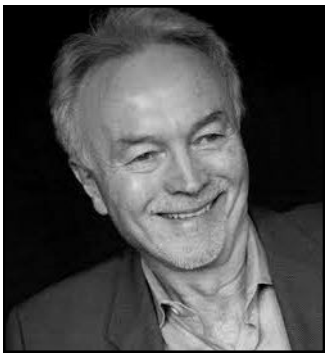
Explaining the Alexander Technique

by John Nicholls



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Most teachers have difficulty explaining the Alexander Technique. It's easy to get bogged down in jargon that does not communicate anything meaningful to the average newcomer: terms such as "use," "primary control," "non-doing," "end-gaining," "inhibition," and "direction," while valuable once their meaning has been experientially understood, can seem overly abstract and verging on cultish until that time. Explanations focusing on consciousness can evaporate in wisps of neo-zen philosophizing that leave us seeming barely distinguishable from the many mindfulness-based practices available. So while consciousness is clearly important, I think we do better to begin modestly with the unique physical elements of the Technique and sneak up on consciousness later.

Another difficulty is that Alexander's four books do not communicate well to a twenty-first century reader. However in his second book, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (*CCCI*), which he also considered his best, he makes a very helpful distinction between "coordination on a general basis" and "coordination on a specific basis." Most people think of coordination in relation to specific skills: playing a sport or a musical instrument for example. But that is coordination on a specific basis. General coordination is a pervasive quality that we bring into every specific skill or even the most mundane of our activities. It is touched on simplistically when sports trainers exhort their students to pay attention to their "form" as they execute a specific exercise. But this is often little more than a rather crude idea of maintaining body alignment. If we look more deeply into this we could say that the main muscles of the body (the skeletal muscles) have three basic functions to perform:

1. They assist in holding us up, giving us postural support in opposition to gravity. A skeleton cannot stay upright without muscular help.
2. They move us around, enabling us to interact with the world around us and with other people.
3. They "breathe" us. Although the physiological process of respiration takes place in the lungs, it requires the musculature of the diaphragm, thorax etc. to move air in and out of the lungs.

These three functions should operate in harmony with each other, synergizing so that each facilitates the others. Indeed that synergy can often be observed in small children, although we shouldn't assume that all small children are perfect in this regard. (As with all talents and functions there is variability of general coordination among children.) But in most adults the three basic muscular functions of postural support, movement, and breathing are more often getting in each other's way rather than facilitating each other. Collapsed or rigid habits of posture are restricting movement and breathing; awkward habits of movement are interfering with optimum postural support and breathing; and habits of restricted breathing are limiting movement and postural support.

How these three functions operate together could be called, echoing Alexander in *CCCI*, "general coordination"[1] to distinguish it from the specific coordination of, say, the hands and fingers to play the piano, or the hands and eyes to play tennis. In Alexander jargon it largely corresponds to use but is somewhat easier to explain. So we could say that F.M. Alexander, in the course of trying to overcome his own issue with the specific coordination of his voice and breathing, came upon the realization that he needed to consider the larger issue of his general coordination, the synergy (or lack of it) of postural support, movement, and breathing. That would seem a very daunting challenge to tackle, were it not for another remarkable observation that he made. In the course of observing himself, he wrote that he realized that "a certain use of the head in relation to the neck, and the head and neck in relation to the torso and the other parts of the organism… constituted a primary control of the mechanisms as a whole…."

Now the term *primary control* and its description as the relationship of head, neck, and back also do not usually communicate well. With regard to a head, neck, back relationship people may be inclined to think, "Well, we all have a head, a neck, and a back, and, yes, they are related to each other. So what's the big deal?" And the term primary control can seem to suggest some amazing control system embedded within the nervous system, but hitherto unnoticed by anatomists and physiologists. So let's consider another way of describing primary control.

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If the problem is that of improving general coordination; i.e., the integration of postural support, movement, and breathing, then we could say that F.M. Alexander discovered that the key to this lies in the way the neck muscles are organized to support the weight of the head, and the way the back muscles are organized to support the trunk. When the head and trunk have optimum support from the neck and back muscles we have easy upright carriage, neither collapsed nor stiff, which in turn makes all movement easier as we are a sprung weight not a dead weight; and with the upright support coming through the spine, the trunk musculature remains elastic enough to allow full natural mobility of diaphragm, ribs, abdominal and back musculature for breathing.

How does all this work? When I was training as an Alexander Technique teacher in the mid-1970s, a popular idea among teachers was that since the weight of the head is not evenly balanced on top of the spine but instead has a forward bias, release of the muscles at the back of the neck would cause

the head to rock forward and this in turn would stretch the neck muscles, which would reflexively tone and support the weight of the head. In some way never clearly explained, this was assumed to set off a chain of stretch reflexes all the way down the spine to support the trunk. These days I see a number of problems with this explanation:

1. Although we like to tell our students that there isn't a correct head position, this explanation does seem at first glance to contradict that. (Note: We will see later a different explanation of why in some situations head angle or position makes more of a difference than in others.)

2. There are situations where releasing the neck and directing the head and back have a considerable impact on general coordination, but where gravity is not taking the head forward and thereby stretching the upper cervical muscles—swimming the front crawl, for example, where the weight of the head is supported by the water as the neck is released or lying on one's side with the head on a pillow, where gravity is going to take the head into the pillow rather than forward of the spine.

3. The explanation of human upright posture as a series of reflexes has been largely abandoned by scientists as inadequate to explain the variability and adaptability of human postural responses. The reflex model is associated with the pioneering work of the British pioneer of neurophysiology Sir Charles Sherrington (1857–1952), a near contemporary of Alexander. It was wonderful work in its time; and since then, as with all scientific work, others have built on it, extended it, and found flaws in it. If you simply Google "Limitations of the Sherrington reflex model of posture" you'll find material to read on this subject. Or a good summary is a paper called "Why and How are Posture and Movement Coordinated" by Jean Massion et al, published in 2004.

In his final book, *The Universal Constant in Living* (*UCL*), Alexander writes, "I had found a way by which we can judge whether the influence of our manner of use is affecting our general functioning adversely or otherwise." In line with this quote, I would prefer to view the freedom and poise of the head on top of the spine as being at least as much a criterion as a cause of good use, or improved general coordination. Modern theorists and experimental scientists studying issues of posture sometimes talk about it in terms of organizing degrees of freedom. Put very simply, this means that since we have many flexible joints not only in our limbs and their attachments to the trunk, but also along the axial column of the spine, maintaining upright posture requires strategies for limiting movement at these joints so that we don't continually buckle and collapse.

However we don't want to do this in such a way that we rigidify ourselves and make movement and breathing difficult. A phrase often used by Walter Carrington during my time around him comes to mind: we need "elastic bracing," but not "rigid bracing." Elastic bracing also promotes the most efficient transfer of energy between arms and legs—or legs, arms, spine, and head, in many common movements—a transfer that is impeded by either floppiness or rigidity. Perhaps appropriate stability is what we should be emphasizing in our work rather than simply freedom of movement.

In a letter to his friend Mungo Douglas in 1942, F.M. writes that instead of the expression "with the neck relaxed" he would prefer: "with the neck muscles so employed that the head can go forward and up."[2] This implies quite a complex coordination of neck muscles, and probably all spinal muscles, in which the forward and up poise of the head is perhaps more effect than cause. But it also helps here to remember that a distinction can be made between the best description of what is happening and the most effective pedagogical instructions to get it to happen.

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How could we judge whether we, or someone else, are achieving something close to elastic bracing? Well, the criteria are obvious. If you can come easily up to your full natural height with the full natural resilience of your spine, and if you can achieve that without locking your head on the top of your spine and without restricting the movements of your diaphragm and your ribs (especially at the back) for breathing, you are well supported without compromising good movement and breathing; in fact you are demonstrating good general coordination. In this way, the freedom of the neck, poise of the head, and openness of the back are both a means of working towards optimum synergy of postural support, movement, and breathing, and a criterion of assessing how successful we are in that process

Endnotes

1. Going forward, I would prefer to call it *primary coordination* rather than *general coordination*.
2. Letter from F.M. Alexander to Mungo Douglas is cited in Endnote no. 103, F.M. Alexander, *Articles and Lectures*, ed. Jean Fischer (London: Mouritz, 1995), 298.

John Nicholls trained with Walter and Dilys Carrington in the early 1970s and remained with them for eleven years assisting daily on their teacher training course. He has subsequently directed training courses in Melbourne, Australia; Brighton, England; and New York City, where he now lives. John also offers private lessons, "hands-on" supervision groups for teachers, structured postgraduate courses for teachers, and makes teaching visits to the United Kingdom, other European countries, Australia, and Brazil.

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