

# Alexander Technique

*Re-awakening the Body's Intelligence*

By **Joan Arnold**

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**R**ecently, a young woman came to me with upper back and neck pain so acute she found it difficult to concentrate. Lisa – a healthy, fit, overworked lawyer in her mid-30s – had been suffering for three months. Debilitated and exhausted, she was frightened that something was seriously, structurally wrong. One chiropractor she had consulted, mystified by her persistent condition, suggested an MRI. But a subsequent chiropractor referred her to me, knowing she could help Lisa feel better – temporarily – but that lessons in the Alexander Technique would address the problem's cause. To find long-term relief, Lisa would have to change her movement pattern. "I was in a crisis state," she says now, "a mess. My neck was so out of whack I was in pain all day. It was totally distracting, getting in the way of work and pleasure."

As she described her symptoms in our first session, Lisa's chin jutted forward, her shoulders lifted and her torso collapsed. The source of her pain was no mystery to me. Without realizing it, she was putting tremendous pressure on her cervical and thoracic spine. My role was to help her understand how her way of doing things could perpetuate or alleviate her condition.

We started our work together with an immediate goal: Lisa had planned a two-week trip to Tahiti as a birthday gift to her partner. That required a 14-hour plane flight each way – a real challenge for anyone with chronic tension. She yearned to have a romantic vacation and gaze at the landscape that inspired Gauguin, without excruciating pain.

In four Alexander Technique lessons, I helped Lisa tune in to her body and apply the Alexander concepts to the way she works and walks. I explained how compressed posture can cause pain. I encouraged her to release tight muscles and breathe more fully. With words and touch, I directed her head forward and up, eliciting her body's natural tendency to expand. In two weeks, her pain was gone; the color had returned to her cheeks. She was amazed and exhilarated to be pain-free, and regretful she did not have this information sooner. When she returned from her voyage with a smile and a tan, she reported that the plane flight had been no problem.



A few of the Alexander Technique's fundamental ideas can make an enormous difference to a client, sometimes with immediate results. Everyone who embarks on a course of Alexander Technique lessons wants to know, "How long does it take?" Though changing habits takes time, many people can begin to use the work right away. In two lessons, one woman

radically reduced her neck pain and corrected a balance problem which had troubled her for years; she continues to study and improve. Another client took eight months to overcome her chronic headaches. An actor took 1½ years to change his walk and bearing from awkward to regal. In these and many other examples, relief and change endure when clients invest the time to shift their customary movement style. That might mean three months or a year. Whatever their course of study, students gain a sense of physical control and new freedom in movement. They then have the skills to continue their progress, long after lessons are over.

## Alexander's Story

Frederick Mathias Alexander (1869-1955) was a Shakespearean actor who lived in Australia in the late 1800s. At 19, his ambitions were frustrated by a chronic vocal problem. While on stage before an audience, he lost his voice completely. When a doctor's treatment failed to correct the problem, he wondered what he might be doing to provoke it. He set up a three-way mirror to observe himself and noticed that every time he began speaking, he tightened his sub-occipital muscles, lifted his chin and tilted his head back and down. The resulting pressure on the spine restricted his breathing and shortened his stature.

Changing this habit proved surprisingly difficult. Alexander realized his whole concept of rightness was

untrustworthy, based as it was on years of faulty habits. Hours of experiment revealed that "inhibiting" – stopping the habit – was far more useful than trying to do what he thought was correct. He also discovered that deliberate muscular work was not as effective as envisioning an activity, what he called "directing." He realized if he was too concerned with his goal, his over-anxiety to perform well interfered with his ability to do so. He was simply trying too hard. When he focused on the process rather than the goal, his over-activity lessened. His voice and body worked much more easily, becoming the expressive tool he yearned for. He could do more by doing less.

Through Alexander's nine-year odyssey of self-observation, he developed a reliable way to restore his voice and enrich his stage presence. He became known for his mellifluous voice and, when he began teaching his method to others, found it resolved a wide range of problems. His students' overall health improved. Polio victims regained their balance, recovered more of their movement range and felt far less disabled. People who suffered from awkwardness, stuttering or stage fright overcame their difficulties. He continued to teach his technique in England and the United States until his death at the age of 86.

When Alexander found no medical solution, he began working on himself. This mode of self-observation and modulation during activity are key to the technique. In the pressure cooker that is our contemporary health care climate, patients are increasingly frustrated with the troubled medical world. More informed consumers are tapping alternative approaches that challenge the model

of the patient as passive machine and the physician as mechanical whiz. As we all know, the trend is toward wellness: taking an active role in maintaining one's health and vitality. One of the keys to that role is education, in its original meaning – to draw out the knowledge that is already there.

### The Technique's Basic Ideas

Many people are mystified by their pain, excess tension or lack of coordination. They often see problems in their joints or muscles as structural, unchangeable. That can be frightening as, like Lisa, they are tyrannized by a symptom whose source they don't understand. But, as they learn the technique, they are surprised they really can make lasting shifts in the way they walk, their degree of pain, muscular tension or the shape of their posture. They begin to understand how dynamic and changeable the body really is. They acquire a portable body intelligence that is theirs for the rest of their lives.

The technique's basic tenet is that when the neck does not overwork, the head can balance lightly at the top of spine. The relationship between the head and the spine – what Alexander called "primary control" – has ramifications throughout the rest of the body. Our neuromuscular system is designed to work in concert with gravity. Delicate poise of the head sparks the body's anti-gravity response: A natural oppositional force in the torso that easily guides us upward and invites the spine to lengthen, rather than compress, as we move. We don't have to slump or rigidly hold ourselves up. We can direct and, with focused thought, invite this flow upward. That gives us

poise and enhances ease, balance, confidence and pleasure in movement. Anyone, regardless of age or physical condition, can use the technique to spark the body's inherent support system and use it throughout the day.

### What To Expect In An Alexander Lesson

An Alexander lesson is movement education. The practitioner is called a teacher, the private session a lesson and the client a student. Though the technique has therapeutic benefits, it is not a treatment, such as chiropractic or massage. Students learn to take an active role in rebalancing themselves. It is not a relaxation technique, though letting go of muscles is an important first step. With the client's eyes open, the teacher distinguishes among varying states of relaxation, slumping or the capacity for functional, energized ease. The technique is not a set of exercises or postures such as yoga, Feldenkrais or Pilates. Rather, it is a set of guiding thoughts to keep in mind during an activity. Because the technique is a way to heighten movement awareness and better coordinate the body, it helps people perform specific postures or exercises with less strain and more comfort. The Alexander teacher can provide detailed coaching on how to ski or do abdominal exercises. Students can bring their newly refined understanding to a class or a stretch. Since the technique is not a formula but a set of principles, private lessons are easily tailored to individual needs.

A teaching studio includes a chair, bodywork table, mirror, anatomical pictures and a skeleton model to illustrate the body's logical structure. Students wear loose, comfortable clothing which allows free movement of the arms and legs. An Alexander lesson – usually 30-45 minutes long – is an opportunity to unwind and observe how the mind and body work. The Alexander teacher is trained in a subtle touch which



Frederick Mathias Alexander (1869-1955)

invites the release of muscular tension and elicits the student's primary control. In one aspect of a session, the client lies clothed on a bodywork table while the teacher gently moves their limbs. With words and touch, the teacher encourages ease and expansion while offering focused, supportive coaching on how to calm the system. In the movement segment of a lesson, the teacher guides the student to notice how they perform simple actions, such as standing, sitting or reaching. The practitioner helps the student sense and release compression in the neck and envision the spine lengthening. Guiding the student to expand the torso while walking, the teacher offers (through the hands) the feeling of a lighter, more fluid stride. That becomes a reference point after the lesson, when the student recalls an idea, sensation or image. Since any activity is fair game, students can bring a computer keyboard, a guitar or a paint brush. They can work on a dance movement, a yoga pose, a monologue or a song. And no matter where the problem is, the teacher will attend to the entire body's dynamic pattern.

Conscious control then becomes the vehicle to improve function. One of the technique's delightful aspects is that ordinary actions – writing, speaking, riding a train, washing dishes – become imbued with a spirit of observation. As students become more adept, they notice their own tendencies and streamline their movement. They also become sharper observers of those around them. When they begin to notice other people sagging, holding their breath or hunching their shoulders, they are reminded to counter their own stress responses. Since tension is a kind of internal static, releasing tunes the system, quiets the mind and expands perception.

I encourage people new to the technique to try one lesson. If they decide to take the plunge, they will get the most out of Alexander study

by taking one to two lessons a week for three to six months. Teachers charge from \$40 to \$100, depending on their experience and geographic location. Some students solve the problem that first drove them to study, then continue for a year or more, fascinated by the process of removing inner obstructions and refining their skills.

### Practicing the technique

Teaching the Alexander Technique offers tremendous variety. In a day, I might help a 9-year-old dancer with her over-arched back, a woman in her 60s with rheumatoid arthritis and a professional singer with his breathing. Among clients, I move through different modes – playful, educational, healing, comforting, challenging. I can help them relieve pain, resolve a chronic hip problem, or lighten the pressure on aching knees. The technique, created by a performer, is a thrill to an actor or a singer who can use it to access more vocal power or authenticity in a role. To a bodyworker or movement enthusiast, the technique's principles have an appealing elegance and infinite applications.

To be certified by the North American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (NASTAT), requires 1,600 hours of training. Teaching the Alexander Technique is a complex skill that takes a long time to build. Teachers must maintain their own body/mind integration while helping students improve theirs; they must guide their students along the sometimes difficult road of dislodging embedded habits. Unlike reiki or cranio-sacral work, one cannot learn it by degrees in a series of workshops and use it with clients. But there is tremendous potential in the partnership between the Alexander Technique and other forms of bodywork.

### Partnership Among Disciplines

Some of the synergy between my

work and others is obvious: After a week of seeing 20-25 students, there's no place I'd rather be than under the capable hands of a massage therapist. And I have a network of practitioners to whom I refer – shiatsu, massage, cranio-sacral balancing, etc. Here is one example of how the Alexander Technique can dovetail with another modality.

*For the client:* I exchange with Archer Martin, a New York City bodyworker trained in Swedish massage and energetic healing. When I sense that my students' aches, stiffness or stress level interferes with learning, I refer them for massage. On her part, Martin helps her clients by referring them to the Alexander Technique. "I can give people the freedom of choice by loosening constricted muscle," she says. "What I can't do is teach them how to make a different choice. Until use of the body is reprogrammed from the inside, the original situation is going to recur. That's where you and I work beautifully together."

*For the bodyworker:* Massage is hard work; a challenge to one's energy, psychological endurance and physical strength. Some therapists suffer from repetitive strain or burnout, so self-care is crucial to professional survival.

When Martin first came for an Alexander lesson, she was having pain in her shoulders. In my studio, she replicated her stance and movement during a massage. I encouraged her to avoid over-using her shoulders as she exerted pressure, to let them drape from her back, and to support the effort with her entire torso. She added an image to recall while working: "I thought of a pine tree weighted with snow – with this wonderful straight center and the boughs flowing off. That drops my shoulder girdle." Since the exertion of massage work tempts her to shorten the torso, she counters that by directing, thinking of "releasing my tail, elevating my head and maintaining the integrity of my spine."

All of us who work closely with people must balance self-care with our concern and drive to be effective. In Alexander training, we are constantly reminded that hands-on work is far clearer when we don't crowd the student, but maintain an open, dynamic space between us. Martin articulated the attitudinal change that results from this physical shift. "It's helped me with my awareness of the strong energetic pull to the client. If I drop my head toward the area I'm working on, my torso collapses and my energy is not as free to flow. Then I'm falling into the client and I tend to over-think about my work. When I keep my head erect, I can actually feel more energy going through my hands." Her perspective expands and the client has a better experience. Working this way helps to ensure she won't lose herself, literally, in her work. It supports an emotional and physical self-care that protects her body, amplifies her technique and helps her maintain her own integrity.

Since our posture and movement express who we are, the Alexander Technique's way of streamlining movement can have a profound effect on someone's sense of self. It is remarkable to ignite in students the realization that they can master their own symptoms and come closer to realizing their potential. It awakens within them an internal flow – a new level of body intelligence. As theirs improves, so does mine, and it enlivens between us a kinesthetic conver-

sation and a fresh reciprocity between body and mind. The technique offers an enjoyable, sophisticated tool with which we can continue to work on ourselves, to evolve toward greater expansion and connection to ourselves and those around us. **MAB**

### Resources

- NASTAT Books: 800/473-0620
- *Body Learning*, by Michael Gelb, Henry Holt  
General introduction to the technique.
- *Back Trouble*, by Deborah Caplan, Triad Books  
Geared to those with chronic back problems.
- NASTAT Web site: [www.alexandertech.com](http://www.alexandertech.com)
- *The Complete Guide to the Alexander Technique*  
[Alexandertechnique.com](http://Alexandertechnique.com)
- Joan Arnold: [JoanArn@aol.com](mailto:JoanArn@aol.com); or phone, 212/691-3941.

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