

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Freedom
in thought and action



TASHA MILLER and DAVID LANGSTROTH

 **Nous** Publishing

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Miller, Tasha, 1954-

The Alexander technique [electronic resource] : freedom in thought and action / Tasha Miller and David Langstroth.

ISBN 0-9739786-0-0

1. Alexander technique. I. Langstroth, David, 1963- II. Title.

RA781.5.M54 2006
C2006-900886-8

615.8'2

Manufactured in Canada. Nous Publishing is the publishing arm of Alexander Technique Atlantic. For further information contact Nous Publishing, 219 Sambro Creek Road, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, B3V 1L8, www.AlexanderTechniqueAtlantic.ca

for Jeanne and Aksel

and for all of our students

*Sow an act and you reap a habit.
Sow a habit and you reap a character.
Sow a character and you reap a destiny.*

- Charles Reade

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Introduction

“ Don’t waste life in doubts and fears; spend yourself on the work before you, well assured that the right performance of this hour’s duties will be the best preparation for the hours and ages that will follow it.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

We live in an era when the health of developed nations is compromised by poor lifestyles and chronic diseases prevail; the accelerated pace of life creates relentless pressures demanding instant response, with scant time for reflection and calm. The destructive consequences of flawed policy, impulsive action and uncontrolled emotion ricochet across continents. Increasing subspecialisation in medicine segregates the human organism into components while politically imposed targets dictate treatments; and there is creeping erosion of collective and individual freedoms despite the rhetoric of successive governments assuring us that we have a right to choice.

What then, if a method existed which could cultivate good habits instead of bad? An approach that could facilitate conscious and reasoned control of the human organism as a psychophysical whole? A means to poise and freshness in outlook and the possibility of freedom from stifling constraints, internal and external? Such a method *does* exist. It is the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique can improve the way in which we use ourselves in any aspect of everyday living and may be applied throughout life; there is no end - point, as there is always potential for improvement. The Technique, when learned and employed correctly, is a dynamic and continuous process that can effect lasting change for the better. It is scientific in approach, its core principles derived from the study of both human behaviour and the human condition. It stimulates reasoned thought and encourages enquiry and self-reliance. We are creatures of both good and bad habits, and most of us are receptive to the concept that harmful habits need to cease for the good of the individual. Thus the Technique should provoke universal interest.

When the suggestion was made that I might benefit from lessons in AT (as it is known with fond deference amongst its students) it was met with an unhealthy cynicism rooted in the rigours of twenty years of medical training and practice and sculpted by ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’. Beset by significant mid-life crises, the harvest of a lifetime of ‘getting it wrong’, I had reached a point where I could not function efficiently in any aspect of my life. Disequilibrium predominated and contentment seemed unattainable. My attempts to improve my situation through available conventional means were only palliative. There was no lasting change for the better.

At the end of my first lesson with Tasha Miller, I was amazed at her certainty that if I continued lessons, all would be well. ‘Short of death, get here!’ she urged as we parted company. As lessons progressed and my faulty and imperfect condition was gradually exposed, my original ignorant dismissal of AT as ‘some sort of eccentric alternative therapy to improve posture’ transformed into respectful acceptance of a

method which is the best I have yet encountered for the promotion and improvement of health.

Looking back, I can now view my life before AT and relish the difference it has made; health problems have receded, my outlook and behaviour have changed. I can embrace my responsibilities and know their boundaries, accept my limitations without shame and communicate directly and honestly. I can say no and express my needs without guilt, coping better with adversity when inevitable. Increased empathy and efficiency have benefited my personal and professional life; unrecognised potential has emerged. At last, I am content.

Perhaps my best endorsement of the Technique was arranging lessons for my children; the prognosis for healthy living would be considerably more optimistic if Alexander's principles could be absorbed in youth, a point he often emphasised in his work.

My progress would have been less steady had I not read Alexander's books; these were essential for full insight and comprehension of the Technique. He wrote four in all:

- Man's Supreme Inheritance
- The Universal Constant in Living
- Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual
- The Use of the Self

They represent the remarkable life work and philosophy of a largely unsung genius; they are not, however, easy reading. Tasha Miller and David Langstroth perceived a need to communicate Alexander's work in a more modern and digestible style, hence the evolution of this book which explains the phenomenon of the Alexander Technique with vision and absolute clarity. The authors demonstrate the scientific basis of their subject and describe concisely a method summarised with precision by one student as 'subtle, yet profound'; they have succeeded unequivocally in conveying the essence of their vocation. The final chapter reveals their own philosophy and aspiration for the wider acceptance and integration of the Alexander Technique within our culture. For prospective students or those wishing to learn more about the Technique, here is a precious and invaluable resource; current and past students will discover an invigorating infusion of Alexander's principles and procedures.

Tasha Miller and David Langstroth are faithful and enthusiastic disciples of Alexander's craft; Tasha is an enlightened and charismatic practitioner of considerable skill and humour who teaches the Technique in its true and holistic sense. David is a quiet and gentle genius achieving across many disciplines. Their collaboration has produced an inspirational book deserving of wide attention and appreciation, a work that will hopefully raise awareness of an ageless and accessible Technique which is as relevant today as nearly a century ago, when Frederick Matthias Alexander wrote:

"It is my belief, confirmed by the research and practice of nearly twenty years, that man's supreme inheritance of conscious guidance and control is within the grasp of anyone who will take the trouble to cultivate it. That it is no esoteric doctrine or mystical cult, but a synthesis of entirely reasonable

*propositions that can be demonstrated in pure theory and substantiated in common practice...”*¹

*“It is essential that the peoples of civilisation should comprehend the value of their inheritance, that outcome of the long process of evolution which will enable them to govern the uses of their own physical mechanisms.... This triumph is not to be won in sleep, in trance, in submission, in paralysis, or in anaesthesia, but in a clear, open-eyed, reasoning, deliberate consciousness and apprehension of the wonderful potentialities possessed by mankind, the transcendent inheritance of a conscious mind.”*²

Dr Anne Hughes, MB BS
South Wales,
United Kingdom

31st October 2005

Chapter 1

The Psycho-Physical Self

“Not only is there but one way of doing things rightly, but there is only one way of seeing them, and that is, seeing the whole of them.” - John Ruskin

One of the most important principles in the Alexander Technique is that the individual always acts as a whole. The significance of this principle may not be instantly obvious, but it actually represents a profound challenge to many of our current beliefs about human functioning, performance, health and illness: it is not the way we are accustomed to seeing ourselves.

The usual view is that we act by using just a part, or parts, of ourselves at any given time; that we see with our eyes, that we think with our brains and that we play the piano with our fingers, hands and arms. It might seem surprising to take issue with such a ‘common sense’ view, but in fact we don’t see with *just* our eyes, we don’t think with *just* our brains, and we don’t play the piano with *just* our fingers, hands and arms. In every case we act by using the whole of ourselves.

To challenge this view is to make a very big point, for not only is the ‘common sense’ view widely held, but it is also associated with a long tradition of scientific research. Many scientists have explored the details of human functioning by focusing on specific parts of the organism, and by looking at how certain parts function alone or in groups. This study has given us valuable knowledge of anatomy and physiology, but it has brought us no closer to being able to describe the functioning of a whole, living human being. How useful is the ‘common sense’ view for describing real life situations, where our parts do not exist in isolation, but work in co-ordination with each other? And how can we possibly make use of it to solve complex problems involving the whole of ourselves?

The idea that the individual always acts as a whole is not new to the Alexander Technique. It has been part of many mystical belief systems in the past and is part of many current new age philosophies, with their desire to return to ‘holistic’ health practices. What is new in the Alexander Technique is the way we have arrived at this idea, through the use of experiment, observation, and logical thought, and how this idea forms the basis of a simple and practical method for constructive change.

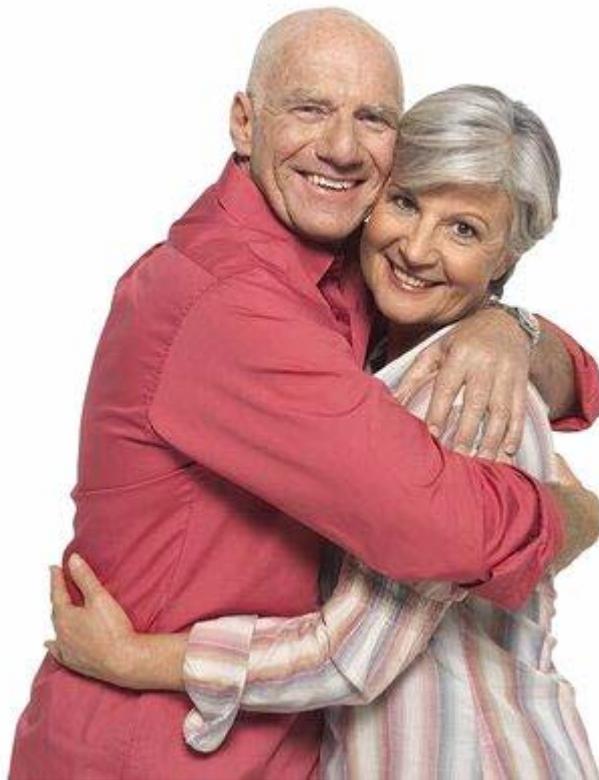
The Alexander Technique is a method that anybody can learn. However, if the learner does not understand the principles involved he will not understand what he is doing or why he is doing it. And so he will make mistakes, the most common of which is to see the Alexander Technique as some sort of body work, or as a system of body mechanics. The result will inevitably be that the Technique becomes distorted and superficial, and fails to live up to expectations.

The challenge in learning the Alexander Technique, therefore, lies not only in learning a new procedure, but in learning to think in a new way about who we are and how we function. It means learning to think of ourselves as a whole, rather than as a

collection of parts. Thinking in a new way, however, has consequences. A great many of our cherished beliefs and practices can be thrown into doubt, causing us to ask, ‘Why do I do these things?’, or ‘Why do I believe these things?’

These are not easy questions. Although everyone wants a method that will help them to deal with their problems, that will help them to change, we don’t all want to call into question the fixed and familiar ideas that underpin who we are, how we do things and why we do the things that we do. If we want to make progress, however, we must face such questions objectively and honestly, and armed with a clear understanding of the relevant principles.

This principle, that the individual always acts as a whole, cannot therefore be overstated. It is central to the understanding and application of the Alexander Technique.



*Fig. 1. A hug.
Thought, feeling and
movement are
inseparable. They do
not act independently
of each other. We
must see human
activity as a whole.*

But what exactly do we mean when we say that the individual always acts as a whole? To answer this question let’s look at an everyday activity such as walking. Have you ever stopped to think about how you walk? According to the seventh edition of *Human Physiology*,

“Walking requires co-ordination of literally hundreds of muscles in different parts of the body, each activated to a precise degree at a precise time.”¹

This tells us that there is much more to walking than just using the legs. Using hundreds of different muscles means the involvement of many different parts, such as the head, neck, torso, arms and legs, all in a rhythmic pattern. It even includes those

muscles which seem to be inactive, as their tone and even their inactivity are an important part of the pattern. Every muscle has a role.

This is the case in everything that we do, not just in walking. The simple act of turning the head to glance over the shoulder is the same. For the head and neck do not move independently, but as part of the whole. The way they move is influenced by, is dependent upon, and must adjust to everything else; including the way in which we are holding ourselves upright. We often take upright posture for granted, but it requires the co-ordination of a great many muscles. These muscles hold their tension in a pattern like the ropes that hold up a circus tent. But where the ropes are fixed and passive, our musculature is constantly adjusting: it is in a state of dynamic equilibrium. Turning the head is one inseparable part of this activity of the whole human being.

Yet, the fact that we act as a whole, in co-ordinated patterns, means that we also have a peculiar vulnerability. It means that the way we use any specific part can affect the whole system. If, for example, we use too much tension in the neck when we walk, or even too little tension, then the whole pattern will have to adjust to these unusual conditions. Such adjustments can throw out the balance and co-ordination, bringing about unusual tensions throughout the musculature. To use the analogy of the circus tent again, if you unduly tighten one rope it will affect many others. Some will sag, others will be overly stretched, and the whole shape of the tent will be altered. In the human being this distorted pattern of tension is often seen as poor posture and can, over time, cause serious damage and disease.

When we say that the individual always acts as a whole we refer to more than just the muscles. We walk with every part of us, using the support of our skeleton, the movement of our joints, the feedback from our senses, and the support of our vital systems of respiration, circulation, and digestion. Even the mechanisms for regulating body temperature are involved. Walking involves the integration of all parts and systems. Incidentally, anyone who has lived in a cold country knows that to keep your feet warm you put on a hat. This works by reducing heat loss from the body *as a whole*.

And we walk with much more than just our bodies; walking involves 'mental' processes as well. In fact there is no human activity which is purely 'mental' or purely 'physical'. All activity involves the integration and co-ordination of both. It is wrong to describe walking as a 'physical' activity, for without the 'mental' plan, the complex sets of instructions that are stored in our memories and transmitted to our muscles through the nervous system, we would not be able to move. Furthermore, walking is a goal-directed activity. We are going somewhere, we have in mind our destination, and how we walk depends upon how we feel, whether or not we're late, or what the weather is like. It is influenced by our irritation about the stone in our shoe and it is guided by our knowledge of our surroundings and our plan of how to get from A to B. Without such 'mental' processes, the body would be lifeless and immobile. Without the integration of 'mental' and 'physical' the act of walking would be impossible.



Fig. 2. Is football a “physical” activity? Certainly not. It is an activity of the whole person. The exquisite co-ordination of over 600 muscles, some to contract explosively, others more subtly or not at all, depends upon the constant projection of impulses from the central nervous system. These impulses are refined, directed and controlled by intentions, thoughts and feelings.

The idea that the individual always acts as a whole is known in the Alexander Technique as the **principle of unity**. And rather than talking about the mind and the body as if they were two unrelated realities, we prefer to use the single term, the **psycho-physical self**. The quotation marks we place around the words ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ are to indicate a certain dissatisfaction with these terms. Given that the human being acts as a whole, we prefer to avoid adjectives which imply that there are two different types of activity. We use them only because it is very difficult to introduce new ideas without using the words with which we are familiar.

The principle of unity is not an easy concept, but it is consistent with current understanding of human physiology. As any physiologist will tell you, all human activity depends upon motor signals from the central nervous system activating muscle. These signals themselves may not be exactly what we call ‘mind’, but they are either controlled by or are under the influence of those parts of the brain that are associated with thought and consciousness. This is because the central nervous system is an integrated and hierarchical structure. Sitting at the top of this hierarchy is the cerebral cortex, that part of the brain that gives us some of our most uniquely human qualities. Here we locate many of the processes that create our consciousness, our sense of self, our thoughts and beliefs. These processes exert control down

through the hierarchy of the nervous system to influence the most basic reflexes and movements. For example, even though we have no conscious control over the activity of the heart, the images we conceive in our mind will affect the operation of those lower autonomic centres which regulate heart activity. Anxious thoughts will bring about an increase in heart rate and blood pressure and calmer images will reverse this effect.

Not only does action depend upon ‘mental’ activity, but all ‘mental’ states are inevitably embodied. There are no thoughts or feelings which exist only as ‘mental’ entities. They all have an eventual effect on the musculature. Sir Charles Sherrington, the father of neurophysiology, wrote, as far back as 1937,

*“I may seem to stress the preoccupation of the brain with muscle. Can we stress too much that preoccupation when any path we trace in the brain leads directly or indirectly to muscle?”*²

Indeed, as our *Human Physiology* textbook informs us,

*“...it is only by controlling the activities of muscles that the human mind ultimately expresses itself.”*³

This relationship of cause and effect runs in both directions at the same time. Not only are there millions of motor neurons directing signals outwards to muscle, but there are also millions of sensory neurons carrying sensory signals inwards from all over the surface of the body, from muscle, connective tissue, internal organs, and from the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and balance organs. These sensory signals are the input into the central nervous system and their influence on ‘mental’ processes is enormous. It is a continuous loop. Sensory signals influence ‘mental’ activity which then produces motor signals to bring about action. And this action creates a whole new set of sensory signals to feed back into the system.

Thought activates muscle, and sensory input influences thought. Great floods of information flow back and forth in a dialectical relationship. One cannot label either flow as being prior, as being the original ‘cause’ of the other. We are so used to thinking of the mind as the sole initiator of action that it takes a moment for the importance of this concept to sink in. But it means that the ‘physical’ is just as much at the root of ‘mental’ phenomena as the other way round. The ‘physical’ creates the mind to the same extent as the mental is ‘embodied’. They are totally integrated facets of a whole individual.

This is one point where the principle of unity requires us to disagree with certain other approaches. For example, if we accept that we act as a whole in everything that we do, then it does not make sense to analyse our feelings as the primary origin of our behaviour. Such is the idea behind many ‘mental’ health disciplines which search for the source of our problems in purely ‘mental’ processes. Nor does it make sense to reduce our emotional experiences to issues of brain chemistry or genetics.

The principle of unity requires us to think again about feelings. They are not isolated ‘mental’ events, but are states of the whole human organism. Like all human actions, they are complex and integrated patterns involving both the ‘physical’ and the ‘mental’. When insulted our musculature stiffens, our blood pressure rises, and adrenaline is released into the bloodstream. These are not the ‘physical’ effects of

anger, but constituents of a pattern involving the whole individual. Anger is not an internal ‘mental’ event, but a psycho-physical event. And as such it is visible; we can see it in those around us and we can even recognise it in photographs.

The same is true for the act of thinking. For thinking depends not just upon certain cognitive abilities and processes, but upon everything else as well: the whole pattern. Calculating the cost of a bunch of bananas is a very different activity if you are also trying to keep track of a small child. A person’s ‘physical’ activity influences their thinking, and their thoughts are reflected in their muscle tone, movements and co-ordination., as is shown in a variety of neurological and behavioural studies.⁴ You can see when someone is ‘deep in thought’, and it’s not hard to tell whether they are thinking of something serious or something funny.

Our tendency to divide the human being in two, to see the mind as something separate and different to the body, has a very long history. As far back as the fourth century St. Augustine of Hippo wrote about a struggle between the soul and the body. Whether or not St. Augustine’s concept of the soul is equivalent to our modern concept of the mind, he was nonetheless describing a human being divided down the middle into parts which were not only independent, but actually in conflict with each other. The early Christians didn’t invent this dualism, but probably inherited it from Greek philosophy,⁵ and we can only guess where the Greeks got it from. Its origins may go way back to our pre-literate history. It has even been suggested that our tendency to perceive a separate ‘mental’ entity within us is a side effect of the evolution of the cerebral cortex and the development of consciousness, and may be very ancient indeed.⁶



Fig. 3. Emotion cannot be understood as an internal “mental” state. It is a complete pattern of the whole person. This accounts for the visible and communicative nature of emotion. We can see this man’s jubilation and be moved by it.

Today the dualistic perspective is so habitual that it seems to be 'common sense'. We speak of 'physical' fitness and 'mental' health as if these were two different goals to be pursued in two different ways. And we aspire to a sound mind in a healthy body as if they were two separate things, each with their own separate standard of well-being.

Even more awkwardly, this dualism underlies such important fields as medicine and psychology, with the body as the subject of medicine, and the mind as the realm of psychology. Although we maintain that approaching human problems from the dualistic perspective has serious limitations, this does not invalidate medicine or psychology. For as we have already said, some of the most important discoveries and ideas about human functioning have come from these fields. And we would never advise anyone to ignore medical advice. What it means is that our relationship with these professions must become more complex. We must come to see them as offering particular perspectives on our problems rather than definitive answers. In this way it becomes our responsibility to think carefully about all the advice we receive rather than accepting it uncritically. One of the challenges of studying the Alexander Technique properly is that one is compelled to take on the responsibility to think for oneself and to evaluate advice from all sources in the light of the principle of unity.

If an individual always functions as a whole then he can only be fundamentally changed as a whole. Specific interventions such as surgery or drugs can improve certain symptoms, sometimes dramatically, but they do not address the whole individual and they rarely return him to a full state of healthy normality. Patrick MacDonald, one of the first generation teachers of the Technique, reminded us that even though we may refer to our doctor as a general practitioner, there is actually no such thing as a general check-up.⁷ There are only specific tests. Even if you passed them all you could still drop dead the next day from an undiagnosed condition. Medicine has no general test for the health of the whole person. And this is because it has no working concept of the whole person.

One specialist studies the heart, and another the muscles. One psychologist is interested in cognition, and another in emotion. And psychology is at a particular disadvantage for the part it has taken to study is the 'mind', where it is notoriously difficult even to agree on basic definitions. Even though the psychologist Eysenck, in 1947, found a definite and fundamental correlation between neuroticism and unbalanced posture,⁸ 'neurosis' is still treated through practices which are fundamentally dualistic, even in disciplines which claim to recognise a connection between 'mental' and 'physical'.

Theories usually get overly complicated when the wrong principles are being applied. For example, when people thought that the earth was the centre of the universe they had to go to great intellectual lengths to try to explain the movements of the heavenly bodies. Realising that the sun was the centre of the solar system made it all so much simpler. Many modern explanations for human problems are also overly complicated. They focus in on specific parts and fail to recognise that the individual acts as a whole. In doing so they fail to recognise how the manner in which the individual acts as a whole is implicated in the problem. In the case of back pain a description of great anatomic detail may seem impressive but how far does that go to serve someone who simply wants to be well again? And some theories about depression are so abstract and complicated that you can see why the term 'psychobabble' was coined.

It is easy to be critical of some of the products of the scientific tradition, but we must also recognise that at its heart science is both open and inquiring. Scientists are trained to take on new ideas, to investigate the possibilities, and to have an objective relationship with the world. We have benefited from this ethos as many prominent individuals in science and medicine have looked at the Alexander Technique and considered its principles and its results with an open mind. You will meet some of these people later in this book. Nikolaas Tinbergen, for example, the winner of the 1973 Nobel Prize for 'Physiology or Medicine', used a major portion of his acceptance speech to praise and draw attention to the effectiveness of the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique is growing in the public perception as an effective means of dealing with a wide range of problems. It is gaining attention because it is simple and it works. However, for the reasons discussed above, it has not sat easily with mainstream thinking. It does not really belong in medicine, psychology or most other disciplines which study the human being. Education, and in particular re-education, are the most appropriate categories for the Alexander Technique, but it is rarely found there. Although it is rational and scientific it is all too often inappropriately categorised with 'alternative and complementary therapies'.

Although a lot of 'alternative and complementary therapies' aspire to the philosophy of the whole person, many fall short of this aspiration in practice. Their practices often reveal a dualistic approach, just like medicine and psychology, even though this may be unacknowledged in their theory. When their techniques focus on either the body, the mind, or the spirit, even with the belief that changes brought about in one area will affect the others, they are not addressing the whole. Their practices are not compatible with the concept of psycho-physical unity as we have been describing it.

The psycho-physical unity of the individual is a principle which challenges our ways of thinking, both mainstream and 'alternative', about the human being. It throws into doubt many cherished ideas and beliefs on how to approach our problems. Letting go of such ideas and beliefs, to replace them with new ones, based on a new paradigm, is not easy. But those who are able to be constructively self-critical and who are willing to follow their reasoning will find the process to be well worth the effort. It is the first step towards real control in our lives and a more constructive and conscious future.