

Alexander Teaching

All human beings have a natural tendency to respond to the downward force of gravity by extending upwards. This energizing upwards involves a subtle balance between the muscles of the body and the intrinsic springiness of the skeletal structure, e.g. the arches of the feet, the curves of the spine and the intervertebral discs. It is not under direct conscious control, like moving a finger, but we can consciously encourage it and release interference with it.

With your hands on an experienced pupil or a teacher, you can feel this tendency to expansion from the heels to the top of the skull. If it is working freely you will also feel free movement of the pupil's ribs in breathing, including right round the back of the rib cage. The overall lengthening helps to free the ribs, and the freer rib movement helps to support the lengthening. For example, lengthening up through the lumbar and lower thoracic region helps to allow the floating ribs to work, and fuller movement of the floating ribs in breathing helps to maintain the lengthening up out of the hips.

That this is a natural tendency is illustrated by the experience of astronauts in zero gravity. In this situation the human body folds into a semi-crouch and straightening up is much more difficult than on earth.ⁱ

Most of us interfere with this natural process by a combination of excessive tension and passive collapse which adaptively shortens muscle and connective tissue. As Alexander observed, we particularly interfere in certain key places. These are the relationship of the head to the neck, of the neck to the trunk, right through the back and the relationship of the back (including the pelvis) to the legs. Hence the basic directions that we have learned from Alexander.

Which of these elements, neck, head, back etc., could be said to be the "cause" of the other problems is a question we can safely leave to interested research scientists to sort out for us. FM himself sometimes wrote in his books about stiffening of the neck being caused by improper use of the back muscles.ⁱⁱ For the practical purpose of improving the situation we can safely say that the basic directions to the neck, head, back and legs show us the way to proceed and the order in which to proceed.

So we can expect to feel this coordinated expansion taking place to some extent in the experienced person. And we can expect that person to move in ways which cause as little interference as possible with this coordinated expansion. Of course some people have more difficult, chronic problems, structural and so on, than others, but in the experienced Alexander person elastic, muscular expansiveness can be felt round and even through intractable structural problems.

All this is brought about by muscular release, which is an internal lengthening of muscle and connective tissue. It is not a matter of moving joints or putting parts of the body into optimum positions, or of striving directly to achieve ideal trajectories in movements such as in and out of a chair. Any form of “doing” it will usually produce lengthening without widening or widening without lengthening.

In giving a lesson, the teacher’s main instrument for bringing about this response in a pupil is the teacher’s own body. It is an aspect of the Technique that we may not be able to explain scientifically very easily, but it is perfectly clear in practice to anyone with some experience. If the teacher has some of that elastic stretch through his/her own body while working on the pupil, that will communicate through his/her hands into the pupil’s body. This releasing directive stimulus must accompany and underlie all the teacher's hands-on work.

Because monkey particularly stimulates this elastic stretch, good use of monkey has become fundamental to the training of teachers. From this basis the teacher can “undo,” right through the back and legs to the ground, and right through the arms to make contact with the pupil. It will then not be necessary to grossly pull the pupil’s head up or pull the arms out etc. Such gross pulling only stretches the immediate area, whereas if the teacher’s whole body is expanding, the whole of the pupil’s body will be affected. Furthermore, gross pulling often just causes a defensive resistance or a passive collapse.

A teacher therefore has to learn to achieve something of this coordinated expansion with hands on a pupil, and to maintain it while doing any further necessary muscular work. For example, to raise a pupil’s arm or leg, or to give some support to a difficult pupil going in and out of the chair. In this way, any muscular activity required on the part of the teacher is spread throughout the teacher’s body, not causing a build up of shortened, tense muscle in one part.

It is this way of working that constantly conveys a releasing, integrating, expansive stimulus to the pupil, both at rest and in movement.

Without this, we are just pulling people about with little to differentiate our use of our hands from any manipulative therapy.

John Nicholls (Feb. 1991)

ⁱSee Dr. Roger Tengwall’s thesis *On Human Postural Behaviors*.

ⁱⁱFor example, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, p.127 (1957 edition).