

F. M. Alexander's Story

When asked about Alexander Technique, I first have to explain what it is not. Typically I hear, "Oh yeah. That's that posture training thing, right?" I gently explain that an easeful posture is an organic result of studying AT, but it is not the end goal.

F.M. Alexander, born prematurely in Australia in 1869 suffered periods of ill health throughout his life. Education was not a priority in his family, but his mother insisted he be educated. One of his early teachers, Robert Robertson, imparted a love of theater and poetry; Shakespeare in particular.

A Strong Desire

Reciting became one of Alexander's "chief pleasures" in his youth. He pursued a career in recitation and was received with rave reviews. In the early 1890's, however, he experienced hoarseness and complete voice loss while reciting. Friends noticed he would make a gasping sound for breath. After seeking help from medical doctors and vocal trainers who prescribed vocal rest, he experienced short periods of relief, only to be followed by hoarseness once again. He came to the conclusion that it must be something he was doing. Determined to find an answer, he set up mirrors in order to observe himself.

Primary Control

He began by simply **gathering information** by **observing** himself speaking as he would in daily life. He didn't notice anything unusual. Then he observed himself reciting and noticed several oddities. He observed his habit of pulling his head back and down, depressing his larynx and sucking in breath. He concluded that he needed to prevent these habits. He was unable to inhibit directly the pressing down of the larynx and the sucking in of the breath, but was able to prevent the head pulling down and back. In so doing he discovered "**the means whereby**" he could improve the quality of his voice production. By using this single direction, other habits improved. He concluded that the forward and up movement of the head is the **primary control** of all movement. Previously he used "**end gaining**" as a way to achieve his goals. Focusing on the ultimate goal caused frustration and poor results. By being mindful and observant, and **experimenting**, he was able to cause change that ultimately aided in achieving his goal. By moving forward and up he had some success. Here he concluded that "**use affects function.**"

Faulty sensory Appreciation

Excited by this discovery, Alexander attempted **inhibiting** the backward and down movement of his head. But he still found mixed success. He added multiple mirrors to aid him in observation. He discovered that he had **faulty sensory appreciation**. He thought if he simply inhibited a habit while doing another activity (preventing downward and back and adding forward and up) it would be enough. He thought it would be enough to will to do something. But without the mirror he was unable to be successful. He also discovered that in doing a new activity, it involved muscles that were part of

the old activity and the old habits were too strong to completely allow for the replacement activity. Simply telling himself to do a new activity was not enough. Feelings are not a reliable source of information.

Renewing a Desire

With further exploration, Alexander recognized that the simple stimulus of thinking about speaking was enough for the old habit to engage. He had to repeatedly give himself the stimulus and tell himself to employ a new direction. As he prepared to speak, he would instead lift his arm or not speak or actually speak. However, the new result was not lasting. He discovered he had to repeatedly renew his desire as he was speaking. He had to inhibit the immediate response to speak while directing himself to think of his head forward and up. While speaking he had to renew the direction to inhibit the response and use primary control. It became an ongoing layering of inhibition and new use, prompted by his desire.

Psycho-physical Unity

As a result of Alexander's experimentation he concluded that the concept of body and mind as two different entities was false. Where it was previously believed that we had physical ills or mental ones, he concluded that we are psycho-physically whole. Both the mind and body must be taken into consideration as a whole in all training. We now know through modern science that this is indeed true. (Although it can be observed not be practiced regularly in modern medicine or education!)

When explaining Alexander technique to a voice student, they can relate quickly when we talk about the physical ramifications of stage fright on the voice. When they discover their own body to be coordinated, they notice change in their voice and their psyche. And yes, they will find posture changes.