

Head Up and Forward – Moving Through Life with Ease and Poise

Monart Pon - Jan 2022

Many individuals move through life in a hunched, twisted, and crooked manner (to some degree), unbalanced, uncoordinated, inflexible – facing life in a slouch, as if with dread, despair, or shame – having forgotten their first years as a child of natural, free and easy poise and elegant movements. Even worse, these people, after a lifetime of corrupted practice, feel that their posture is right and normal. Yet, to some degree, their collapsed demeanor is crushing their organs, choking their breath, and crippling their gait – all diminishing their health and well-being.

But it's possible to change, to improve and redirect oneself, to move through life with head up and forward, neck free and easy, with back long and tall, with shoulders broad and wide, all balanced and coordinated with hips and legs, flexible and loose – embracing life with a straight gaze, an unbowed stature, and an upright, noble, romantic bearing. There is a solution, a conceptual schema and a prescribed practice, originated and developed over the past century, called the Alexander Technique, named after the discoverer, Frederick Matthias Alexander (more on him, below).

To learn the Alexander Technique (AT), there are AT teachers and books (some to be listed below), and resources on websites and video streaming sites. So, if one already has an internet device, there's no need even to spend any money for teachers or books to learn something about AT - just the allotment of time and the life-long commitment and practice to improve oneself, physically and spiritually:

. . .To straighten up, to move flexibly yet steadfastly forward, to free your will to seek and love life, to stretch and reach out for new values, to embrace gracefully your noble purpose with balance, harmony, and unicity. Keep your head up and forward!



F.M. Alexander (1869-1955) began his career as a voice actor, giving recitals of Shakespeare, until he began losing his voice, a handicap which no experts he consulted could heal. So he sought to heal

himself by studiously and meticulously, with mirrors, observing and experimenting on himself while he recited.

Eventually, he discovered that it was the way he held and used himself that was the cause of his affliction, and that by learning to take conscious control of his head-neck-back-shoulder alignment; he corrected his misuse and recovered permanently his voice. Furthermore, he discovered that this proper primary control is the key to the right use of the whole self for all movements and actions, and an essential factor in health and well-being.

So essential was this discovery to him that he replaced his recitals with lessons that he taught on the Alexander Technique to pupils in Australia, the UK, and the US, including lessons to appreciative celebrities like John Dewey, Aldous Huxley, and George Bernard Shaw. Alexander also trained teachers of the Technique, passing on the tactile tradition to the hundreds of AT teachers worldwide today. There is also a significant library of books on the Technique.



The first books written on the Alexander Technique were authored by Alexander himself, books important for historical, scholarly study. Most of them are out-of-print but some high-priced used copies can be found, as well as archived at Internet Archive <https://archive.org/>

- *Man's Supreme Inheritance: Conscious Guidance and Control in Relation to Human Evolution in Civilization* (several editions, 1918, 1941, 1946)

- *The Universal Constant in Living* (several editions 1941, 1942, 1943, 1946, 2000)

- *The Use of the Self* (1932) -His most well-known and still in print: a concise account of how he discovered and developed his Technique, what it consists of, examples of its application, and what benefits it provides to health and well-being. https://www.amazon.ca/Use-Self-F-M-Alexander/dp/1409182959/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3SJBOZDXW8R6&keywords=the+use+of+the+self&qid=1643556661&srefix=the+use+of+the+self%2Caps%2C109&sr=8-1

Contemporary books written by AT teachers are more instructive for modern students. One typical beginner's book, *The Alexander Technique: Learning to Use Your Body for Total Energy*, by Sarah Barker, introduces AT in the following excerpts:

The Alexander Technique: The What and the Why

Imagine a technique for transforming the operation of your body, so simple that you can learn it yourself, a technique so amazing in its results that your physical and emotional life will soon change for the better, like the opening of a door into another world. That technique is the Alexander Technique, named for its discoverer, F. Matthias Alexander, and known around the world as one of the most extraordinary discoveries of our time.

Scientific Acclaim

It would surprise many people to realize what the Alexander Technique can do for them were its astonishing results not supported by the most respectable scientific authority. During the years before and after Alexander's death in 1955, his students and followers conducted a considerable amount of research to substantiate his findings. At the Tufts Institute for Experimental Psychology, twenty-five years of investigations – using quantitative measure and control groups–have thrown important light on the manner in which the Alexander Technique produces its seemingly miraculous effects. There has also accumulated an impressive volume of clinical data, reports by physicians attesting to its remarkable effectiveness in helping many of their patients.

Feeling at Your Best

Apart from suffering any specific medical symptoms, most of us plod through our days and nights in a condition far below optimum. We "manage"; we "get by." Good health is regarded as merely the absence of sickness. Against this keep-your-nose-above-water-level definition of being alive, the Alexander Technique proposes, as normal, an exuberant and vital sense of wellness: physical freedom and ease combined with mental flexibility and alertness.

Age Is No Barrier

If you think you're too old to begin learning anything so revolutionary, you're wrong. It's never too late. Even after forty or fifty years of continually misusing yourself, you can begin to make a beneficial and healthy change. John Dewey, one of the founding fathers of scientific philosophy and modern education, took up the Alexander Technique at the age of fifty-eight. He thereupon underwent an extraordinary rejuvenation and lived another thirty-five rich, full years. The ninety--two-year-old Dewey attributed this vital longevity to his Alexander practice. George Bernard Shaw learned the Technique at eighty and lived to ninety-four.

If You Are Overweight

You can even streamline your physical appearance by means of the Alexander Technique.... A beneficial side effect of the Alexander Technique is a better carriage of the body's weight. You appear more streamlined and proportioned.

Your Rampant Emotions

All of us are subject to "states" of various kinds, and it is hardly news that human development in general is retarded by fear reflexes unduly-excited by-emotions, prejudices-and-fixed-habits. ...

[Aldous] Huxley might have given his own story as a case in point. The famous writer had spent all his days in a state of acute physical illness until he studied the Alexander Technique and transformed himself. He had begun to withdraw from people, finding his physical and mental energies too drained by social contact, and he was beset by a terrible depression and a chronic insomnia that made it almost impossible to work. He had tried gardening, yoga and other remedies in vain, but it was the Alexander Technique that opened up a new way to live.

Can the Technique really help with our mental and emotional problems? Professor Frank Pierce Jones, the foremost scientific investigator among Alexander scholars, observed that while the physical effects of the Technique are indeed remarkable, "the psychological effects are of greater importance." Some of these, he noted, may of course be explained as the happy side effects of any betterment in physical condition, for a change in mental attitude often accompanies an increase in health. Individuals who suffer from chronic depression have found that when they change their bodies from a depressed posture to an open and balanced state, their feelings of depression fade. There is likewise an improvement in our self-image when we feel more competent physically. We also discover how much more we like other people when we have a more relaxed when we have-a more relaxed feeling about ourselves.

Living without Stress

We can see how this works easily enough. Next time you're angry, notice whether you clench your hands slightly or perhaps a great deal. When angry, you may also hunch your shoulders and hold your chest rigidly. Or if you're anxious about something, you may find yourself making fidgety movements.

These are all surface reactions we can observe. Underneath-are the unconscious tension states that can build into attitudes which interfere in our relationships with other people.

When you release those clenched fists, or prevent the fidgeting, by means of the Alexander Technique, you may find your feelings much more within your control, because you are no longer reinforcing them with body tension.

Once you break this cycle of reinforcing feeling with body tension, you may even find that you no longer experience any disquiet--except perhaps to wonder where your rage or panic went. Thus freed, you are able to experience emotions fully in a few moments and begin thinking clearly again. This new conscious control of yourself does not prevent you from feeling any emotional states--life would be rather stiff and boring if it did--but you will be able to allow for more appropriate and spontaneous responses to the events of your life if you are not locked into one fearful or angry response for all occasions.

Being Who You Are

The Alexander Technique has particular value for people who don't want to fill themselves with drugs, or to shop from therapy to therapy, hoping for some kind of emotional relief. Millions of people exist in this half-alive state, countering their depressions and anxieties with a whole arsenal of tranquilizers, and moving hopefully from one fad to another. If they turn to the Technique, there is no magic formula that will instantly solve their problems. Instead, they will discover they have some choice in their lives and that they can consciously interrupt the debilitating habits of a lifetime. Freedom and ease is at their command.

Beneficial Effects in Many Diseases

Many people would find it hard to believe the seemingly fantastic medical cures attributed to the Alexander Technique except that these extraordinary reports come from reputable physicians and scientists.

In 1973, Professor Nikolaas Tinbergen, upon receiving the Nobel Prize for Medicine, devoted half his acceptance speech to the Technique. He related how his interest in it was excited by a little experiment he had tried with his own family. He, his wife and one of their daughters had learned the Technique at the same time. As their body musculature began to function differently, they observed "with growing amazement" the marvelous results. They noted, for example, that the Technique brought about "very striking improvements in such diverse things as high blood pressure, breathing, depth of sleep, overall cheerfulness and mental alertness, resilience against outside pressure, and also in such a refined skill as playing a stringed instrument."

Tinbergen went on to affirm the possibility that certain other stress-related ailments could benefit from the Technique: rheumatism, including various forms of arthritis; respiratory ailments, even asthma; circulation defects that may lead to high blood pressure and heart conditions; gastrointestinal disorders of many types; sexual failures; migraines and depressive states that often lead to suicide. All these as well as other non-bug diseases, he suggested, might be helped by the Alexander Technique.

Tinbergen concluded that while the Technique is assuredly no cure-all to be applied in every case, "there can be no doubt that it often does have profound and beneficial effects; and I repeat once more, both in the mental and somatic sphere.

A physician, Dr. Wilfred Barlow, conducted a survey of men and women who had long used the Alexander Technique, and reported that in this group-there were no coronaries, no cancers, no strokes, no rheumatoid arthritis, no slipped discs, no ulcers, no neurological disorders and no severe mental disorder. Barlow called this statistic "almost unbelievable" and concluded that 99 percent of the population needs the Technique.

The British Medical Journal once published a letter, signed by nineteen doctors, endorsing the Technique for its remarkable effectiveness in the treatment of many of their patients, and called upon their profession to recognize and evaluate it. Unfortunately, no such evaluation has thus far been carried out, which is a point that must be emphasized. Although there has accumulated an impressive volume of personal testimony, no thoroughgoing scientific investigation has been conducted into any of the medical claims that have been made for the Technique.

A word of caution is therefore in order. If you have any ailment or illness--even one due to, or complicated by, the continual wear you place upon yourself through bad muscular habits--only your own physician can advise you if the Alexander Technique is likely to help.

Everyone Can Use It

People from all walks of life benefit from the Alexander Technique. Those who have a professional interest in their bodies--actors, dancers, athletes--are making it an important part of their training and maintenance program. Leading performing arts conservatories and university programs schedule regular classes in the Alexander Technique for students. Many professional musicians attribute quick recovery and continuing ease in playing to their study of the Technique. Patients in medical institutes in London, New York and elsewhere find it acceptable as a valuable resource in physiotherapy. High fashion magazines, like Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, have informed their readers of what the Technique will do for presentation and appearance.

Trial projects in elementary and secondary schools throughout the western world have shown that the Alexander Technique significantly contributes to greater cooperation, attention, and self-esteem. John Dewey, the great educational philosopher and innovator, emphasized that only by including the Alexander Technique in the education of young children can we make that education truly effective.

A Simple Method

This book will introduce you to the Alexander process of thinking and moving. It presents a simple method for learning the Technique by yourself. In the words of Professor Frank Jones, "Since the Alexander Technique is nothing-more than the application of experimental method to problems of everyday behavior, there is no reason-to delay the undertaking if a teacher is not available." . . .

[End of Excerpts]

The following is a list of AT books in my library (including the titles mentioned above), each with different perspectives and applications, for different AT readers, all of which I recommend.

The first two are by AT teachers who were taught by Alexander himself. Wilfred Barlow was a MD, who married the niece of Alexander, Marjorie, who herself was an AT teacher trained by Alexander. Frank Pierce Jones was a Classics Professor, who after becoming an AT teacher, conducted decades of research into the AT effects on health and disease.

- *The Alexander Principle: How to Use Your Body without Stress* - Wilfred Barlow, MD

- *Freedom to Change: The Development and Science of The Alexander Technique* - Frank Pierce Jones

For expectant or new mothers, this title is most helpful.

- *The Alexander Technique Birth book: A Guide to Better Pregnancy, Natural Birth and Parenting* – by Ilana Machover and Angela & Jonathan Drake, Forward by Sinead Cusack and Jeremy Irons

For basic, practical guidance, for the general reader, are the following titles:

- *The Alexander Technique Workbook: The Complete Guide to Health, Poise, and Fitness* – by Richard Brennan
- *Illustrated Elements of Alexander Technique: a Practical Program for Health, Poise, and Fitness* – by Glynn MacDonald
- *Body, Breath and Being: A new approach to the Alexander Technique* - by Carolyn Nicholls
- *How You Stand, How You Move, How to Live: Learning the Alexander Technique to Explore Your Mind-Body Connection and Achieve Self-Mastery* - by Missy Vineyard

For musicians and actors are these titles:

- *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* - by Pedro De Alcantara
- *The Actor's Secret: Techniques for Transforming Habitual Patterns and Improving Performance* – by Betsy Polatin

The following titles are by an AT teacher and mind-body education professor and researcher at the Dimon Institute:

- *The Undivided Self: Alexander Technique and the Control of Stress* - by Theodore Dimon
- *Your Body, Your Voice: The Key to Natural Singing and Speaking* – by Theodore Dimon
- *The Elements of Skill: A Conscious Approach to Learning* - by Theodore Dimon
- *The Body in Motion: Its Evolution and Design* - by Theodore Dimon
- *Neurodynamics: The Art of Mindfulness in Action* – by Theodore Dimon

There is even this book on AT and the chair, by an AT teacher and professor of architecture, (from which I learned about the Capisco Chair that I sit on) :

The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design - by Galen Cranz
