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CHAPTER:

1

“EVERYTHING A PERSON HAS DONE IN THE PAST HAS BEEN DONE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE MENTAL DIRECTION TO WHICH HE IS ACCUSTOMED.”

F. M. Alexander (1930's)

our bodies, our selves

IN THIS CHAPTER

- balance – the key to the Alexander Technique
- unlearning habits; the concept of Use
- practising active rest; semi-supine

How I learned to stop slumping and love the Alexander Technique

I had my first series of 30 Alexander lessons in my early 20's. Quite simply my mother nagged me into it. She suffered from ankylosing spondylitis, a painful arthritic condition that mostly affects the spine. Lessons enabled her to continue in her job as a schoolteacher when her doctors had told her she should retire at 50. She couldn't explain what the Alexander Technique was about and when I asked her what she did in her lessons she was rather vague and said it helped her think clearly and that, in turn, helped her back pain. I didn't understand. She told me I should have lessons. "I don't have a bad back," I said. "It's about a lot more than back pain," replied my mother mysteriously.

Then I got ill myself. At the time I was studying for a degree in Fine Arts and living a fairly typical student life which meant late nights, even later mornings, bad food, bad housing and huge amounts of work. In my case this was quite physical as my artistic pieces were all large, so I was always heaving equipment around. I got a kidney infection which didn't respond to

antibiotics. Neither did I. I hated taking them as they made me feel even sicker. Somehow I limped towards the end of my course, spending a few days in hospital here and there, having various treatments and investigations. I was preparing for my final exhibition, and the workload was enormous. I remember one doctor commenting on the amount of work I was doing and asking me if I couldn't stop for a while and rest. "You're running on empty," he told me, "You can't expect to get better if you don't slow down a bit."

My mother, with uncharacteristic decisiveness, bought me a course of 30 Alexander lessons, made the first appointment, rang me up and told me I was going. So, I went.

A new direction

That first lesson changed my life. I came away feeling lighter both in body and spirit – somehow the workload didn't seem so great. My legs felt strange – as if they were walking without my assistance. I realised that I usually rushed everywhere with enormous tension, particularly in my legs. I seemed taller, which as I was already 5'10", tall for a woman, wasn't something I at first welcomed; but I was curious that things looked different from my new perspective. As my lessons continued and I began to understand what was happening, the parallels to what I thought of as my creative processes fascinated me. Ideas about not

fixing your mind on a particular result I found very appealing. I always enjoyed letting my artwork unfold, almost randomly, seemingly without any end point in sight, rather than forcing it to do my will. I had wrestled frequently with this strange concept and found it difficult to explain to tutors who wanted to see my working sketches, which in the end I did after I finished the project. It seemed to them that I was unfocused and possibly not serious about my work, which was very far from being the case. I soon discovered F. M. Alexander's ideas about non-end gaining – where if you focus solely on your goal you are ignoring the path towards it, usually at your peril.

I felt I had connected with something I had been looking for, not just for my physical well being but to help me explore my creativity in new way. It profoundly changed the way I worked. I was so taken with it that I trained to be an Alexander teacher myself. Soon after I qualified, my mother innocently asked me "So what is the Alexander Technique then – how would you explain it?" My answer was that it was about thinking in a specific and purposeful way, it was about breathing, it was about awareness, it wasn't possible to totally verbalise the experience, but it was about all sorts of things... well, it was about body, breath and being. Ultimately the Alexander Technique is about balance.

Keep your balance

Balance is something we seek in all areas of our lives. We are exhorted to find a work/life balance, told to eat a balanced diet, required to pay attention to our bank balance and hope to have a balanced mind. We admire balance in all areas of our lives. A well-balanced painting is pleasing to the eye; a play or book that has a well-balanced plot engages us. Balance is important and it is a very practical matter. The Alexander Technique offers a practical way to explore balance. If your body is not balanced you will hold yourself and move in a distorted way, which could lead you to suffer from back pain or a myriad of other problems.

Balancing act

Imagine trying to stand a 6" stick of liquorice on its end. It would probably fall over. Perhaps you could split the lower half in two so your liquorice stick had legs – would that make it easier? Add a couple of jelly-beans on the ends of the two legs as tiny platforms for balance. Then place a round sweet on the top of the stick. Magically make both your liquorice stick and the surface you are hoping to stand it on magnetic. See if you can balance the stick.

The magnetism will want to lie the liquorice down flat – it's easier that way. But it's not what you want – you want it to be upright. Of course the round sweet on the top will make things more difficult. Perhaps it will help if you bend the stick a bit, put a curve in it, or spread its legs apart a bit. Even if you find a balance, the tiniest movement will make it fall over. Balance is a problem.

Endgaining:
Concentrating on getting a result, without thinking about the steps involved



Do you balance like the figure in yellow when you stand?

Balance is essential

If you don't balance – you fall down. Of course, you are not a stick of liquorice, but you have some of the same problems to contend with. Gravity is the magnetic force holding you on to the planet and somehow you have to deal with it. Lose your balance and gravity will claim you – you topple or fall over. Like the liquorice stick you are a long thin structure balancing over two tiny platforms – your feet. Have a look at your feet. How long are they? No more than a foot long. How long are you? Several times longer and wider than your feet, but still you have to balance over them. All your joints are mobile and wobble, your feet and ankles flex and straighten, as do your knees and hips. You have to make constant adjustments to keep those joints organised so that you don't fall over. Then there's your head – a round, quite heavy object – no doubt full of wonderful things, but weighing about 5kg on average and balancing precariously on the top of your very slender neck. Balance is not just a problem for the liquorice stick – it's a problem for you too.

Everyone manages to balance in some way or other, using their muscles to prop a bit of their body here, relax a bit there. The question is, are you managing it well or could you do it better. Furthermore, does it matter how you do it – so long as you do it?

Yes! It does matter. The way we achieve our unique way of balancing out our bodies so we can walk around and do what we want is largely hit and miss, and can contribute to back pain and other problems. If you unknowingly walk around carrying your head on one side, then you will compensate for that misplaced weight somewhere else in your body, maybe by hunching a shoulder or hitching up a hip. Our unconscious search for balance can lead us to distort ourselves in ways that only add to our aches and pains.

As well as being long and thin, with a heavy head to balance on a slender neck, we spend most of our time bending in one way or another. We bend our hips, ankles and knees when we walk and we bend them a lot more when we sit or stand. We pick things up and put them down; we carry things in our hands

with their clever opposable thumbs that make us the envy of sheep and cows. We also rotate as we bend, twisting, turning, making the most of our incredibly mobile structure. The question is, could we do these things better?

Proprioception and kinaesthetic awareness

Our bodies really are quite clever – constantly giving us information about where we are in space. The basic reason for this is so that you can avoid falling over and hurting yourself. The information comes from within us – joints, ligaments and muscles all 'tell' us when they are stretched or altered in any way, alerting us to changes in balance and shifts of weight. Due to the fact that our general awareness levels are low, we are mostly unaware of this feedback, which is known as proprioceptive information. Most people don't even think about their balance unless they are in a challenging situation such as walking on uneven or slippery ground, when suddenly balance becomes an immediate issue and we attempt to compensate for wobbles in our ankles and knees so that we can remain upright. The classic slap-stick sketch of someone slipping on a banana skin – which we find so hilarious as an observer – is the body and mind's attempt to keep in balance and not fall over or – if we must fall over – to land on a nice padded bit of ourselves such as our bottom, rather than our heads. If our general balance is good then the banana skins of life are less likely to floor us. However if our kinaesthetic awareness – so crucial to our balance – is poor, then we are more likely to find the whole business of balance a challenge; we bump into things, we stumble easily and we think ourselves clumsy. F. M. Alexander's observations about how we process and respond to this sensory information offer different ways of tackling the balance problem. Habit, repetition and an assumption that our bodily information is 'right' can all distort our kinaesthetic sense. If you have the habit of walking with the toes of one foot turned in, it will feel straight to you – your body will tell you that it is 'right'. This apparently simple action will have a ripple effect right up through your whole body's musculature and could be a contributory factor to back pain. Learning the Alexander Technique lets you deal with such

ingrained habits and misleading senses and consciously influences your own balance and movement.

Mark's story

Mark Nelson is 6'3" and he has a very long back and very long legs. He is lightly built and has a slight scoliosis (twist) in his spine. He was told over 30 years ago that if he didn't do something about his back he would suffer a lot of pain in later life. The twist makes it difficult to balance the way his back support works. Mark unconsciously developed compensation problems, which included permanently hunching up his right shoulder and swivelling his pelvis round to the left as he walked. With one leg slightly longer than the other, the pattern of compensation spread though his frame. When he took his jacket off and hung it on the door, his wife said the jacket looked like he was still wearing it, as it adopted the shape of his back. Mark's back began to complain and ache.

Mark said, "I knew I was twisted, but honestly didn't realise how much, it all felt perfectly normal to me. People occasionally commented on my odd way of walking and suggested I put my feet down differently, but I couldn't and had no concept of what they meant."

Not doing, but thinking

When Mark began Alexander lessons he wanted the whole thing explained very precisely and had many questions. Why did he need to lengthen?

Surely he was tall enough already? What did it mean when he was asked, "just to *think*, not to *do*?" How could he tell if he was getting it right or not? Why could he not trust his sense of feeling to tell if he was doing the right things in his lessons?

It's never easy to explain an experience in words. You can no more describe what lengthening your back actually feels like than you can fully explain what cheese tastes like. But you can use imagery and metaphor, and you can describe your experience and compare it with someone else's. And you can gather information about it to help make sense of the experience.

"I wanted answers and had no idea that I was so out of touch with what was going on in my body. If you'd asked me where my legs were, I'd look and see. I had no idea what they felt like or how they moved, or that they were so tense. I lived mostly in my head. In the first lesson I was introduced to semi-supine. My teacher got me to lie on my back on a special teaching table with my knees bent and my head resting on a small pile of books. Then she stood behind me and put her hands on the sides of my head. I know she wasn't pulling, but her hands felt firm and strong and after a little while – without her seeming to do anything else – my back began to unravel. I felt like a telescope opening out. It was an irresistible sensation and went all the way down my back to my pelvis and legs. It was very strange. At the end of the lesson I was aware that there was less pressure in my back, although I hadn't noticed there was any pressure in the first place. Somehow, with the pressure gone, I realised it had been there and could have been contributing to my back pain."

Lengthening (shortening): Unlocking muscle tension and joint compression, thus allowing a natural process of de-contraction of the body to take place. (Using excessive tension that literally drags your body towards the floor, shortening you)



It's easy to tie yourself in knots if you get too involved in your work.

semi-supine:

Lying on your back with your knees bent, head resting on a small pile of books. This will be explored in great detail in the workshop at the end of Chapter One.

Sitting in a knot at the computer

Mark often sat with his legs in a considerable knot. He crossed his legs and wrapped his foot round the back of his other ankle. This way of sitting was a habit. He sat like this when drinking a cup of tea at the kitchen table, when working at his computer and even when relaxing in the garden. It was such a strong automatic habit that he didn't realise he did it. The tension in his legs was such that this twisted position felt comfortable – even right. Sitting like this occasionally for a few minutes doesn't matter, but for Mark it was a habit that contributed to his problems. Constantly sitting with uneven weight on his sitting bones meant his pelvis – already tending to be twisted – was encouraged to twist even more. The body tends to learn what we teach it and the more you practise a poor habit like this, the easier it becomes and the more natural it feels. For Mark this seemed like a relaxed position and when he felt tense he went even further, wrapping the whole twisted spiral around the leg of the chair, hooking his ankle behind the chair leg. Consequently his legs were tense in all other activities too so that when he walked his legs remained tense and had the effect of pulling his entire body down towards the ground. At the other end of his body, Mark balanced out his legs and pelvis by hunching his shoulders and pulling his neck and head out of shape. Our bodies work as a whole unit, not in separate bits and we will compensate for tension throughout our whole structure. Mark's compensation included thrusting his head forward on his neck with his back rounded and compressed. It wasn't only when he worked at the computer that he experienced these problems, he used his body in the same way when playing guitar too, his favourite hobby.

Use:

Literally how you use your body; well or badly.

A fundamental problem

After lessons Mark began to realise it didn't matter what he was doing, whether he was playing guitar, sitting at the computer, drinking tea or watching the television. It was a more fundamental problem than getting the right chair, or even learning to sit up straight. It was about him, his body and how he dealt

with gravity – that ever present force that holds us on to the planet. Learning to relate to gravity in a free and easy way is part of what the Alexander Technique is about. Mark began to reassess his situation.

"I had to relearn things, or perhaps unlearn things would be a better description. The way I moved, the way I breathed – it all changed. What I was doing with my head and neck was crucial to keeping myself in a good balance."

Mark practised active rest, in semi-supine position, every day. This is the single most important thing anyone can do to help themselves. It can change the way your body supports you and refreshes discs, muscles and ligaments. When you lie down you are in a different relationship with gravity and your back no longer has to work in the same way as it does to hold you upright. Your legs are not carrying your body weight and so have a chance to change the way they relate to your back. Lying down allows the spongy discs that separate the bones of your spine to soak up fluid. These disc are hydroscopic in nature and can absorb fluid from surrounding body tissues if they are not under pressure. When you are walking around, with your weight going through your spine, there is compression on these discs that squashes them slightly. This pushes fluid out back into the body. The discs are then a little narrower, a little harder, a little less flexible. They don't act as such good shock absorbers when you walk around. When you sleep at night, the discs plump up again, and you will wake up in the morning actually taller than when you went to bed. But why wait till bedtime? Lying down practising active rest is like giving your spine a drink.

The bank account of good Use

Changing the way you use your body is a slow process, and it requires thought. The best way you can improve your Use is to practice active rest, in the semi-supine position – and to do this regularly. You may not notice very much at first, people vary as to what they observe and what seems to change, but those who are persistent will gain benefit. Think of your Use as a bank account in which you deposit time and thought.

When you have built up your account – because you have given your Use time and attention – then you can expect to get some interest. Your general everyday Use starts to improve, even when you are not thinking about it at the time. This only happens because you have put the work in – it isn't a random occurrence. You notice you are pain

free, or joints are easier to move, or you have more energy. All these things are the interest paid on your Use account. Notice too when funds get low and you need to deposit more. Small niggles, extra tiredness or stressful feelings again are signs that you need to do some more work on your Use. So practise active rest and keep your bank account of Use in credit.



Workshop 1

Active Rest: The art and practice of Semi-supine

Read through the workshop material first to familiarise yourself with the concepts. This will greatly improve your understanding and enjoyment of the audio instructions. Gather together the items you need and when you are ready, select Track 1 on the “Workshops CD”. The CD will talk you through the Active Rest procedure in detail whilst you are doing it. It contains directions and thought pathways for you to follow. Listen to it regularly, everyday. There is a lot of information on the CD and you won't absorb it all in one session. Make yourself a promise to practise regularly and commit to it and you will gain enormous benefit. If at anytime during your practice you feel discomfort and want to stop, just gently roll on to your side and get up when you are ready. The most important aspect of the active rest practice is to take your time and not rush through it.

You will need

- A quiet, warm, draft free place to lie down, with a firm but not hard surface. A carpeted wooden floor is ideal. Don't lie directly on floorboards, as you do need some padding. Put down a yoga mat or a duvet if you

have no carpet. Avoid lying on a concrete floor, even if it is carpeted. Your bed is too soft for this practice, but may be used if you have such severe pain or restricted mobility that you can't get down on the floor. If this is your case please read the section on adapting Active Rest at the end of the workshop notes.

- A small pile of paperback books about 2-4" high.
- Loose comfortable clothes you are happy to lie down in.
- 15 minutes uninterrupted time just for you.

Your approach to the procedure

Active rest is much more than simply adopting a position and resting in it for a while. It's a subtle combination of a bodily position that will encourage muscular release and the practice of engaging the mind in a thoughtful process of directing neuromuscular energy in an organised way throughout your whole body. These two aspects make for a dynamic procedure.

So now it's time for a nice lie down. You can get down on the floor following the series of photos. They show the least stressful way to lie down. Getting on to the floor with care rather than just throwing yourself down will help you get the most out of the activity.

Read through the description of getting on to the floor, but adapt it if you need too. You might like to

directing
Using your mind to send messages to your body: thinking rather than doing.

have a chair near by to support you on the way down, or you might find kneeling painful and want to miss it out. A little experimentation will help you find the best way down.

This procedure is an active, thoughtful resting state that can help you change your pattern of coordina-

tion. It is stress free, can be practised almost anywhere and needs no special equipment or skill. Over a period of time you will come to appreciate the benefits of a quiet mind and an alert body. Having chosen your quiet place, turn off your phone and put the cat out. Place the pile of books on the floor behind you, ready to rest your head on when you lie down.

Lengthening up from the floor

Start by simply standing quietly with your feet a little apart from each other, about a foot, perhaps a little more if you are tall. Allow your arms to be resting by your sides, with your fingers uncurled but not stiffly pointing towards the floor. Having bare feet will help you appreciate the contact of your feet on the floor, but if you are a cold person, keep your socks on. Stand quietly with your head gently balanced on top of your neck. Look straight ahead but don't lock your gaze on anything in particular. Keep your mouth lightly closed and breathe in and out through your nose. Take a moment to appreciate what is under your feet. Is it the carpet, or a mat of some kind? Is it smooth or textured? Appreciate the contact of your feet as they rest on the floor and hold you up. Aim your head up to the ceiling and allow the natural spring in your back to lengthen your body. Don't force this at all; simply ask for it. A good guide is your breathing. If you interrupt the gentle rhythm of your own breathing then you are more likely to be stiffening up rather than lengthening.

Kneel on one knee

Kneel on one knee, still keeping your body upright, your head gently balanced on the top of your neck and your arms quietly resting by your sides. Fold your other leg underneath you and sit back on your heels.

