

Pain-free Walking and The Alexander Technique

By Tasha Miller

“To execute a simple thing such as walking requires the right degree of action of a great many muscles and nerves, some hundreds to thousands of nerve fibres, and perhaps a hundred times as many muscle fibres. Various parts of my brain are involved in the co-ordination and management of this, and in so doing, my brain’s rightness of action rests on receiving and despatching thousands of nerve messages, and on registering and adjusting pressures and tensions from various parts of me”.

Sir Charles Sherrington
(Neurophysiologist)

Of course we are totally unaware of all these processes when we walk. For most of us walking seems to happen so automatically and instinctively that from a very early age we move from crawling to standing - perfecting our balance in standing - to walking and running, and then on and on to ever more complex patterns of movement in order to enjoy and explore our world.

In our developmental journey no one, least of all ourselves, considers or takes care to check out whether we are establishing the fundamentals of movement co-ordination correctly. It is assumed, quite erroneously, that these things take care of themselves and don’t need bothering about, unless we get into trouble, and then it’s a bit of a mess trying to work our way out of all this complexity.

Sadly, most people don’t get out of their mess. They just learn to cope with it, or if they do get out of one mess the methodology used usually brings about several other new messes, commonly termed side-effects. Sometimes people do experience a ‘cure’ without any immediate side-effects but sooner or later new problems emerge or the old ones come back with a vengeance: ‘cure’ by transferring the problem somewhere else. The reason for this is our ignorance of what is involved in movement co-ordination as discovered by F.M. Alexander and our total belief and dependence upon instincts to guide and direct us correctly in this manner.

F. M. Alexander, the originator of the Alexander Technique, discovered, through a long process of detailed and painstaking observation, analysis and testing, an underlying bio-mechanical pattern that was essential for good movement co-ordination. This pattern comprised of a certain dynamic relationship between the Head, Spine, Torso and Limbs and constituted a fundamental and total pattern. G.E. Coghill, another neurophysiologist, supported Alexander’s

finding through his own research, spanning over 40 years, on a creature called amblystoma. Coghill showed through his studies that:

“.....behaviour first appears as a total reaction of the organism, which is integrated from the beginning, and that the smaller patterns of behaviour, or specific reflexes, arise by a process of individuation from the total pattern.”

Alexander also discovered that this underlying total pattern or bio-mechanical design, was being interfered with and disturbed: from the moment we began to craft tools and technologies to the present modern day culture there has been a constant compromising of this total pattern in our attempts to use these tools and technologies. The primary reason being our lack of awareness of its existence: this pattern evolved and developed so gradually through time that it slipped into the deeper more unconscious levels of brain and central nervous system processing without our awareness of it doing so.

Anatomists and physiologists know that there are postural reflexes that ‘should’ take care of organising us into a physiologically efficient posture automatically or instinctively regardless of what we are doing: but this is an assumption.

It is obvious from the A-Z of common everyday ailments that these postural reflexes are unable to ensure proper functioning of the total pattern instinctively . F. M. Alexander not only discovered how we could ensure that these postural reflexes continued to function properly in our various activities, but more importantly we could learn how to put them right if they had gone wrong.

Alexander teachers can demonstrate that when the head’s relationship to the spine, torso and limbs is organised in a certain way we can attain an attitude of mechanical advantage in which we can function in a physiologically efficient way. Without knowledge of this total pattern we tend to disturb it, and this in turn disturbs our equilibrium and we begin to establish poor neuro/musculo/skeletal and respiratory habits. These poor postural habits over time are overlaid with new bad habits as we learn a greater range of skills and as we rehearse and rehearse them they become ever more fixed and ingrained.

Alexander observed, and could demonstrate, that the more the total pattern is disturbed the more we tend to lose our general standard of health and well-being. He put it into a simple formula: ‘USE DETERMINES FUNCTIONING AND MANNER OF REACTING’.

Alexander Teachers are very interested in how someone ‘USES’ themselves, that is, what they are doing, albeit unconsciously, to their head’s relationship to their spine and torso and lower and upper limbs. We help students of the Alexander Technique to recognise and understand the significance of this interference and learn how to stop disturbing the poise of the head in its

dynamic relationship to the body in activity so that the postural reflexes can do their job properly. We also teach students how to correct their incorrect concepts about their bodies. It can be demonstrated that many people, including experts, have incorrect concepts regarding their ideas about their body parts and their relationship to each other, leaving it to instinctively look after itself or imposing by distorting their bodies into shapes that try to emulate the latest fashion and other cultural models in vogue: in other words they have faulty body maps that are not rooted into their biological givens.

They have developed, in Alexander's language, a faulty sensory appreciation of where things are and how they should be: they have an inaccurate sensory understanding of their anatomical framework and structure and what they are doing with it. Put technically their proprioceptive system is feeding back faulty messages to the brain about what is going on. The reason for this, as explained earlier, is that the proprioceptive sensory system operates at deeper more unconscious levels of brain and central nervous system processing and is therefore 'hidden' from us in contrast to the other five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

The sixth sense - our proprioceptive sense, tells us about our body position, its mass and movement and Alexander discovered that we need to make it more conscious and establish sound habits from a very early age. If we do this then we will be able to experience greater control, ease, grace, fluidity, flexibility, stamina and strength in all our activities from the simple to the more complex and demanding.

As we undo the faulty, wrong habits and establish new and improved ones we are released from pain, stiffness and increasing immobility as we age. We experience a sense of reclaiming our lost health and general well-being and put an end to the association of an inevitable decline into old age. As adults experience the benefits of this work they will hopefully realise the need to act preventively where their children are concerned, making sure that Alexander Technique lessons like dentistry begins at a very early age.

For those seeking relief from pain associated with poor posture and lifelong habits it is good to know that it is never too late to learn how to help yourself and experience freedom from pain in walking or any other activity that you enjoy.