

Escape from the Monkey Trap: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique

In an expanding system, such as a growing organism . . . freedom to change the pattern of performance is one of the intrinsic properties of the organization itself.

C. Judson Herrick

I see

*The lost are like this, and their scourge to be
As I am mine, their sweating selves; but worse.*

Gerard Manley Hopkins

What can I do to be saved? This is an old question and there has never been a shortage of answers. The question is still being asked and the answers continue to multiply: meditate; join a group; relax (“You must relax”); scream; have an orgasm; take your clothes off; lie on a bed and kick; have a massage; give someone else a massage; confess your sins; do isometric exercises; do isotonic exercises; be your own best friend; take a pill. Which shall I choose? Is one way, or combination of ways, better than any other? Or is the important thing to be doing something, regardless of what? What is the fashionable way this year? Is structural integration still in? Or should I try bioenergetics instead? What if I try them both and find that I haven’t really changed at all; that I am still “my sweating self but worse”?

With so much competition it seems providential that the Alexander Technique, which had its fashionable hour as a New Way of Life back in the 1920s, is still available and has not been choked

out or absorbed by other and newer ways. For the Alexander Technique doesn't teach you something new to do. It teaches you how to bring more practical intelligence into what you are already doing; how to eliminate stereotyped responses; how to deal with habit and change. It leaves you free to choose your own goal but gives you a better use of yourself while you work toward it.

F. Matthias Alexander (1869-1955) discovered a method (a "means-whereby") for expanding consciousness to take in inhibition as well as excitation ("not-doing" as well as "doing") and thus obtain a better integration of the reflex and voluntary elements in a response pattern. The procedure makes any movement or activity smoother and easier, and is strongly reinforcing. Alexander and his brother, A. R. Alexander (1874-1947), developed a way of using their hands to convey information directly through the kinaesthetic sense. They gave their pupils an immediate "aha" experience of performing a habitual act—walking, talking, breathing, handling objects, and the like—in a non-habitual way. The technique changed the underlying feeling tone of a movement, producing a kinaesthetic effect of lightness that was pleasurable and rewarding and served as the distinguishing hallmark of non-habitual responses. It was then up to the pupil to learn the technique for himself. The learning process was greatly facilitated, however, because in the first lesson the pupil had a foretaste of the experiences he would have, once he had learned it.

F. M. Alexander published four books between 1910 and 1941. In them he presented a unified view of the organism, strongly opposed to any form of mind-body dualism. He maintained that under the influence of civilization, man as a whole—as a human being—had degenerated, that he had reached a stage where his instincts were no longer reliable, and that if he was going to survive, his behaviour had to be reintegrated on a conscious level. He labelled contemporary therapeutic and educational methods as "end-gaining," because they were based on analytical concepts that divided the organism and produced results whose undesirable side effects outweighed their benefits. He proposed instead a "means-whereby" principle in which inhibition of stereotyped responses opens the way for conscious direction and control. The principle need not be inconsistent with specific therapies, but the means-whereby (inhibition) has to come

first. No matter how many specific ends you may gain, you are worse off than before, he maintained, if in the process of gaining them you have destroyed the integrity of the organism.

Though it was John Dewey who introduced Alexander's books to the American public, his ideas have had little influence on educational theory or practice. They have made a greater impact on the newer body-mind therapies where his precepts about non-end-gaining and the danger of neglecting the body in favour of the mind hold a prominent place. In none of them, however, does there appear to be any grasp of his basic discovery. It is quite possible to accept on a verbal level the idea of mind-body unity and the principle of non-end-gaining without increasing your own self-knowledge and control (or what Alexander meant by self-knowledge and control). The non-verbal aspect of the Technique has always been a stumbling block to readers who felt that Alexander was holding something back from them and that there was more there than the books conveyed. Dewey and Huxley and other early advocates were frustrated in their attempts to describe the Technique because they could not convey the sensory experiences it involved.

Alexander was fully aware of the unique character of his teaching. He had, in fact, attempted to take out patents on it, and for many years it was not possible to study the Technique (apart from reading the books) except with him and his brother. In the 1930s, however, he decided to start a three-year training course for teachers in which they could learn to communicate the new use of themselves which he and his brother had developed. He continued the training of teachers until his death in 1955. Since then, training courses have been set up by some of his pupils and there are now a hundred or more teachers with certificates signed by F. M. or A. R. Alexander or by someone whom they trained.

Most of the literature on the subject, including Alexander's own books, while stressing the preventive character of the Technique, have used as illustrations the same kind of case histories and postural before-and-after photographs that are used to prove the value of other methods. Such records, of course, are worth obtaining and reporting, since they show that *post hoc* changes actually take place. They do not throw any light, however, on the mechanisms by which the changes come about or on the nature of the kinaesthetic expe-

riences that pupils report. To remedy this situation a study was made at the Tufts Institute for Experimental Psychology. Rejecting as criteria the long-term changes that are claimed for other forms of training, we chose instead to study the changes in movement pattern and performance and the reported changes in feeling tone that can be produced immediately (that is, without previous training). Using quantitative measures and control groups, we were able to construct an operational definition of the technique and suggest a mechanism to account for the changes. We believe that the study supports John Dewey's opinion of the scientific importance of Alexander's discovery and should lead to further scientific investigation of the technique.

In this book I want to describe the essential features of the Alexander Technique—those that distinguish it from other approaches to the mind-body problem. The knowledge should be available to teachers and therapists because of its unique power for dealing with habit and change—for dealing with the person who “sees the better course and approves of it but continues to follow the worse,” who wants to change but is convinced he cannot.

It is said that a simple way to trap a monkey is to present him with a nut in a bottle. The monkey puts his paw through the bottle's narrow mouth, grasps the nut, then cannot withdraw his paw because he will not (and hence cannot) let go of the nut. Most people are caught in monkey traps of unconscious habit. They cannot escape because they do not perceive what they are doing while they are doing it. Having an unconscious response pattern pointed out to you by somebody else is not the same thing as perceiving it for yourself while it is happening. The Alexander Technique opens a window onto the little-known area between stimulus and response and gives you the self-knowledge you need in order to change the pattern of your response—or, if you choose, not to make it at all.