Primary Control: what, why, how

(John Nicholls' continuous learning class at the Alexander Technique Congress, Lugano, August 2008)

F. M. Alexander's written descriptions of primary control include references to other parts of the body beyond the neck, head and back. For example, in his last book he wrote that primary control involves 'a certain use of the head in relation to the neck, and of the head and neck in relation to the torso and the other parts of the organism'.[1] Professor George Coghill in his Appreciation (of Alexander's work), writes of Alexander reeducating the use of his (Coghill's) neck, back and limbs[2]. In several of his books, Alexander also indicated that stiffening of the neck could be caused by wrong use of other parts of the body[345].

This continuous learning class began by exploring the way key procedures of Alexander work illustrate this inseparable relationship between the neck, head and back and the limbs. Monkey and chair work, particularly rising from sitting to standing, illustrates how the use of the legs affects the neck, head and back, and 'hands on the back of the chair' illustrates how the use of the hands and arms affects the neck, head and back.

We started with monkey to encourage elastic firmness in the neck and back – firmness for support and elasticity for breathing – and then focused on coming up out of monkey. This simple but profound action involves unfolding into the fully human upright without any diminution or distortion of that firm elastic spread of the back and neck. In particular, it is necessary to fully unfold the

front of the hips in order to allow the legs to extend vertically under the head neck and back without the pelvis and/or lumbar area being pulled forward and down into the legs. The pelvis remains part of the back and is not taken over by the thighs, and the legs remain subordinate to the support of the back and neck, and are not allowed to dominate and therefore overwhelm the back, neck and head.

When this is understood, it makes sense of the way Alexander and many of the first-generation teachers took students up out of the chair. When the student is asked to come back to the teacher's hand or arm while aiming his or her head forward and up and not pushing with the legs, the conditions are created for maximal unfolding of the front of the hips while neck and back muscles are supporting head and trunk. It is not simply an education in how to perform unaided the everyday movement of rising from a chair: the exact way you might do that in daily life will vary according to many factors, e.g. height of chair, how far back you are sitting, your particular body proportions, etc. More importantly, this way of rising with a teacher’s help provides a neuromuscular education in the experience of optimal unfolding with neck, head, back and legs integrated.

This has interesting parallels with infant development and also the schooling of horses. The newborn infant cannot support its head or trunk at all. Soon it develops sufficient muscle tone and coordination in the neck to support its head and look around at the world. Then it develops sufficient tone and control of the back muscles to support the trunk and enable the infant to sit on the floor without the aid of its hands, thus freeing its hands to explore the world around it. Next, crawling begins to organise the legs with the support musculature of

the back and neck, and squatting appears, leading to the infant's first attempts to unfold from squatting to full uprightness, usually accompanied by great delight in this new view of the world.

So there is a coordination sequence here: neck muscles to support the head, back muscles to support the trunk, and leg muscles to coordinate with the back, neck and head to achieve full uprightness and enable the infant to better view and explore the world. The legs are integrated with the neck, head and back, so the upward energy, generated by the contact with the ground and oriented by the intention expressed with the head and hands, flows unimpeded through the whole body.

Similarly in the schooling of a horse, in order to help it recover optimum balance and coordination after this has been disturbed by the process of learning to carry a rider. The horse's neck muscles must be coaxed into lengthened elastic tone so the neck is not pulled down into the withers (the shoulder area in a horse), and the head must be free to flex on the atlanto-occipital joint. The back has to spread long and wide under the saddle to support the rider while allowing free movement of ribs for breathing, and the limbs should move as continuations of the back. The hind quarters (the pelvis and back legs) must be integrated with the whole back so that the energy for forward movement can flow smoothly from the hind legs through the back, along the spine and out through the poll (the junction of head and neck). Ideally, intention and energy flow from the power of the hind quarters through the elastic support of the back and out through the neck and head, unhindered by any disharmony in the horse's musculature.

Clearly F.M. knew a lot about horses; we know he was brought up with horses and continued to be a passionate horse rider and race-goer throughout his life In a private lesson, Margaret Goldie mentioned to me that Alexander told her he learned a lot from the observation of animals, especially horses.

After monkey, we moved on to seeing how ‘hands on the back of the chair’ examines the use of hands and arms in relation to the support musculature of the neck and back. The straight-fingered hold on the back of the chair demands some active tone in the hands, while the direction to the arms – a releasing, lengthening ‘pull’ to the elbows, and the upper arms and shoulders releasing to widen away from each other – asks for undoing along all the lines of musculature we habitually over-activate when using our hands. That includes the forearm flexors, biceps, pectorals and latissimus dorsi, and not just the neck. From this, we can learn how to use our hands without degrading our head–neck–back relationship. Just as we saw earlier with the legs, the arms are not allowed to dominate and overwhelm the back, neck and head. In the process also, as Alexander points out in CCCI[6], the whole rib cage is flexible, available for breathing instead of being squeezed by the muscles connecting the upper arms and shoulders onto it.

We practised holding and moving objects such as a water bottle, a book, and a bag. Grasping ‘gently and firmly’ as Alexander wrote of hands on the back of the chair in CCCI[7], without shortening from wrist to elbow and without squeezing the upper arms and shoulders into the rib cage and neck.

We observed how this application of the ‘hands on the back of the chair’ directions enables the arms to be open channels from the hands to the back. If

you are sitting while doing this, the support musculature of the back is stimulated as the weight or pressure (however small) of the object ~~held~~ in contact with the hand passes through the arms and shoulders to the trunk and onward to the sitting bones on the chair. If you are standing, and can incorporate the understanding of monkey or coming up out of the chair, the legs also become open channels between the back and the feet on the ground. Then, the weight or pressure of the object passes through the hips, legs and feet. The opening of the feet onto the ground, like the spread of the pelvic base onto the seat of a chair, stimulates the support musculature of the back and neck. Walter Carrington referred to this as 'using the hands as feet'. There is integration of the functions of support and movement and, as with a well-balanced horse, there is a coherence of intention and energy. Finally, we applied the same principle to lifting and moving a student's arm, and moving a student out of a chair.

This illustrates why Alexander is reported to have told some of the first-generation teachers that the practice of monkey with hands on the back of the chair gives you all the experience you need to use your hands as a teacher.

The polarity of doing and non-doing in our work often puzzles private students and trainee teachers. I think this kind of progression helps to clarify how we learn to inhibit habitual responses and redirect our neuromuscular energy to open ourselves to full, integrated expansion (non-doing). But this non-doing, integrated expansion must be brought into activity, using hands, arms, legs, voice, etc. without compromising elastic support from neck and back and thoracic mobility for breathing. Goddard Binkley, in his account of lessons and training with Alexander, referred to this as 'doing in accordance with the

working integrity of the self',[8] but a simpler description might be doing on a non-doing foundation.

In this way, we as teachers are literally embodying conscious inhibition and direction; we are choosing to organise and channel our energy in ways that keep us open and expansive, maximising the elastic antigravity springiness of the human structure, staying open so that we can breathe freely and sensitively notice what is happening both in ourselves and in our students. When we practise this in pairs, it is obvious that being touched, supported and moved by someone who is employing this integrated expansion encourages this same integrated expansion in the recipient. For example, having your arm lifted by someone whose arms and legs are *not* open channels between hands, feet and back has a purely local effect on your own arm or shoulder. But having your arm lifted by someone whose limbs *are* open channels, i.e. limbs that integrate hands and feet with an expansive neck and back, has a much more global effect throughout your whole body. It is as if the teacher's whole "co-ordinating system" is talking to your co-ordinating system, giving you sensory information about how to use your arm in the context of that relativity of head, neck, back and limbs F.M. called the primary control.

In the neuroscience panel at the Congress, Professor Lucy Brown referred to this as a kind of 'sensorimotor contagion', drawing an analogy with Dr. Tanya Singer's description of 'emotional contagion'. We know reliably how to produce this effect of integrated expansion in both teacher and student. Perhaps by the next Congress, someone will be able to show us objective neuroscientific data for this remarkable phenomenon. But to bring about this integrated expansion requires understanding it, which in turn usually requires some

experience of it. Just inhibiting per se is unlikely to fully bring it about; neither is aiming or moving up without understanding how the whole back, thorax, and limbs are involved. Alexander's simple procedures can bring about the required experience, and with that comes the understanding that makes the experience repeatable. and accessible without the constant help of a teacher.

[1] Alexander 2000 [1941], p. 8.
[2] Alexander 2000 [1941], p. xxiii
[3] Alexander 1996 [1910], p.59
[4] Alexander 2004 [1923], p.189-190
[5] Alexander 1946 [1932], p.11
[6] Alexander 2004 [1923], p.120
[7] Alexander 2004 [1923], p.117
[8] Binkley 1993, p. 96

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