

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE - A HYPOTHETICAL MODEL

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[2006: A cautionary note. This article is now somewhat out of date because of more recent developments in the scientific study of posture and movement. Reflex responses are no longer considered an adequate explanation of human postural behaviour, and the article above, *Modern Neuroscience and the Alexander Technique*, reflects this new trend. However, this 1989 article does still usefully represent how the Alexander world related to scientific knowledge during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s.]

- 1) Functionally, the muscles of the body should be seen not as separate strips connecting one bone to another, but rather as a single, interwoven unit, an elastic suit that clothes the skeleton.
- 2) This elastic suit has a dual function: to enable us to move about and interact with our environment, and to help maintain the parts of our body in appropriate relationship with each other. Underlying both functions is the need to deal with gravity, to maintain our precarious upright balance.
- 3) This upright balance is maintained by a constantly re-iterated series of upthrusts through the skeleton, particularly through the legs and the spine. The upthrusts are produced by a coordination of activity in the muscular suit and the inherent compressive quality of the skeleton, particularly the spine, with its curves and discs providing a natural spring.
- 4) The spine also has an important role to play as the "spacer" that keeps the elastic suit stretched and toned and maintains space for the internal organ systems: breathing, circulation and digestion. Any contraction of the elastic suit required for the "primary movement" of upthrust against gravity should not buckle, compress or distort the spine and prevent it from performing its "spacer" role.
- 5) The primary movement (anti-gravity upthrusts) therefore needs to be coordinated very efficiently. The proprioceptors of the head (labyrinthine) and the neck act as a steering and fine-tuning device for this upthrust coordination. Steering in the sense of ensuring that the direction is accurate (behavioural vertical) and fine-tuning is the sense of ensuring minimum effort and tension. An aspect of this is, of course, the equilibrium and righting reflexes.
- 6) While the delicate coordination of the upthrust mechanism operates for the most part unconsciously, in most people it does not operate as efficiently as it could. "It is possible that in the average person they (the equilibrium reactions) are never fully developed, remaining a potential, the achievement of which depends on the presence of other factors, such as coordination, sensitivity to certain stimuli, perceptual awareness, motivation, body shape and weight, and the absence of fear and anxiety." (From *Physiotherapy in Disorders of the Brain*, by Carr and Shepherd.)
- 7) Alexander discovered by practical observation, not theory, that the primary movement (against gravity) can be consciously facilitated to a remarkable degree. This is done by consciously inhibiting tension patterns that interfere with it, and by developing the conscious wish for the anti-gravity mechanisms to function to their optimum. The wish can positively influence the appropriate muscular activity.
- 8) When the spine is reaching a near optimum compromise between its role as a supporting column and its role as a spacer, all parts of the elastic muscular suit are lengthened and toned and this in turn provides the ideal internal environment for breathing and circulation and digestion.

Further hypothesis:

1. "It is through the neuromusculoskeletal system that we act out our humanity and our individual possibilities..." The neuromusculoskeletal system is the "primary machinery of life, the instrument through which we behave as human beings." (Irwin Korr)

2. Within the primary machinery of life, the postural reflexes have a special role to play. They maintain the integrity and balance of the organism while the voluntary muscles are in action. Within the postural reflexes, those that establish head-neck-back relationship exert a controlling influence and this control can be monitored consciously, that is, its efficient functioning can be consciously fostered and interference with its delicate work can be consciously inhibited.
3. When consciousness is organised in this way, centred on the primary control so that the integrity and balance of the organism can be maintained in activity, then there is an increase in awareness of the field of voluntary activity. a greater ability to discriminate between events outside us and those within us, and a greater ability to choose either to facilitate desirable response or to inhibit undesirable ones.