

Progress in the Alexander Technique

By David Langstroth

*"It helps to see changes as "interesting incentives to grow rather than threats to security".
(Kobusa et al, 1982)*

There are two possible explanations for the perception that you are not making any progress in the Alexander Technique:

- 1) You are not making any progress in the Alexander Technique.
- 2) You are making progress but you are not aware of it.

If it is the case that you are not making any progress then there are three possible reasons for that:

- 1) You are badly taught
- 2) You are wrongly applying the principles and procedures
- 3) The whole thing is a load of nonsense and doesn't work anyway

Let us begin with number three. It is certainly true that in this day and age, when there are so many competing claims for methods which will deliver growth and improvement one must indeed be sceptical. For the claims that are made vary widely in terms of their status as 'truth'. For example the claims about God are of a different status to scientific claims.

Scientific claims are based on objective observation and logical thought. And all claims must be falsifiable. Essentially that means they must be testable; it must be possible to contrive circumstances in which such claims could be proved false. According to these rules, claims about God are not scientific. One cannot contrive circumstances to test God's existence. Anything that happens in the world, no matter what, is evidence that God exists. This doesn't necessarily mean that such claims are false, but just that they are a different type of knowledge. They rely on faith.

The Alexander Technique makes scientific claims. You can put them to the test. Apply the principles and procedures and see whether or not it delivers the results. This happens every time an individual has lessons. And, there is a considerable amount of formal scientific work that has put the Alexander Technique to the test. In Frank Pierce Jones' book *'Body Awareness in Action'* you can read in detail about his experiments using strobe photography, electromyography, and force plates. The evidence is presented by Jones, with many

photographs of his work included. In Dr. Wilfred Barlow's book, *'The Alexander Principle'* he draws on his own objective experience as a physician and Alexander Teacher to claim that the Technique was effective in changing manner of use, and that manner of use played a significant role in rheumatism, cervical spondylosis, back pain, arthritis, breathing disorders such as asthma, hypertension, gastro-intestinal conditions, dystonia, anorexia, migraine, epilepsy, gynaecological conditions, neurosis and depression. Dr. Barlow included in his books many 'before and after' photographs which also show profound changes in posture.

Recent controlled research on the results of lessons in the Technique has further confirmed the relationship between use, functioning and manner of reaction by measuring a variety of specific conditions and indicators. One particular study¹ found a quantifiable improvement in respiratory function as well as a subjective sense of enhanced ease of breathing. This confirmed an earlier finding of increased respiratory functioning.² Another study found that the Technique helped sufferers of Parkinson's disease by reducing depression, improving body concept, and reducing difficulties in daily activities.³ In a study on performing music students, another researcher reported improvements due to the Technique in the areas of musical and technical performance, heart rate, anxiety and attitude, although, except for heart rate, these improvements were restricted to low stress situations.⁴ Lessons in the Alexander Technique have been shown to be of huge benefit to a variety of craniomandibular disorders, in which habits of use play a large part,⁵ and other research has found that in people with learning disabilities the Technique brought about improvements in breathing, mobility and anxiety.⁶

These studies are particularly significant in view of the fact that in most of them the subjects did not have many lessons. The benefits of the Technique increase over time with more instruction and more application. It is likely that given more time, and more instruction, those music students would have developed the skill to apply what they had learned in high as well as low stress situations.

One of the main characteristics of a poor manner of use is the undue and excessive effort required to accomplish the simplest of actions. The neurophysiologists Whatmore and Kohli discovered that excessive effort is related to a very large number of diseases and health problems. They coined the term 'dysponesis' to refer to this chronic state. 'Dys' means faulty or wrong, and 'ponos' means effort, work or energy. They stated that,

"...[dysponesis] is a hidden etiologic factor in a number of common clinical syndromes, and can give rise to a variety of functional disturbances within the organism. It is basically a reversible physiopathologic state composed of errors in energy expenditure that interfere with nervous system function and thus with control of organ function"

*...resulting in reduction in the organism's productivity and disturbance of its emotional reactivity, ideation, and central regulation of various organs of the body."*⁷

This is only a tiny proportion of the available scientific work on the technique. On the basis of such objective evidence and personal experience it has been endorsed by such scientists as Sir Charles Sherrington (the father of modern neurology), Nikolaas Tinbergen (winner of the Nobel prize for medicine and physiology) and by the medical scientist Dr. David Garlick, who wrote a short book on the scientific status of the Technique.⁸

However, just because a lot of scientists have confirmed the value of the technique does not mean that the final word has been said. We have a responsibility to ask questions and think for ourselves. Scientists have been wrong before.

So let us consider number 1, the idea that you are badly taught. This of course is a real possibility. There is an awful lot of bad teaching about. Unfortunately very few bad teachers will acknowledge the fact that they are teaching badly. The responsibility falls to you to think for yourself and to make sure that you are being taught correctly. If you are not, then you should change teachers. The only way for you to make certain in this area is to read the original four books by Alexander. And read them carefully, for they are not easy reading, and contain ideas which are very unfamiliar to the ways we are accustomed to thinking about ourselves. They form the best definition of what the Technique is, and should be, allowing for some updating and development, exactly the principles and procedures you are being taught.^{9,10,11,12}

This leaves us to consider number 2, the idea that you are not properly applying the principles and procedures. Let me describe my own experience in this regard. I have been learning to apply the principles and procedures to my own life, and my own behaviour over the last 15 years. I have been in the position *a great many times* of feeling that I was not making progress. I have felt frustrated and this has brought me to wonder both whether I was up to the challenge of learning this work, and whether the Technique itself was all it was cracked up to be. These periods of frustration, and perceived lack of progress have been of varying lengths of time, from a few days, to a few years.

In my own case, each of these periods of frustration eventually motivated me to seriously examine my own assumptions about what I thought I was doing. They led me to the point where I was determined to find out where I was stuck. So I returned to Alexander's books, I read, I thought, and eventually I was forced to conclude that perhaps I was not doing what I thought I was doing.

The procedure seems so simple. Inhibition, direction, analysis of the conditions present and conscious choice. Yet, faced with my own perceived lack of progress I had to ask myself whether I was doing what I felt I was doing. I have discovered, each time, a particular

misconception or habit of thought that I was clinging on to and which was preventing my progress. For example, even though I was aware on an intellectual level that this work is not about position, the habit of thinking positionally was so deeply rooted that I had not completely discarded it. I found myself holding firm notions about where my head should be, or the shape my back should take, and I found that I was actually looking at myself in mirrors or shop windows and adjusting myself to fit my assumptions. When I finally let go of this habit, several years into the work, a period of great change followed.

Another habit of mine was to try to 'do' my directions. Again, even though I had an intellectual understanding of 'not doing', in practice I was, to some extent, trying to do them. This related to a very fundamental habit that underpinned my personality. It related to the fact that I am habitually a bit of a control freak, that my habit is to achieve things and to need to make things happen. It just felt so wrong to trust just to thinking. This point of discovery was a major revelation to me. It concerned my whole personality and my way of approaching the world, and working through it enabled me to once more initiate another period of great change.

Periods of frustration should be seen as essential steps in learning. They are the motivation that drives us to examine our understanding of the Technique and to discard habitual ways of thinking which have hampered our ability to apply it. At every step in this work we come up against our habits of thought and our assumptions. Eventually, if we allow those assumptions to give way in the face of our frustrations then we achieve another stage in our growth and development.

At the beginning of this article I said that one other possibility was that you were simply unaware of the progress that you were making. This is a point which needs to be seriously considered. For there are certainly periods when nothing seems to be happening, simply because changes are taking place at such a slow and incremental rate. We do not see the grass grow because it grows slowly and each day we habituate ourselves to what we experience. There is a lack of dramatic moments.

We must consider how we can recognise change. What the Alexander Technique achieves is a gradual improvement in the general standard of use. This is evidenced by the relationship of the head to the neck, the back and the upper and lower limbs in activity. A good teacher can observe these changes in others, even though they may not be able to notice them in themselves. Because our feelings are unreliable we sometimes must rely on a third party to get this feedback.

Another source of feedback can come from specific improvements we have noticed that we can deduce to be the result of an improvement in general standards. In Alexander's case,

for example he knew he was making progress because his specific vocal problems disappeared. Some of the scientific studies mentioned above measured such factors as the incidence of disease, the quality of movement, the effort exerted and postural change. However, it is important to remember that the Technique makes no claim to change any specific condition. It changes the general pattern of use. If a specific complaint is a result of poor use then it will certainly change. If it is the product of something else, then it may not. If you have a congenital heart defect then the Alexander Technique will not make it better. If, however the functioning of your heart is impeded by undue pressures from an unduly contracted ribcage, which is part of your pattern of use, then the Technique will certainly benefit the problem.

Therefore, one must be careful about assumptions as to what specific changes we expect. The Technique can offer a surprise in what changes it actually delivers. And not only must we be careful about our expectations we must be aware that measurement can also be a problem. Unless we specifically take objective measurements before and after, we are left to rely on our sense of feeling as a guide. And this, as we all know, is notoriously unreliable. When it is combined with the fact that periods of change may be accompanied by discomfort, painful joints, flu-like symptoms and so on, we realise that our perceptions must not be given too much emphasis.

In my own case I have sometimes only realised the progress I had made by returning after a period of years to an old activity. Only then did I realise how much I had changed. That old activity seemed so much easier, lighter, more fluid, and I was so much more in control. And then I had to be reminded of things that I had completely forgotten such as the pain I used to have in my shoulders or the eczema I used to suffer from.

In scientific studies, of course, very careful objective measurements are made before and after. This is ultimately the only way to be certain if you want evidence that is independent of your teacher's assertions. But one must take care as to which variables you measure. To measure improvements in lung capacity, for example is not difficult, but not everyone suffers from lowered lung capacity as a result of their habits. For others it will be necessary to measure incidences of asthmatic attacks, or episodes of eczema. Frank Pierce Jones decided to measure much more universal variables when he found a way to quantify quality of movement. This however requires more elaborate apparatus than most people are willing to invest in. His book however, is well worth a read.

Progress therefore is an issue which is very important but not so straightforwardly simple. We need to consider a lot of different issues. Above all we need to make sure we are well informed about what the Technique is all about, and we need to look very critically at ourselves and our ways of applying it. Everything in this work is about gaining conscious control, and the assessment of progress should be no different.

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