

RELAXATION, DEEP BREATHING AND REST-CURES

FM is critical of relaxation therapy, maintaining that it invariably leads people into a passive collapse. Was relaxation a popular pursuit at the time?

Yes, it was, although so-called “scientific” relaxation dates from Jacobson in the 1920s. The general problem with all relaxation methods and systems is that they interfere with the support of the body weight. Relaxation therapy is a bit like letting the air out of the tyres of a car – it has a deflationary effect!

Now, although FM writes approvingly of the health benefits of “fresh air”, it’s apparent that he wasn’t at all keen on deep breathing exercises, as traditionally performed in either physical culture or yoga (although he compliments Chinese physicians of 4,000 years ago for their diagnostic skills in utilising various breathing methods in the treatment of certain diseases and conditions). Could you explain why?

Yes. The whole process of deep breathing as it’s usually taught is totally misconceived because it completely disregards the effects and influence of atmospheric pressure. For example, if someone comes along and says, “Now take a deep breath”, almost everyone sucks or gasps for air. That’s very definitely the wrong way to set about it. Another very common misconception concerns the idea that taking a deep breath expands the chest. Inevitably, that puts the focus on chest expansion which, if you try and achieve it on a specific basis, is absolutely disastrous. The expansion of the thorax will happen automatically if the body-weight is supported correctly – in other words, if you lengthen and go up. In fact, FM was always quoting: “All muscular effort tends to make for thoracic rigidity” which, indeed, it does. Everyone who goes in for traditional chest expansion inevitably makes too much muscular effort and, of course, they pull down and get fixed. However, if you get the length, and the rib-cage is free as it’s meant to be,

then, when you exhale, atmospheric pressure will immediately fill the vacuum and expansion will occur automatically.

In the section on respiratory re-education Alexander talks about a “proper knowledge and practical employment of the *true primary movement* in each and every act”. The reference is slightly elliptical. Could you explain what he means?

Yes, the head has to go up. If the support of the body-weight is the first requirement then the second is that the energy to support the weight has to go in an upwards direction.

There are also some harsh words about rest-cures. I assume some of this derived from Alexander’s own unsuccessful experience of trying to “rest” his voice before a theatrical performance, but he goes further and contends that a rest-cure is especially useless for those who suffer from what he aptly describes as “lack of purpose”. In his opinion, resting only serves to make the condition worse and the unfortunate individual more or less comes to a grinding metabolic halt. How did he deal with this problem?

He tried all sorts of ways to motivate, stimulate and get people moving in one way or another. One celebrated case involves the teenage son of one of his women pupils. The boy was unwilling to do anything very much but FM gave him some lessons – I’m not sure how he managed to persuade the boy not to revolt – before deciding that more radical measures were called for. He got the lad’s mother to rent an apartment and FM engaged the services of two beefy young men to live with the boy and keep an eye on him. And one of their main responsibilities was to take him for long walks. FM gave specific instructions that the boy was to wear several sweaters and an overcoat and then be walked from Hampstead to Victoria at a brisk pace. All this would have taken place in 1912 or 1913 – I’m not absolutely sure – but I heard him repeat the story on several occasions. In dealing with lethargy he considered it vital to get some action going. I mean people talk about the Alexander Technique as “non-doing”, “not pull-