

The Alexander Technique and Riding

By Tasha Miller and David Langstroth

Sylvia Loch, in her book *The Classical Seat*¹ tells us that if you put a five year old who has never ridden before on a pony the chances are you will find a near perfect posture. But why is it so difficult for adults? The answer lies in the nature of the habits we have developed over the years, habits which in most cases tend to interfere with and distort this light and fluid co-ordination. These habits prevent us from achieving our best and they interfere with our learning.

These habits are largely unconscious, and exist on a general level, affecting our health and our performance in all our activities. In riding they create such problems as stiffness, lack of balance, lack of poise, lack of sensitivity and ultimately lack of control of the horse. The art of riding depends upon the sensitive communication between two living beings, and if one of those is stiff and mal-co-ordinated it will seriously undermine the performance of horse and rider. A stiff rider makes for stiffness in the horse.

Good co-ordination, such as is seen in most five year olds, is the fundamental upon which the development of all other skills depend. It is as vital for the rider as it is for the violinist or the footballer. Yet it cannot be developed by willpower or by direct approaches. Most of us will have experienced the fact that instructions to “sit up straight” or “relax”, although well intentioned, rarely bring about an improvement in performance. More often than not they add to the burden of effort in what we are doing.

The Alexander Technique is method for improving co-ordination. One learns the Technique as a general skill using such simple activities as sitting in a chair or lying on a table, and gradually one develops the ability to apply it to all activities in one’s life, from riding to driving a car.

The benefits of learning to control and improve co-ordination extend beyond improvements in performance. Our general state of health is also dependent upon our habits of co-ordination. For example, if you sit in an unbalanced way you put a strain upon the spine. The muscles which then have to tighten to hold you in this unbalanced posture also restrict your breathing. The distortion of your torso puts an unusual pressure on internal organs. All of these processes will affect circulation, digestion and the many chemical systems in the body. If such a manner of using yourself is habitual, muscles, tendons and ligaments will actually shorten over the years to adapt, limiting your movement. Joints will seize up, and the persistent strain on internal organs can gradually bring about any number of chronic problems such as circulatory problems, digestive problems or breathing disorders. Musculoskeletal problems such as back pain and arthritis are also very common.

¹ Loch, Sylvia (1988) *The Classical Seat*, London, Unwin Hyman.

Our state of general health also includes our thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Pessimism, depression and anxiety are also bound up with chronic habits concerning our co-ordination and the way we use ourselves. We can recognise these just by the way people sit and move.

The Alexander Technique is taught on a one to one basis. Students learn the skills of thinking in action which enables them to attend to their co-ordination as a means to achieve any goal. Thus the Technique is an educative process and not a therapy. It is a method the student learns to apply, rather than something that is done to him or her by an expert. The teacher puts their hands on the student in the teaching process in order to judge what the student is doing muscularly, and in order to guide the student's efforts. This ensures that the student gets the right experiences in good co-ordination rather than repeating mistakes or practising what they think "feels right". One of the most disconcerting facts the student has to come to terms with is that what they feel they are doing is not always actually what is happening.

The changes that are achieved by applying the Technique can be quite significant. By removing bad habits of co-ordination one removes causes of poor health and poor performance. Progress is often marked by moments in which something that used to be difficult is suddenly experienced as being quite easy. One wonders why it had seemed so difficult before.

The Alexander Technique is used by performers all over the world, in riding, in the arts, and in the widest variety of activities. Alexander himself was a performer who had a promising career on the stage before it was cut short by vocal problems. In attempting to solve his vocal problem he discovered the nature of human co-ordination and how it can be improved. He discovered that this co-ordination was the cornerstone to the success of any human action. The improvement he achieved, and helped others to achieve as well has been documented and studied. The Alexander Technique is based on reasoning and observation and has had the support of numerous eminent doctors and scientists. In 1973 Nikolaas Tinbergen won the Nobel Prize for "Physiology or Medicine" and devoted a large part of his speech to praising the relatively unrecognised work of Alexander.

A famous performer once said that there is no such thing as difficult. There is only easy or impossible. The ultimate goal of any rider is of course to ride with ease and control. If you want to transform the impossible into the easy, to regain something of the fluidity and suppleness of the five year old, together with that ability to learn quickly and effortlessly, then its time to think about what's getting in your way, and put it right. It's time to invest in the Alexander Technique.