

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE: Better Posture, Greater Poise, Improved Health

By Tasha Miller

Recent articles in the press have described how modern life is causing us to revert to a prehistoric state. They claim that the time we spend hunched in front of the computer or the TV, or the hours we spend sitting in the car each week has made our shoulders droop like our distant ancestors. And they say that eating too much junk food has caused us to get fatter, with that extra weight pulling us down into a prehistoric stoop. According to Professor Grey of Nottingham Trent University, 'Millions of years after man became upright, Millennium man is stooping lower and lower'. If it is true, that our modern lifestyle is contributing to poor posture, then this is more serious than you might think. For poor posture can be linked with serious health problems: bad backs, neck pain, coronary, respiratory and digestive diseases to name a few.

But these are not new observations. An Australian named F. Matthias Alexander, who founded the method now known as the Alexander Technique, wrote nearly a hundred years ago about the need for a new science in living because of, "the appalling physical deterioration that can be seen by any intelligent observer who will walk the streets of London or New York, for example, and note the form and aspect of the average individuals who make up the crowd". Alexander was concerned not only with this gradual physical deterioration, but also with a noticeable increase in psychological and behavioural problems which he concluded were both symptoms of the same problem. Yet he did not suggest giving up civilisation to return to a more 'natural' or primitive way of life. Rather he advocated moving forwards. He claimed that man is at a critical point in his development where he needs to take conscious control of the way he uses himself in his daily activities. That is, he can no longer rely upon instinctive direction to control the mechanisms that co-ordinate him in his activities.

The instinctive mechanisms or reflexes that are responsible for ensuring good co-ordination, balance and poise in action and reaction operate beautifully in wild animals. Yet, in modern man they have become unreliable due to the process of civilisation, the rapid development of ways of life for which we are not instinctively adapted. We have created tools and technologies to help us gain control over our environment but in some cases using them has led to a disturbance of our natural balance and poise.

Alexander discovered that our balance, poise and health depend upon maintaining an ideal relationship between our head and our body. He called this relationship the 'Primary Control'. The head must lead forwards and up in a way which co-ordinates the other parts of the body into a smooth, integrated, and balanced whole. Habitual tensions or misuse can distort this relationship and will have harmful effects right throughout the body, due to the way all our muscles, joints and ligaments are interconnected. If we stop for a moment and realise that the head weighs around 16 to 18 pounds and that the pull of gravity is downwards, then this forward and upwards direction of the head can be seen to be critically important. However, this relationship is not a fixed one and the idea of 'good' or 'bad' posture needs to

be understood in a new way. There is no such thing as a 'right' position, but there is such a thing as a right direction or relationship between the head and the body.

This relationship is controlled by very delicate postural reflexes which in primitive man and animals operate automatically and unconsciously. But modern man needs to consciously learn how to not interfere with these mechanisms in the process of adapting to new and 'un-natural' environmental conditions. He needs to learn to maintain this relationship during his long periods working at computers, watching TV screens or driving his car. And, he needs also to learn to attend to his primary control while engaged in more natural activities such as walking. The solution to our modern problem is not more exercise or more dieting or more therapies. It requires knowledge and skill in learning how the postural mechanisms work and this requires the aid of an Alexander Teacher.

The Alexander teacher uses their hands to gently direct the student's head into its proper relationship to the body, and the student gains the experience of what this feels like and learns how to maintain it. The teacher also introduces some simple anatomical and physiological principles and procedures concerning movement and breathing to help the student learn how to think in a new way about what they are doing in their activities. They are taught to recognise this relationship and to recognise when they are interfering with the proper working of the postural reflexes that align the head to the body so that they can learn to move and react to stimuli more efficiently and constructively. Over time, as knowledge and skill develops, movement becomes more fluid and posture improves. There comes greater freedom in muscles and joints and better breathing, digestion and circulation, all of which contribute to being more poised and relaxed. This leads to better interpersonal relationships and better general standards of health and well-being.

F. M. Alexander's discovery offers us a unique chance for a healthier and happier future. But in doing so it asks us to abandon the search for a quick fix or miracle cure and move instead towards a reasoning attitude of investing in a long term programme of re-education to learn to undo the unconscious and deeply ingrained habits that are damaging our health. However, every journey begins with the first step, so why not arrange for your first introductory session and discover what many others have discovered, a sound method for developing good habits of movement, control and poise in everything you do.