

# BODY, BREATH & BEING

a new guide to the  
Alexander Technique

Carolyn Nicholls



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“We’ve all been waiting for a ‘good’ new book introducing the principles and practice of the Alexander Technique. Carolyn Nicholls has given us a ‘great’ new book on the subject. Highly recommended for beginners of all levels.”

Malcolm Balk  
Author: Master the Art of Running

“I have had Alexander lessons throughout my career, found them invaluable and recommended them to countless other singers. Congratulations to Carolyn Nicholls, who has distilled her many years of teaching into this lucid, down to earth and entertaining book; it will work well for newcomers and devotees alike (singers and normal folk!), whether as introduction to or reminder of this marvellous technique.”

Dame Emma Kirkby  
Soprano

“A fantastic book , great pictures, a very informative practical book. This goes on our reading list for BA and MA students.”

Chris Palmer,  
Head of Voice and Speech, GSA School of Acting and Musical Theatre

“Carolyn Nicholls’ book is much more than a beginner’s introduction to the Alexander Technique. Teachers of the Technique will also find this book a useful manual for honing their communication skills and expanding their repertoire of handy hints and ideas. Carolyn’s expertise as a teacher shows through in her case studies and examples. Using personable, jargon-free language that is easy to follow, she progressively explains the concepts of the Alexander Technique and their value in our busy world. Her book is a pleasure to read.”

Dr Terry Fitzgerald  
Head of Training, Sydney Alexander School, Australia

“The author has managed successfully to distil many years’ experience teaching and practising the Alexander Technique into this highly readable and well illustrated book. I warmly recommend this accessible volume.”

Professor Basant K. Puri.

## Dedication

To my wonderful children Alison and Christopher

## Acknowledgements

The stories in this book are real stories of real people, who have been generous enough to allow me to use their real names (except for Ellen and Jane, who are real people but prefer to be known just as Ellen and Jane). I would like to thank them all.

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Matthew Andrews	Author photo, Alison Nicholls and many others
Carolyn Nicholls	Mark Nelson, Guy Richardson, Anna Thorell, Malcolm Balk Running workshop
George Weis	Richard Weis on Ming
Astrid Holm	Two year old boy in wood, two year old girl in chair
Collins and Brown	Malcolm Balk in 'lunge'

## CD Sound credits

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# Foreword

by Ron Colyer B(mus) MSTAT

Head of Training: Alexander ReEducation Centre, Berkshire UK

In January 1979 Carolyn Nicholls and I met for the first time as we hung up our coats at the Constructive Teaching Centre in Holland Park, London. This was where we were to embark on the training which would prepare us to teach the work of F.M. Alexander. Each of us had been taking regular lessons in the technique for some time, and were now to enjoy the privilege of three year's intensive work with Walter and Dilys Carrington.

Walter Carrington had been Alexander's assistant, and continued the work of training teachers after Alexander's death in 1955 until he himself passed away in August 2005. He was widely respected for his wisdom, and for his unique way of communicating the meaning of Alexander's discoveries in a simple and direct way. Dilys Carrington had developed her own thorough and precise method for teaching the unique hands-on skills which an Alexander Teacher needs. Without their example and inspiration neither this book, nor its preface, would have been written.

Now, 29 years later, Carolyn and I each direct a Teacher Training course and meet regularly to run workshops for postgraduate Alexander Teachers. With deep admiration I have watched Carolyn develop her own entirely personal way of talking and writing about the Technique, through constant practice, enquiry and reflection.

Writing about the Technique presents two important challenges. The primary one is that people wishing to learn about the Technique need more than just verbal explanations and so teachers use their hands to convey a more direct understanding. However, where the written word really can score – as this book does – is by intriguing us, and inviting us to explore further. In this context the workshops on the CD are particularly useful and will hopefully encourage the reader to find a teacher to help experience the Technique for themselves.

As in other disciplines, the Alexander Technique has its own traditionally accepted terms and phrases – which do not convey much without the direct experiences to which they refer. Most of us who have worked with these ideas for many years are still discovering deeper layers of meaning within them.

Thus the second challenge for the writer is to find a vivid, precise and contemporary language with which to bring Alexander's ideas to the modern reader. This is Carolyn's special contribution to our work. What I love about this book is that although she does not fight shy of introducing the classical terminology, she presents it alongside apt, colourful and imaginative analogies to help us find resonance with our individual needs and difficulties.

Whether you are totally new to the Technique, are already having lessons or are even an Alexander Teacher or teacher-trainee, you will find in these pages inspiration and food for thought.

Alexander was a man of his time, who identified perennial truths about the human condition. He expressed them in a dense and complex language, which many students of the technique have found difficult to unravel. The writer of this book is a woman of her time, with a particular gift for bringing those truths alive for us in the 21st century.

Ron Colyer

2008

## Introduction

### Body, Breath and Being: A new guide to the Alexander Technique

#### A powerful technique

Many people are puzzled by the Alexander Technique. Why is it, they wonder, that whether you take lessons because of your bad back, to improve your tennis playing or to speak more clearly, the Alexander teacher will put their hands on you and guide you in and out of a chair, sitting down and standing up again. They will also talk a lot about your neck. Why is it that if you want to improve your violin-playing technique the teacher is likely to tell you to leave your instrument at home, at least for several lessons?

Alexander teachers work in many different environments. You can find Glynn MacDonald working with the Royal Shakespeare company – using the skills and experiential learning of the Alexander Technique to help actors find physical balance and emotional truth in their performance. Meanwhile other teachers put their skills to work in a chronic pain management clinic. What is the common factor and why is it so powerful?

#### Clinical Trial

One of the key reasons that people seek out Alexander teachers is to deal with back pain. The Alexander Technique has been demonstrated as a highly effective method of dealing with this extremely common ailment. A recent large clinical trial of the role of the Alexander Technique in the management of low back pain (MRC ATEAM trial) demonstrated this conclusively. The trial showed that – compared to normal care – a course of 24 Alexander lessons remained effective in reducing days in pain and improving function over a long-term period (patients were followed up over a year), whereas massage – although effective in the short term – was much less effective in the longer term.

How is it that such results are achieved without physical manipulation or medication of any kind? Perhaps the most pertinent question is: what can the Alexander Technique do for me? The answers are the subject of this book. It is the recognition on Alexander's part of the powerful influence that gravity and how we deal with it, has on our every act. The observation that how we use our selves affects how we function as human beings, so even the act of breathing is recognised as an act. It is the understanding of the complex interweaving of body and mind and all that implies. It is about the flexible adaptable nervous system we have, and our mental life! It is about our bodies, in movement and at rest and how we think and feel.

## The fundamental facts about functional human movement

F.M. Alexander was born in Tasmania, Australia in 1869. Near his birthplace on Table mountain there is a plaque, which reads.

“On a nearby property was born FREDERICK MATTHIAS ALEXANDER 20 Jan 1869 – 10 Oct 1955 FOUNDER OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE DISCOVERER OF FUNDAMENTAL FACTS ABOUT FUNCTIONAL HUMAN MOVEMENT ONE OF THE “200 PEOPLE WHO MADE AUSTRALIA GREAT”

What are these ‘fundamental facts about functional human movement’? The Alexander Technique is not a therapy nor an exercise system, but an in-depth study of how human reaction, co-ordination and movement plays a significant part in all our doings – including our well-being. Basically, it is a skill of balance.

With over one hundred years of practice, the Alexander Technique has helped people manage all sorts of conditions, including back pain, stress, anxiety, ME/CFS, fibromyalgia, and asthma. It has enhanced the performance of actors, singers, musicians and athletes. It has inspired artists, writers, composers, and philosophers. This huge scope of application is possible because the Alexander Technique addresses the fundamentals of human balance.

It has been my joy and privilege to teach this work and to train other people to teach it for over 25 years. In that time I have met many fascinating people, all with their own story to tell. This book explores the Alexander Technique through the stories of those who have studied it and benefited from it. These range from a photographer with back pain who had 12 lessons to a composer who studied the Alexander Technique for 14 years and uses the principles in his compositions. This book will discuss both the practice and theory of the technique. It tells the stories of a pregnant woman, a potter with back pain and a tuba player with asthma. Most chapters contain a workshop of practical experiments that anyone can try. These workshops are accompanied by a CD of detailed verbal instructions and advice on each workshop.

The book offers a new view of the way we use our bodies and the consequences not only on our health, but also on our approach to life.

Carolyn Nicholls

Brighton 2008

