

The Alexander Technique

by

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Coordinate Movement

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### History of the Alexander Technique

Francis Matthias Alexander was born in Tasmania, Australia, in 1869.<sup>1</sup> From his youth he enjoyed poetry, and took pleasure in studying Shakespeare, often reading plays aloud, interpreting the characters as well as he could. As time went on, he began being asked to recite in public, and eventually decided on a career in Shakespearean reciting. (This was a common performance practice before radio and television.<sup>2</sup>) Alexander studied every branch of dramatic expression, and after receiving numerous positive reviews as an amateur, he moved to Sydney in 1896 at the age of 27 and became a professional reciter of dramatic works. For several years all went well, but as time went on he began losing his voice towards the end of a performance and was unable to stop making audible breathing sounds during his recitations. His medical diagnosis was irritation of the mucous membrane of the throat and nose and inflammation of the vocal cords. Following doctor's orders, he rested his voice as much as possible, which helped to some degree, but by the end of a speaking engagement, his hoarseness would again be so acute he could hardly speak. Since the doctor could offer no further cause or treatment, Alexander set out on an investigation to discover what he was doing that brought about his condition, and in so doing, eliminate the cause and consequently the symptoms of his problem.

He at first realized that ordinary speaking did not affect his voice in the same way that public speaking did, so he realized that he must be doing something different when

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<sup>1</sup> Michele MacDonnell, *Alexander Technique* (New York: Lorenz Books, 1999), 9.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

he was reciting. To examine himself, he set up mirrors so he could watch his image and compare his actions when he simulated the acts of normal speaking and recitation. At first he noticed nothing, but then observed that when he started to recite, he would pull back his head, depress his larynx, and suck in breath through his mouth that produced a gasping sound. Subsequently, he realized that those three things actually were present in his ordinary speaking, but to a much lesser degree. He eventually noticed that the three tendencies were present to a greater degree when he was reciting passages where a greater demand was made on his voice. He concluded that this must be a way in which he was misusing his body, and that he must learn how to prevent the misuse.

Bringing about this change was not easy. He was not sure if one of the three actions came first and caused the others. Through more patient experiments and observations, he finally came to realize that he could not directly prevent the depressing of his larynx or the audible sucking in of his breath, but that he could prevent the pulling back of his head to some degree. He then saw that this action indirectly affected the other two, as those actions in turn would be halted. This influencing effect of his head became one of his most important discoveries and one of the foundations of the Technique – in time he would call it the “primary control.”

As a result of his experimentation and the changes he made, his hoarseness began to decrease. Upon medical examination, an improvement was also found in the condition of his larynx and vocal cords. A further conclusion he came to was that the changes in the *use* of his body directly affected the *functioning* of his body.

As Alexander continued his research, he decided that since keeping his head forward was one of the changes he wanted to make, he would experiment by positioning

it even further forward than he felt was right. As he did so, he found that he tended to pull it down as well as forward, with the end result that was much the same as when he pulled his head back and down, causing the depressing of the larynx. He experimented with ways to use his head and neck in such a way as to not depress the larynx, and after some time he realized that any use of his head and neck that was connected with a depressing of his larynx was also associated with lifting his chest and decreasing his stature. From this discovery he realized that his whole torso was involved in the functioning of his speech organs, not just the pulling down and back of his head. He also found that he could affect the length of his stature, and that the tendency to hoarseness was connected with the decreasing of his stature. He realized that to maintain a lengthening of his stature, he needed put his head up as well as forward. Connected to this use, he saw that it was vital to prevent the lifting of his chest, which caused an arch of the spine and narrowing of the back, and instead focus on bringing about a widening of the back.

As he tried to put his findings into practice, with the help of his mirrors, he found that when he began speaking or reciting, he could not maintain the conditions that he was learning to bring about. Even when he “felt” that he was doing something, he could see in the mirrors that what he felt was not what was actually happening. As he continued his experiments and observations, he realized that his whole body was part of the misuse, and that the use of a specific part was closely associated with the use of other parts. He began to understand the enormous difficulty in making permanent changes in the use of his body. He saw that a habitual wrong use feels natural and right because of years of habit, but the feeling is actually unreliable. He described how this discovery affected him:

This indeed was a blow. If ever anyone was in an impasse, it was I. For here I was, faced with the fact that my feeling, the only guide I had to depend upon for the direction of my use, was untrustworthy... Discouraged as I was, however, I refused to believe that the problem was hopeless... 'Surely,' I argue, 'if it is possible for feeling to become untrustworthy as a means of direction, it should also be possible to make it trustworthy again.'<sup>3</sup>

After still more experimentation and thought, Alexander came to further conclusions that have become part of the principles of the Alexander Technique. He realized that his misuse was an instinctive response to the decision and consequently the stimulus to use his voice. He recognized that he must replace his old instinctive direction with a new conscious direction. As he continued his investigations, he eventually learned how to be free from his wrong habitual use in reciting and his throat and vocal trouble ended.<sup>4</sup>

By the time of Alexander's death in 1955, the Technique was well-known, he had written four books, and he had established a training course for teachers that continues to this day.<sup>5</sup> John Dewey, the American philosopher, once said that the Alexander Technique was systemized common sense, meaning that when you no longer do the wrong thing, and start thinking, the right thing will happen.<sup>6</sup> Although the Alexander Technique makes no claim to heal diseases and the aim of lessons is not to heal, many

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<sup>3</sup> F. M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1932; reprint, London: Orion Books Ltd, 2001), 35-36 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. The story of F. M. Alexander's physical difficulties, experimentation, and discoveries is taken from chapter one, "Evolution of a Technique."

<sup>5</sup> MacDonnell, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Glynn Macdonald, *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Alexander Technique* (Boston: Element Books Inc, 1998), 19.

conditions have been improved by Alexander lessons.<sup>7</sup> The Alexander Technique helps improve poise and balance, it promotes muscle tone, flexibility, and well-being, and it has even helped people with chronic pain, stress-related illnesses, and psychological distress.<sup>8</sup> In this paper I will go into more detail about the discoveries Alexander made and the principles that have become the Alexander Technique.

### **General Principles of the Alexander Technique**

The Alexander Technique is not similar to yoga, transcendental meditation, self-hypnosis, biofeedback, Rolfing, Feldenkrais, self-hypnosis, biofeedback, massage, chiropractic, posture training, physical therapy, or relaxation techniques. F. M. Alexander was a very practical man, and the Technique is as practical as he was.<sup>9</sup> It is an educational technique that teaches you how to change habits that are not beneficial.<sup>10</sup>

### **Use of the Self**

F. M. Alexander looked at the whole person, and he spoke simply of “the self” as a unity. He did not divide the body from the mind with one part controlling the other; he did not even sub-divide the mind and speak of the sub-conscious controlling the conscious (or vice versa). Therefore, he did not see the actions of the body as separate

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<sup>7</sup> Chance, 13.

<sup>8</sup> MacDonnell, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Chance, *The Alexander Technique* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Judith Leibowitz and Bill Connington, *The Alexander Technique* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc, 1990), xx-xxi.

from the body's owner. In other words, whatever we do with our bodies, we do with our whole selves, whether good or bad. So Alexander's focus was on the use and functioning of "the self" as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

With this understanding of the "self" as a complete unit, Alexander then spoke of the way a person uses his or her self. He titled one of his books *The Use of the Self*, in which through the story of his research and discoveries, he gives a foundational understanding of what we now call the Alexander Technique. The use of the self is the way we react in any situation, with all of our being. An example of this would be to consider a person using his or her voice to talk. The act of speaking is not just physical, nor is it just mental, because you use your whole self when you speak. Rather than referring to the way you "use your voice" it would be better to refer to the way you "use yourself while speaking."

Three principles can be drawn from this understanding. First, the part of your body that you are using reflects the way you are using your whole self. As you use your voice to speak, that use reflects who you are. Second, every part of the self always plays a role, whether that part is active or not. To keep a part of the body still is a way of using it, and many times that can be the appropriate use of that part of the body in a given situation. Finally, every part is connected to all the other parts. This is more obvious when you consider how parts of the body are connected through muscle groups, but even the use of your voice is connected to the way you use your neck, shoulders, and back. So realizing that you are a whole self, you will see that you cannot just focus on one part of

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<sup>11</sup> Pedro de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures, A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1997), 10-11.

the body that may be causing you trouble, but the self must be examined and changed as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

Most small children have a good use of the self. But as the years go by, habits of movement often develop that cause them to lose an efficient, coordinated use. This can happen for a variety of reasons: copying the behavior of those around them (both physically and attitudinally), sitting for long hours at school, the stress of doing well in school and learning new disciplines such as sports and music, self-image problems, and sometimes an injury that forms habits that persist even after it is healed. The poor habits learned in a person's childhood and teenage years usually continue on into adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

#### Tension and Relaxation

A common generalization about tension and relaxation is that tension is bad and relaxation is good. While there is some truth to this idea, it can cause a wrong focus in trying to come to a correct use of our body. In fact, tension is only bad when it is the wrong kind and amount of tension, in the wrong places, and/or for the wrong length of time. Obviously, total relaxation is impossible for any kind of physical movement to occur. There must be the right kind of tension for the muscles to contract and cause the various parts of the body to move into action. Sometimes by creating the right kind of tension (which may feel more like support), wrong tension can be released in another part of the body.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Leibowitz and Connington, 37-39.

<sup>14</sup> de Alcantara, 14-15.

The most influential wrong kind of tension in the body occurs in the muscles in the neck. Habitual tensing in the neck muscles will cause a tensing of the entire body, distort the rest relationship between bones, impede efficient weight delivery through the skeleton, and hinder the involuntary muscle support that is needed to make voluntary movements. A contraction occurs in the whole body as a result of contracting the neck muscles; this contraction is called downward pull.<sup>15</sup>

#### Use and Function

As mentioned above, Alexander maintained that the self is a unity, and he spoke of the way we act with our whole being as the use of the self. Going a step further, this use of the self affects the way we function. Alexander had a unique way of understanding how we function, believing that because people are whole, there is no difference between what is being controlled and the control itself. He maintained that our problems stem not from what is done to us, but what we do to ourselves – rather than saying that our back gives us trouble, it is we who give it trouble. Since the way we use our self directly affects how we function, to improve our function we must change our use, rather than trying to directly control our functioning.<sup>16</sup>

#### Use and Habit

We are creatures of habit, which means that we react in a familiar way to a specific stimulus. You may be aware of a habit or not, and you may have developed it

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<sup>15</sup> Barbara Conable and William Conable, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique* (Portland, OR: Andover Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>16</sup>de Alcantara, 16.

consciously or not. Some habits are good, and some are harmful. A habit becomes a problem when it is harmful, automatic, and not something you are consciously able to control. The use of our self is a constant influence upon our functioning in all that we do, and manifests itself as habit. So changing our use causes an indirect change upon our habits. Therefore, the way to change our habits is not to try to change them directly, but to focus on changing our use.<sup>17</sup>

### End-Gaining

It would seem that stopping the misuse of the self and beginning right use will bring about right functioning. However, we need to go further as we consider how to do that. Alexander considered the ultimate cause of misuse to be the habit of “end-gaining.” This concept is central to the principles of the Alexander Technique. End-gaining is the habit of working directly for an end, usually with a “trial and error” method, without considering how that end should be gained.<sup>18</sup> It is something we do in many aspects of our lives, not just in our physical movements. End-gaining is a widespread habit that most people do almost constantly. It is seen in the simplest of habits, such as taking off shoes without untying the laces (and ruining the shoes). Many weight-loss diets are end-gaining: they help you lose weight (the desired end), but are unhealthy in the process of doing so. Taking medicine to suppress symptoms is end-gaining. A musician who focuses exclusively on winning a competition without being aware of how he uses his

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, 57.

body as he practices is an end-gainer. Trying to change other people without changing yourself is end-gaining.

Those who diagnose physical problems while using end-gaining look at the end result and prescribe a remedy that deals with the symptoms without dealing with the cause of the problem, which in many cases is misuse of the self. However, with proper instruction and practice, you can become aware of end-gaining in everyday activities, such as sitting, standing, walking, and speaking. As you become aware of end-gaining in specific acts, you eventually become aware of end-gaining itself, and in time that understanding will be integrated into your awareness in all that you do.<sup>19</sup>

#### Means-whereby

In contrast to end-gaining, Alexander developed the “means-whereby” principle. This principle entails a willingness to pay attention to the process involved in achieving the desired aim.<sup>20</sup> Instead of focusing on the end result, the “means-whereby” principle helps you to create and utilize the best possible means to achieve the desired goal. To do this, you must be able to wait and make sound decisions before acting, always being aware of your use of your own body, and being willing to give up using end-gaining.

Means-whereby involves all the steps used to achieve the end. In a series of intermediate steps, the most important step is the one being performed at any given time. As you are going through the steps to attain your goal, each one should be uppermost in your mind – not the one before, the one after, or the desired end. This principle applies to

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<sup>19</sup> de Alcantara, 18-20.

<sup>20</sup> Macdonald, 22.

all activities – diagnosing and solving problems, practicing, performing, carrying out simple actions, or working on complex skills.<sup>21</sup>

### Summary

The goal of the Alexander Technique is to change the influence of the use upon our functioning, thus changing the manifestation of our use – our habits – from being harmful to being beneficial. Although it does not cure illness or disease, in the process of improving the use of the self, many people find improvement in areas of their bodies where they have had physical problems.

### Primary Control

There is a primary control of the use of the self which governs the working of all the mechanisms and so renders the control of the complex human organism comparatively simple. F. M. Alexander: *The Use of the Self*<sup>22</sup>

Through Alexander's experiments and personal observations, he discovered the idea of the primary control – the mechanism that orders the whole use of the self. It entails the relationship of the head and neck to each other and to the back. In simple terms, it is the idea that the head leads and the body follows in all that we do. Alexander called it “the true and primary movement.” A simple way to experience this principle is to crawl on your hands and knees and have another person gently hold your head and turn it to the right or left. You will feel compelled to crawl in the direction your head is facing, and find it almost impossible to crawl in the opposite direction. This relationship

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<sup>21</sup> de Alcantara, 20-21.

<sup>22</sup> Macdonald, 38.

of your head and neck to the rest of your body is always affecting your coordination, either positively or negatively.<sup>23</sup> When the head is forward and up, the body's weight naturally is back, the spine lengthens, and a balanced body position is the result.<sup>24</sup> When the head is back and down, we see the pattern of downward pull that is created by tension in the neck muscles.<sup>25</sup>

To ensure a further understanding of the primary control, it can be useful to look at what it is not. First of all, primary control is not something you acquire, but it is something you are born with. How you use your primary control, however, is something that you may acquire and develop throughout your life. Also, primary control is not something that is done independently from the rest of the body. Because of the unity of the self, your whole body and mind are involved. Finally, primary control does not mean holding your head in a fixed position. It is not accomplished by twisting the head and neck, or alternating tension and relaxation. The relationship of the head, neck, and back is fluid, and involves a dynamic balance with constant adjustments being made.<sup>26</sup>

### The Primary Control and Functioning

As stated above, primary control entails the principle of the head leading and the body following. This happens whether we realize it or not, and the head can lead in a faulty or correct way. Alexander took this understanding of primary control and realized

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<sup>23</sup> Chance, 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> Macdonald, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Conable, 5.

<sup>26</sup> de Alcantara, 26-28.

that correcting the primary control would lead to right use through the whole body. In his own words:

I [cannot] enable my pupils to control the functioning of their organs, systems, or reflexes *directly*, but by teaching them to employ consciously the primary control of their use I [can] put them in command of the means whereby their functioning generally can be *indirectly* controlled.<sup>27</sup>

The uniqueness of the Alexander Technique is that it seeks to change human behavior indirectly by changing use rather than by focusing on the functioning itself. And this change in use happens through changes in the use of the primary control.

With this understanding, there are several guidelines to consider regarding the use of the primary control. The use of your primary control is the first thing to keep in mind when solving any problem, and the prevention of interference with its right working. Also, every procedure or exercise you practice should enhance the right working of the primary control, and that should even be the ultimate goal of exercise. If an exercise does not develop the natural working of your primary control, at least it should not harm it. At no time, should any procedure or exercise require a misuse of the primary control. Any seeming benefit will be short-term and will ultimately not be beneficial if you are misusing your primary control while doing it.<sup>28</sup>

### **A Formula for Change**

In Alexander's experimentation on himself, he had learned to analyze his present use, find the means whereby that use could be changed, and consciously give the self new

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander, 51.

<sup>28</sup> de Alcantara, 34.

directions for applying the means to the use of the body. He also realized that there was a need to continue giving those directions throughout the duration of all the steps of the action.<sup>29</sup>

However, he found that his instinctive reactions were a hindrance to continued right use of his body, no matter how much he had discovered about his use and had learned to correct it while watching himself. He realized that when we are performing a familiar action, our habitual use is practically irresistible.<sup>30</sup> After further investigation, he finally began to see that his instinctive misdirection connected to his old habitual use invariably overcame his reasoning direction towards his new use. In other words, it was the decision to act and the habitual instructions he gave himself that were overwhelming everything else, because those actions had been part of him for so long and felt right and natural. So even though he could know the facts, practice correct use, and understand all the reasons for doing so, he saw that his habitual faulty sensory awareness was preventing him from making changes in his use, aside from the times when he was focusing on those changes.<sup>31</sup> His senses wanted an experience that felt natural, but the experience he wanted with his reasoning felt entirely wrong. In effect, he was trying to change at the same time that he was trying to stay the same.<sup>32</sup>

Alexander's perseverance and investigative and reasoning processes once again gave him the answer, although he became discouraged at times, wondering if there was

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<sup>29</sup> Alexander, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>32</sup> Chance, 9-10.

some fault within himself.<sup>33</sup> He finally came to realize that he needed to have the processes involved in directing his use dominated by reasoning instead of by feeling, especially at that moment when the giving of directions transferred to the actual action. Thus began his principle of “inhibition,” or simply not doing something after having decided to do it. This would inhibit the wrong use, and he would continue to give himself new directions to perform the action. After sufficient inhibition, he would be able to complete the action with his new, natural, correct use.<sup>34</sup> A list of the steps Alexander finally put together for performing any muscular activity is as follows:

1. The conception of the movement required;
2. The inhibition of erroneous preconceived ideas which subconsciously suggest the manner in which the movement or series of movements should be performed;
3. The new and conscious mental orders which will set in motion the muscular mechanism essential to the correct performance of the action;
4. The movements (contractions and expansions) of the muscles which carry out the mental orders.<sup>35</sup>

A summary of these steps could be “conception, inhibition, direction, action.” I will go into in more detail on each of these steps in the rest of this paper. For a musician, this formula could be thought of as: “think, get rid of wrong thoughts, think again, play.”<sup>36</sup> These steps are simple in theory, but quite difficult to put into practice.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Alexander, 43.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>35</sup> F. M. Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (London: Chatterson Ltd, 1946), 120.

<sup>36</sup> de Alcantara, 37.

<sup>37</sup> Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, 45.

## Conception

As has already been discussed, our habitual use often causes us to use ourselves in an incorrect or harmful way. This faulty sensory awareness is one of the first obstacles a student faces when beginning the Alexander Technique. Sometimes people who start having lessons and encounter their wrong sensations even think the Alexander Technique is the cause of their misuses, which feel new to them. Students need to persevere, and realize that discovering their misuses is a positive thing because that discovery will ultimately lead to right use and freedom.<sup>38</sup>

What causes faulty sensory awareness? The sense that is involved in muscular activity is proprioception, the sense that makes us aware of our orientation in space, the relative position of our body parts, our movements, effort, tension, and fatigue, and it is partly responsible for helping us with our balance. For the average person, proprioception is instinctive, although it can be brought under conscious control. It is a vital sense for musicians. The freer a body part is, the more accurately it will sense its movements through proprioception. Through misuse, parts of the body are over-contracted, and the feedback information from proprioceptors becomes distorted. The result is faulty sensory awareness.<sup>39</sup>

To conceive of an action is to think of what you want to do and how you will go about doing it. Many factors are involved in how our conception is shaped, but the most significant one is experience. Your conception of how you stand and sit is formed mainly by the memories you have of all the times you have experienced sitting and standing.

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<sup>38</sup> de Alcantara, 38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 40-43.

Sensory awareness links experience and conception, for example, as we remember how something felt or sounded. This produces an obvious cycle – you cannot execute an action correctly until you have experienced it correctly, and you cannot experience it without executing the action. Our experiences shape our conceptions, and those conceptions in turn affect our subsequent experiences. If we have faulty sensory awareness, that awareness will keep us from achieving our desired goal as it affects both our conceptions and our experiences. As a result, a musician can move consistently further away from their goals, if their faulty awareness influences both their conceptions and their experiences.<sup>40</sup>

### Inhibition

Alexander believed that inhibition should be the first step in any activity after choosing to do the act. Simply stated, inhibition is the procedure of pausing before acting, which gives us time to think about how we are planning to carry out our action.<sup>41</sup> Inhibition focuses on *not doing* the wrong thing rather than *doing* the right thing. It consists not of learning a new action, but learning to stop doing something old. However, this “non-doing” does not mean passivity, but rather not using wrong tension. It means stopping yourself from doing anything wrong and undesirable. If inhibition can precede action, that action can become free from tension.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>41</sup> Leibowitz and Connington, 33.

<sup>42</sup> de Alcantara, 51.

This part of the Technique takes time. After you decide to perform a particular action, you inhibit yourself from responding to the stimulus to do it, and thereby stop yourself from doing it. For musicians, this may just mean to stop and wait before playing. Timing is an element of inhibition, but it is not the only thing involved. Inhibition is not just the temporary suspension of an action; it is the suspension of the desire to act. It is a letting go of the eagerness to be right and thereby end-gaining.<sup>43</sup>

Inhibition is the first step to any activity after choosing to act, but must continue while you give yourself your new directions for correct use. Even then, you should ask yourself if you are really ready to use the new direction, and continue to inhibit until you feel you can perform the action with the new direction. At this point, Alexander would sometimes even do something totally different from his original choice, while continuing to give himself directions for the new use.<sup>44</sup> Inhibition cannot stop once the action begins to take place. Inhibition of habitual actions must continue, as new directions are learned and followed for right use.<sup>45</sup>

At first, the waiting component of inhibition may need to be exaggerated when learning this aspect of the Alexander Technique. But it can be learned to be done continuously when in motion without hesitation. A brief coordinated thought can inhibit habitual misuse and set in motion correct, integrated use.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51-53.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, 46.

<sup>45</sup> de Alcantara, 53.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 54.

## Direction

We constantly give ourselves directions because everything we do is the result of a command from the brain, so there is a constant connection between our muscles and our brain. Nothing is ever purely physical or purely mental. Through conscious directions we can encourage our bodies to achieve their full, natural stature – to release, lengthen, and widen. Directions are not direct commands, but suggestions to help us avoid interfering with our natural poise and balance.<sup>47</sup> To direct is not to train just the mind or the body, but to improve the connection between what you think and what you do. We can do many things at the same time, and we can learn to direct our use in all that we do.<sup>48</sup>

Everyone is involved in direction and inhibition at all times, whether they realize it or not, and whether they do it well or not. The most common cause of misuse is the lack of the ability to inhibit, which in reality should take precedence over directions to act. Learning to direct allows you to keep inhibition and action in balance. Consciously learned directions eventually become somewhat automatic, but they remain available to the will and can be re-examined and altered if necessary.<sup>49</sup>

The most important direction in the Alexander Technique is that which directs the use of the primary control, since the primary control coordinates the whole self. One way to do this is to inhibit “pulling down” and instead “think up.” Thinking up means to think up along the spine, let the neck be free, allow the head to be balanced lightly at the top of

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<sup>47</sup> Macdonald, 34.

<sup>48</sup> de Alcantara, 56.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 56-58.

the spine (forward and up), and let the back lengthen and widen, all together, one after the other. These are not commands to do a muscular activity, because if you try to do them, you will invariably try to assume a posture that is simply a reaction to a new stimulus in an old, familiar way. The most misunderstood of these directions is for the head to be “forward and up” – many people think of it as a position of the head, but it is more a direction than a position.<sup>50</sup> Also, “forward” does not mean sticking your head forward of the spine, but instead it is the opposite of tilting the head backward. In fact, sometimes it may feel like the head is moving back in relation to the spine, and that is the right direction because it is being more balanced on the spine.<sup>51</sup>

### Action

As we saw earlier, end-gaining involves a habitual gesture that only looks to the end result. A gesture based on good use involves self-awareness, inhibition, and direction. There are several principles to keep in mind when considering how to carry out an action.

The first one is to not try too hard. Many people think that failure is the result of not trying hard enough, and their response to failure is to try with a greater determination and a resulting increase in misuse. Rather than trying harder, it is better to try something different that may be more effective. A second important aspect of action is to stop judging, and truly be happy with using yourself well, even if you do not achieve your desired end. An example of this is a pianist who wants to find a chord at one end of the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 57, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Conable, 6.

keyboard in the middle of a fast passage. Focusing on the desired end of finding the chord causes the arm to stiffen (and usually miss the chord), while loosening the arm and being willing to miss the chord will ultimately help one to find the chord with much better use of the arm. To be free from the limitations of inaccurate feelings of what is right or wrong means both not anticipating the outcome of the action and not judging yourself by the outcome.<sup>52</sup> If you truly are paying attention to the means and not the end, you must be willing to act “irrespective of whether, during the progress of the activities concerned, the performance is correct or incorrect.”<sup>53</sup>

A third aspect of action to be aware of is end-gaining through either hesitation or eagerness. Hesitation, which is not the same as inhibition, involves insecurity and timidity that result in falling short of the goal. On the other hand, eagerness, which is not synonymous with direction, involves excess effort and tension that overreach the goal. Although it is important to inhibit and direct, they should not be done with fear.

Finally, proper timing, the fourth aspect of action, is the mark of a correct action. Once you have taken the time to inhibit wrong actions and make the decision to act, do so. Take time between the conception of the gesture and the direction to do it (this can happen very quickly with experience), but not between the decision to do so and the action itself. Be free to act without worrying about the outcome. Rather than trying to control every action, think of it as allowing the right action to happen. Enjoy yourself as

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<sup>52</sup> de Alcantara, 73-74.

<sup>53</sup> F. M. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, 1923 facsimile of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Downing, CA: Centerline Press, 1985), 215.

you learn without trying to do everything perfectly, take risks, and you will find yourself passing from bad use to correct use.<sup>54</sup>

### **Alexander Technique Procedures**

One of the most significant aspects of lessons in the Alexander Technique is the guidance of the teacher's hands. Alexander found that the students' faulty sensory awareness made it difficult to learn the principles of the Technique without his help. The Alexander teacher uses his or her hands to monitor what the student is doing, to prevent some things from happening, and to encourage other things to happen.<sup>55</sup> Many Alexander teachers today still maintain that the Technique cannot be fully learned without the help of a certified teacher; however, through reading books about the Alexander Technique you can still learn much about yourself and your own use.<sup>56</sup> If you are unable to get to a teacher, you may be able to carefully follow written instructions, aided by pictures, that can guide you to a better use of your body.<sup>57</sup>

Alexander taught that there was no such thing as a right position, but instead a right direction – if you think up, every position will be right, and if you pull down, no position will ever be right. However, he found that by guiding students into certain positions he was able to encourage them into the right direction, so he taught a series of procedures that he called “positions of mechanical advantage.” These positions would

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<sup>54</sup> de Alcantara, 76-77.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 84-85.

<sup>56</sup> Leibowitz and Connington, xxi-xxii.

<sup>57</sup> Chance, 27.

encourage right direction, and thereby would be “right.”<sup>58</sup> They can be used in a variety of life situations, such as playing musical instruments, athletics, household chores, and many everyday situations. Two of these were the monkey, a standing position of strength and stability with the knees bent and the torso bent at the hips, and the lunge, a variation of the monkey, with the feet placed asymmetrically and only one of the knees bent. He also worked with walking, sitting, and standing, and the use of the arms. He even developed a procedure called the “whispered ‘ah’” which can release facial tension and help with breathing, speech, and playing wind instruments. He also taught breathing as part of his Technique, as he had originally had trouble with his own breathing and developed an understanding of breathing that has helped eliminate many problems. These procedures and positions can be studied with Alexander Technique teachers today, and most will recommend not trying to learn them on your own because your sensory awareness will make it very difficult to execute them correctly. Although it is recommended that you study with a teacher, like a music student there are many activities you can do to “practice” on your own. To learn to be aware of your own faulty sensory awareness and improve your use, you can do several things: observe yourself and your reactions, possibly with the use of mirrors or video cameras, become aware of people around you and the use of their bodies, imitate people who have good use, and consciously inhibit and direct while doing physical exercise.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> de Alcantara., 88-89.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 161-165.

### **Alexander Technique and Body Mapping Compared and Contrasted**

Body Mapping and the Alexander Technique have many similarities; in fact, much of what is taught in Body Mapping comes from the Alexander Technique, and lessons in both would have much of the same information. However, as stated above, an Alexander teacher uses his or her hands to instruct and guide the student into the most desired positions and procedures. Becoming an Alexander teacher requires years of education, which needs to be learned first-hand from a qualified teacher because of the exact, highly refined movements taught through the Technique.

Body Mapping, on the other hand, is not generally taught with a hands-on method, but training is accomplished through the conscious correction of a person's body map, which is the internal (mental) representation of their function, structure, and size. A faulty body map results in faulty movements, and corrections in the body map result in improvement in movements. Changes in the body map can be accomplished by using anatomical models, pictures, verbal coaching, palpation of various parts of the body, and demonstration. The Body Mapping teacher observes the student, and gives instruction and feedback on what he or she sees are changes in movements as the body map is changed. Often Body Mapping is taught as part of other training, such as music or acting lessons. Body Mapping also generally does not involve procedures like the monkey or the whispered ah.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Barbara Conable, "Body Mapping Training Manual" (Portland, OR: Andover Educators, 2005), Body Mapping and the Alexander Technique: Compared and Contrasted.

## **Conclusion**

Francis Matthias Alexander, through his dedication and perseverance, has given us a method for integrating our whole selves and learning to recognize and overcome instinctive, habitual restrictions in our movements and way of thinking. Although the Alexander Technique does not involve a medical diagnosis or procedure, a type of alternative medicine, or a counseling or religious method, over the past 100 years the Alexander Technique has proven to be helpful in numerous aspects of life, and many people have experienced the benefits of Alexander's research. We are able to learn things that took F. M. Alexander years of patient experimentation and observations, although learning about the Technique is only the beginning of the journey. With practice in using the principles of the Technique to improve our use, we can relieve our bodies of stress and tension and bring improvement to our whole selves.

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