

Why Alexander truly is great

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By Harry Eyres

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One of the best things I've found to do recently has been to lie on the floor in my study with four Chicago paperback translations of Greek tragedies under my head. The virtue of this exercise has had nothing whatever to do either with Chicago or with Greek tragedy (no references to hubris and nemesis in this column). It is a practice recommended by F Matthias Alexander, the Australian actor and reciter who originated the Alexander Technique.

Lying on the floor in this way does something subtle but powerful to the alignment of your head, neck and back. You can actually feel your vertebrae slowly shifting and settling and, after a while, a pleasurable sense of relaxation and mental calm sets in. If you're feeling particularly energetic, you can stretch out your right leg and extend your left arm, and then repeat the process with your left leg and right arm. But I wouldn't want you overdoing it.

One of the wonderful and tantalising things about the Alexander Technique is that it doesn't really involve doing anything. You could say that it involves undoing but even that wouldn't be quite accurate. FM Alexander created his technique, which is now taught and practised all over the world, especially by actors and musicians, by observing himself – he was trying to find out why his voice (on which he depended for a living) lost strength when he stepped onstage. Having consulted doctors who repeatedly said there was nothing physically wrong with him, he decided something more radical was required: he set up some mirrors and began, very carefully and slowly, to watch how – as we might say – he held himself.

Holding yourself is the key in more ways than one. What Alexander discovered, by his method of patient, empirical observation (which his friend the philosopher John Dewey would later say met all the requirements of the scientific method) was that he was holding himself, or parts of his body, in all kinds of unnecessary and harmful ways. He was not allowing his neck to be free, or his head to go "forward and up"; he was shortening his spine and narrowing his back.

Alexander began with no grand theoretical or ideological construct. He began with his own body, or body-mind, and a perfectly practical problem. He consistently refrained from making any grandiose claims to be a wonder-working healer or, as Dewey said, from "building up an imposing show of technical scientific terminology of physiology, anatomy and psychology". There is something humble and workaday about the Alexander Technique, which presumably attracted the pragmatist in Dewey.

But Dewey, who wrote the introductions for three of Alexander's books, did make some pretty big claims for the Alexander Technique. The reason was that the philosopher believed the technique, in which he took lessons for 35 years, had not only freed him from bad physical habits and posture, but had helped him to think.

Dewey was a physically awkward, maladroit person who took refuge in his powerful mind. But as his lessons with Alexander progressed, he found that he was not just able to perform physical actions less impulsively and clumsily but to think more flexibly – "to hold a philosophical position calmly once he had taken it or to change if new evidence came up warranting a change", in the words of Frank Pierce Jones, author of *Freedom to Change: The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique*.

Dewey was learning the first lesson of the Alexander Technique, which is that body and mind are indissolubly linked. Alexander states that "No human activity can be said to be wholly 'physical' or wholly 'mental', but all human activity, in whatever sphere, is psycho-physical activity."

This discovery hit Dewey with the force of a revelation. "The question of integration of mind-body in action is the most practical of all questions we can ask of our civilisation ... Until this integration is

effected ... we shall continue to live in a society in which a soulless materialism is compensated for by soulful, but futile, idealism and spiritualism.”

Quite a lot to hang, you might say, on a technique that consists of lying on the floor not doing very much and occasionally being manipulated very gently by a teacher with no medical or physiological training. When I recently attended an introductory course in the Alexander Technique, fellow students asked if we would eventually do more than watch each other walk across the room and sit down on a chair. But the beginnings of close observation and awareness of our own and others' posture brought surprising insights. Peter had no idea that he held one shoulder six inches higher than the other. I didn't realise that I was holding my right arm rigid, unconsciously unwilling to let anyone else take the weight.

Momentous change has been promised in the last fortnight, and there is a feeling of hope in the air. But Alexander and Dewey suggested we might do well to start close to home and begin “to recognise the most wonderful of all the structures of the vast universe – the human body”. The Alexander Technique provides a humble but surprisingly powerful way of doing that.

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