

The Alexander Technique

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Individual performing artists can be distinguished by the way in which they move to perform. The style of their performance is their personal style of movement. All human behavior can be viewed as a continuum with optimum skill in expressive movement at one end and meaningless twitches at the other.

To view the medical problems of performing artists in isolation is to lose sight of the fact that these problems are only elements in the whole behavioral complex. The "how" of behavior is co-equal with the "what." When we recognize this unity and can discriminate between what is basic and what is superficial we will be able to deal with behavioral problems (including our own) in a practical, far-reaching way.

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Editor's Note: Anyone treating performers will encounter patients who have had prior treatment with alternative methods, or will be questioned as to the advisability of such therapy, or both. The Alexander Technique is one of the more widely subscribed to and available alternative or adjunctive therapies. Whether medical practitioners wish to recommend it or not, it seems important that we have at least a passing acquaintance with the philosophical background of this and other methods. This article, written by a prominent musician and teacher who is also a certified Alexander instructor, is presented for this reason.

The quality of attention we are able to bring to bear on our activities depends on the acuity of our senses and the general state of alertness of our organism. For a musician the ear is the ultimate arbiter, but visual signs enable us to move together and kinesthetic cues guide the fine movements that produce expressive sound.

Knowing what we do while we are doing it is the beginning of conscious control of our activities. But what am "I" doing when I am doing anything? The "I" is a complex psychophysical system dependent ultimately on all other systems for its existence. How much of the universe can be said to be "known?" How much is it necessary to know in order to avoid those conflicts of behavior known as stress? The tip of the iceberg is where our interest lies. As a musician this is mainly in the ears and brain, but what we perceive in the world of sounds depends on an adequate flow of blood from the heart to the head. The neck, through which this passes, is vital for many reasons. If these random introductory thoughts make you hot under the collar, ask yourself "why?"

Alexander located his initial problem in the neck—in the larynx, which is where he looked for the solution to the recurrent hoarseness that marred his public performances as an actor in Australia in the 1890's. His problem was not solved until he realized that the problem was contingent on his *total pattern of behavior*. His habitual reaction to the stimulus to speak interfered with his freedom of delivery. When he was able to stop this habitual pattern and replace it with a sequence of appropriate movements his voice responded to his wishes; his health improved and his behavior changed for the better. The details of his problem and its solution are told in his own

words in *The Use of the Self*. In my opinion this is the most accessible of his books.

Success in dealing with himself led others to seek his help and in 1904 Alexander moved to London and began what was to be a long successful teaching career. Many leading performers studied with him from his arrival there.

What did he teach them? The difficulty in describing his discovery and methods of teaching lies in the inadequacy of words to convey the change in behavior he brought about. A musician should not find this difficult to understand. No verbal description of a performance no matter how eloquent can adequately describe sounds heard, although a few seconds of music is often sufficient for recognition. Similarly a face glimpsed can be seen as familiar yet no verbal description can distinguish one individual physiognomy from the multitude of possible owners.

To describe and communicate Alexander's discovery was the work of a lifetime for Frank Pierce Jones, scholar and scientist, whose *Body Awareness in Action* was completed in 1975, the year of his death. In it, Jones recounts the history of Alexander and his discovery as well as a summary of Jones' own experiments at Tufts University. He was encouraged to undertake these by John Dewey whose experience led him to write that Alexander's work bore the same relationship to education that education bears to all other activities.¹

Dewey viewed education as a lifetime process of growth and development. He considered one of the major signs of the value of Alexander's work to be the growth and change in the Alexander brothers during the 30 years of his friendship with them.

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Jones' work led him to hypothesize:

"1. The reflex response of the organism to gravity is a fundamental feedback mechanism which integrates other reflex systems.

"2. Under civilized conditions this mechanism is commonly interfered with by habitual, learned responses which disturb the tonic relation between head, neck, and trunk.

"3. When this interference is perceived kinesthetically it can be inhibited. By this means the antigravity response is facilitated and its integrative effect on the organism is restored."²

All skilled voluntary activities depend on interdependent systems, voluntary and involuntary, which can be discoordinated in the organism's single-minded attempt to achieve a limited goal. The Alexander Technique enables a performer to utilize the force of gravity instead of battling with it. The experience of moving with our natural response to gravity is given by the teacher. A load is literally taken off the mind. Initially an effect of lightness is given in the performance of a simple everyday movement—in, for example, moving from sitting to standing, walking, picking up a pen. Ultimately patterns of interference are recognized as such and can be eliminated from any activity, including skilled performance. Stopping interference is comparable to reducing the noise in a system. When the level is low we can hear a pin drop. Continual bombardment of the auditory nerve by excessive noise results in deterioration

in hearing. Similarly, unnecessary noise in the kinesthetic system reduces sensitivity to the minimum effort required to move.

In an early experiment with the flute, I suspended the flute with a system of pulleys to which was attached a spring balance. Although I played initially with a "weightless" instrument, after a short while I would be literally "hanging" from the instrument—adding weight to the instrument although my intention was only to make contact with it. This additional weight, recorded on the spring balance, was a counterproductive force of which I was normally not aware.

Repeated experiences of movement facilitated with regard to gravity set a new standard for the kinesthetic sense in the same way as the Suzuki teacher, tuning the student's violin, gives a standard of intonation which eventually becomes that of the student.

Changing how we move—our habits of movement—is one of the most difficult problems of learning. John Dewey used his experience with Alexander as the germ of his discussion of "Habit as the Key to Social Psychology" in *Human Nature and Conduct*.³ Habit change is the key to improvement in performance. Change for the better, growth in the positive sense, is what life is about. The Alexander Technique and those teachers trained directly and indirectly by F.M. Alexander during 60 years of teaching are there to help anyone considering the need for such change. Perhaps they can help you to help yourself.

References

1. Dewey J: Introduction. In Alexander FM: *The Use of the Self*. New York, EP Dutton and Inc, 1932. Paperback reprint, Downey, California, Centerline Press, 1984, p xix.
2. Jones FP: *Body Awareness in Action*. New York, Schocken Books, 1976, p 151.
3. Dewey J: *Human Nature and Conduct*. New York, Modern Language Library, 1957.

The ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

A system of psycho-physical education developed by F. Matthias Alexander that helps to prevent and eliminate musculoskeletal problems resulting from inefficient use of the body while practicing and performing.

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