

The Alexander Technique and Dystonia

By David Langstroth

The Alexander Technique was developed around 100 years ago by its founder, Frederick Matthias Alexander (1869-1955). He was an aspiring young actor in Australia who suffered from persistent hoarseness in his performances. His attempts to solve this rather ordinary problem led to a long series of experiments and discoveries on the nature of human control and co-ordination. In the end he solved his problem and returned to the stage with a quality of voice production that was the envy of everyone. In teaching his technique to others however, it quickly became apparent that he had discovered something of fundamental importance for general health and well-being and he set aside his acting career to devote the rest of his life to teaching his Technique.

Fundamentally it is a method for eradicating the persistent bad habits of co-ordination which impinge on our health and affect our manner of reacting to life's stimuli. Many people find it hard to believe that the human being could cultivate habits of movement and control which actually cause injury and disease, but sadly the evidence is all around us that this is in fact the case. Most adults today exhibit serious defects in control and co-ordination in total ignorance. Today the Technique is taught to people from all walks of life who use it to eradicate a variety of problems, or for general growth and improvement.

One of the humbling experiences that everyone encounters when they start lessons in the Alexander Technique is that they have little or no conscious control over the way in which they do things. Although it is true that when we want to lift an arm and reach for a glass we will most of the time end up with the glass in our hand, but we leave the control and co-ordination of over 600 muscles almost entirely to automatic processes. This would be fine if we could rely on these automatic processes to co-ordinate all the actions and tensions in the most effective way for the purpose, but the shocking fact is that we cannot. In the simplest of acts it can be seen that muscles which should be more or less relaxed are over-tensed, those which should be tensed are collapsed, and there is a general state of irritation and confusion, all of which goes unnoticed until some specific part gives out, or some medical problem arises.

This is what we call poor "use" of the individual. Instead of supporting the action of the arms with the broad muscles of the back, the individual may bring the more delicate muscles of his neck into play to do this work, muscles which were never intended to take such a strain, stressing and deforming delicate and important structures and mechanisms. This will have a knock on effect throughout the body, bringing about rigidity, painful distortions and disease of all sorts. In Alexander's case, he discovered a pattern of poor co-ordination that was characterised by the tendency, among other things, to pull his head back and down and depress his larynx in everything that he did. No wonder his voice didn't last.

In the Alexander Technique people are taught to develop real control over the way in which they do things, to replace the erratic or harmful automatic processes of control with a conscious and constructive control. However, this does not mean paying attention to each one of over 600 muscles,

and making sure it does the right thing at the right time. Rather, there is a natural mechanism which co-ordinates all of this detail and this is known as the primary control. It consists of a certain dynamic and fluid relationship between the head, neck, back and limbs in any activity. When this relationship is maintained, the many detailed and particular movements and reflexes that we employ at any given moment for any purpose will be controlled and co-ordinated.

The primary control is an organising and co-ordinating factor that has been observed in many vertebrates other than humans. It is perhaps due to the very artificial environment in which we now live that our automatic processes are not able to cope, and the primary control becomes distorted.

It is important to understand that the Alexander Technique is concerned with the restoring of adequate control and co-ordination on a general basis through the proper employment of the primary control. It does not set out to cure any specific defect and teachers of the Technique are not trained as doctors. They are teachers who impart a skill. However, a great many chronic illnesses are rooted in poor co-ordination and control, and over the course of time as control improves there is often substantial improvement or elimination of illness and disease. Although poor habits of co-ordination can be found in the case of most illness, they cannot be stated to be the only cause of disease. However, even when symptoms persist, improved co-ordination enables a person to cope much better with their disability.

However, having said all this it seems quite likely that dystonia is a condition that is intimately bound up with problems of co-ordination and control. There are several reasons for this supposition:

- 1) The definition of dystonia as “a disorder characterized by sustained and involuntary muscle contractions and spasms which result in abnormal postures and movements”, describes precisely the field that the Alexander Technique is concerned with. The skill to consciously inhibit unwanted actions is central to the Alexander Technique. It is a skill which is taught as the first part of the co-ordination process.
- 2) The various classifications of dystonia seem to describe not different conditions, but a similar problem of control and co-ordination in different parts of the body. The Alexander Technique teaches the same general skill to everyone. Restoring the general control of the whole organism often removes the causal factor of a localised problem.
- 3) The causes of dystonia seem to be unclear to the medical profession. This is always the case when a problem is caused by a general condition of poor co-ordination and control. This level of analysis has yet to be appreciated by the medical profession. A similar lack of certainty exists as to the causes of back pain for example.
- 4) Although we have not worked with anyone suffering from diagnosed dystonia, There are descriptions of improvements to sufferers of torticollis following lessons in the Alexander Technique mentioned in *The Universal Constant in Living* by F. M. Alexander, *The Alexander Technique as I See it* by Pat MacDonald, and *Postural Homoestasis* by Dr. Wilfred Barlow published in *The Annals of Physical Medicine*, July 1952.

The Alexander Technique is taught on a one-to-one basis. It is a skill which takes time and application to learn and cannot be reliably taught in a group. It involves changing habits and implicated in this are habits of thinking. A great many of our assumptions about how we move and act in the world are re-examined. The potential for health and improvement in learning to gain conscious control over the way we do things is enormous. The only prerequisite to learning is the possession of an open mind and a willingness to change.