis.

The Alexander Technique is often grouped with alternative therapies. However, it is neither a therapy, nor is it alternative. It is founded on the same scientific process of investigation as any orthodox practice. But it is based on the discovery, which has not been fully appreciated by modern medicine, that our psycho-physical habits in the daily activities of life are a large factor in determining our state of health and performance.

Even though the Technique represents an approach to human problems which is new and challenging, it does not conflict with any established anatomical or physiological principles. When Nikolaas Tinbergen won the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1973 he devoted a portion of his oration to praise the value of Alexander's technique, and to confirm its scientific standing.