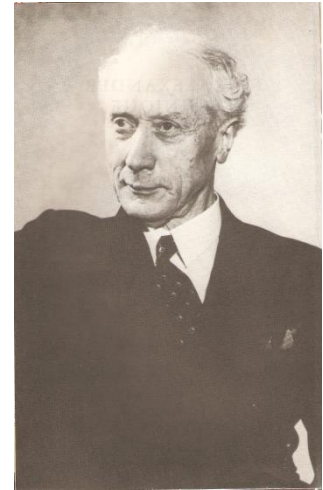


# The Alexander Technique by Frederick Matthias Alexander

From Olive Brown's Book 'Your Innate Power'

## Chapter VI – USE

The body of civilized man should be an efficient instrument of the mind. With conscious control and an improved use of the self and the body, distortion and disease diminish or disappear. An outstanding example of the benefits to be gained by this improved use was told by Randolph Churchill in an interview with Ben Gurion for the London Evening Standard a few years ago. Churchill, surprised at the improved appearance and vitality of the Prime Minister, asked him why he looked so much more vigorous and fit in spite of the anxieties and difficulties he was going through. Ben Gurion enthusiastically gave full credit to what he had learned from a teacher of the F. M. Alexander principles of reeducation which, he said, not only cured him of lumbago but revolutionized his mental and bodily health. 'Mr Ben Gurion told me,' said Churchill, 'that not only is he entirely rid of the lumbago, but also of the troublesome habit of clearing his throat when speaking in parliament. In addition, he has found that his memory had greatly improved—a very rare thing in a man of seventy-three. To achieve this improved use, Alexander taught how to inhibit harmful, habitual reactions to any stimuli from within or without; how consciously to direct the self so as to create a new coordination of mind and muscle. He discovered that allowing the head to fall back instead of balancing on its atlas, and the spine and back muscles to curve in and collapse, causes pressures. It throws the body off balance and interferes with the functioning of all its organs and limbs. All tense effort whether physical or intellectual seems to be associated with rigidity of the thorax and a pulling down in the sub-occipital regions, causing pressures on the spine, especially in this region of the top three vertebrae. Refuse to permit that pressure and mental strain eases. The position of the head is of primary importance for all vertebrates. It is not held, but 'fallen into', the head being lightly balanced and free. FREE the head forward and up from the neck. Let it go up itself, do not deliberately put it there. It is not so much what you do as what you do not do that matters. In learning the new use you simply make a calm decision : 'No, I am not going to tighten. I am not going to pull that head back. I will not close in or sink into myself.' If you refuse deliberately to do any of these things the right thing does itself. 'Nature is there dying for the chance, if you'd only give it to her,' Alexander used to say. Refusing consent to come down or pull in choosing instead to go out, is as simple as to decide whether or not to eat a chocolate. You can choose to do one or the other. You may consciously give or withhold consent to do



anything. It is a matter of will. When you open up all energies are free and radiate out into space. It is a kind of lengthening out of self in all directions, a freeing of self. Energy follows thought, conscious or unconscious. Focus your conscious attention with absolute trust and simply think of lengthening to turn your head or to extend an arm—even to pull an object toward you. Watch any baby's movement and you will see what I mean. The slightest doubt defeats the end. It changes the direction and the quality of the energy. The great pitfall for most of us is wondering if we are right. Instead of staying with the principle we look for results. When we learn how to direct and use our bodies properly, awareness is increased and we are able to control nervous and muscular tension to the minimum required. Then we can exteriorize and achieve objectivity at will. We function more in obedience to nature's laws. With lowered awareness the pro-prioceptive (body) senses does not give accurate information. Gradually a maladjustment takes place which affects the functioning of all the organs. If the body is off balance movements cause all kinds of strain, irritation and harmful habits. The result is lowered breathing capacity and, according to Dr J. E. R. McDonough, is one reason why the blood cannot be pure. In consequence the whole system is effected. When you open up and let energies radiate out the body feels light; you have a feeling of buoyancy and being above things. Unconsciousness seems to be heavy. The weight on the scale is, of course, the same but a body in balance feels lighter to carry about. The importance of good posture is well known, but Alexander used to say that it was foolish to speak of it if the neuro-muscular functioning is imperfect. For then there can be no stability and the posture is likely to be a harmful 'held' position.

I realize that these few paragraphs greatly oversimplify some of Alexander's teachings, but his four books on the subject give full details of his discoveries. I simply cite these principles as a means of opening up in order that the sensory may function more reliably.) Unfortunately one cannot understand and correct faulty habits of movement and posture on verbal instruction alone. Words cannot express sensory experience. Most of us need the teacher's hands to check the direction of our energy and help us to recognize the change. As any osteopath can tell you, many symptoms of ill health are due to faulty use which causes undue pressure on the vertebrae, nerves and internal organs. Opening up, lengthening out (or refusing to tighten, refusing pressures) permits a heightened consciousness so that we are able to meet life and its problems objectively, and stay above the sordidness and confusion that is so prevalent a part of modern life. The unstable or neurotic person does not have conscious control. He puts up a wall, a defence against the problems and difficulties of life. His vital power weakens and he becomes a slave to his own organism without freedom or inner harmony. Instead of objectifying he sees everything egocentrically in terms of himself. He neither sees nor hears what is, but comes to everything with a preconceived idea or emotion that distorts fact. He rarely listens or tries to understand what is being said or done. Instead he withdraws further into self, uninterested in another point of view. All life's

activity whether mental or physical is met with this faulty use. Without consciousness in control he is driven by impulses, moods and desires. Of course he is not happy.

We can learn how to modify these states, these mental habits and the state of the brain. We are working with a vital force which can perform miracles when we learn how to dominate and direct it instead of misusing it to torture ourselves. The new control (full consciousness) of thoughts, emotions and acts gives a very positive sensation of wholeness, of harmony with yourself and with reality. The increased self-awareness acquired through improved use enables controlled reaction instead of automatic, unconscious response. Nearly all the work of the brain is in thinking. Its rest and nourishment come through sensing. In learning to use our senses, we modify brain activity and achieve an economy of nervous force. If the brain falls into lazy habits the nervous system is affected and causes malfunctioning of the brain and other organs. This is especially true of the vascular system which then makes the organs anaemic or congested and augments or diminishes their secretions at the slightest psychic influence. With improved use and conscious control, you eliminate distractions and mind-wandering and so increase vital force. The channel is clearer with fewer leaks and the consequent loss of energy. Moreover you learn not to overspend your energy by making more effort than is needed. The quality of energy is also improved becoming calm and free, not tense. You begin to sense your power and act with confidence. Many people are inclined to be skeptical until they have had the experience and so understand. It is rare, though, for anyone after the first hour of practice not to see what is meant, but to apply the principle to life takes him a long time. It is subtle and elusive. Repeated and repeated good experiences are necessary to install the new habit of use. Let sensation come to you! I shall repeat this again and again. If you try to seek it in the old habitual way, you tighten and pull into yourself. Let the head fall into place so that it balances high on its pivot, whether in movement, in thought, or in receiving sensations. In all vertebrates the head leans (or should), lengthening forward and up from the neck, no matter what the activity, physical or mental. It is to be, as it were, spiritually within the object or the act. In the early stages it is important for the teacher to check the vibrations and direction of energy in order to avoid as much self-deception as possible and the very harmful habit of looking for results. Reading the vibration tells the monitor when energy is channelled and directed out to the point of focus, in writing, seeing, hearing or any act. It tells if the pupil is centreing-in and doing something with the brain itself. The brain should not be used as a muscle. 'It's just wonderful how these principles work when you put them into practice,' said my friend. 'One sees their truth through personal experience'. Then she told me that though she had loved gardening she was always tired afterwards with a cramped neck and aching back. But that when she freed the head up and forward and lengthened up out of the hips as she bent over, giving full attention to the task without letting her mind wander, she returned refreshed after two hours intensive work. 'Now I am going to see whether it is imagination or true,' she said to herself two or three days later, 'so I will do it the old

way with no attention to posture and less concentrated on what I am doing.' Sure enough she returned to the house with all the old familiar pains, but wiser and convinced.

There is no end to the marvels produced by conscious direction and an improved use of the self. A particularly interesting case was that of a man in his early sixties who had an unusual number of symptoms of psycho-physical malfunctioning. He complained of constant and extreme headaches, pains in his neck, back and shoulder. He suffered considerable pain and disturbance in the viscera. The more he slept the more he felt that he needed to sleep. He had lost all contact with himself, his friends and his work. What seemed to him worst of all was that he thought he had become impotent. This fear causes many men and women a lot of unnecessary unhappiness and contributes to increased nervous instability. Evidence indicates that a truly impotent man or frigid woman is rare. The disorder is usually functional and a symptom of some form of passivity that is indirectly corrected when the person has achieved an improved use and conscious control. This man had consulted one doctor after another, none of whom could find anything organically wrong. Even his neurologist regretted that there was nothing to be done. Once a gay, fun loving person even greedy for life he became despondent, suffered extreme and constant nervous depression and talked increasingly of suicide. He came for the reeducation in desperation and without enthusiasm. In fact he was a little inclined to ridicule it. His thinking was so negative and despairing that I wondered if we would get anywhere. But each lesson gave him such release that within ten days he began to give full, wholehearted cooperation at home. He was one of those rare pupils who faithfully carry out all the practice they are asked to do. As his mental attitude gradually changed his pains disappeared. He regained his enthusiasm and an interest in what was going on outside of himself. At first he would call for help when he could not recapture control by himself. Gradually he learned to work alone in the same way as we worked together and to conquer his disagreeable and painful experiences, instead of being obsessed by them. His confidence increased as he succeeded in controlling his thoughts and acts. A brilliant composer of high sensitivity that he now controlled, he began turning out fine creative work within ten weeks—after more than two years' incapacity. Here is but one example of what intelligence can do when well directed. He saved his career, his health, and his happiness, amazing his grateful family and friends. Many others have found understanding in their marriage and social relationships, and greater success in their profession, simply by being consciously aware and directed towards becoming a free, integrated and whole being.