

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH STRANSKY

ALEXANDER TEACHER



Q Just what does a person learn through the Alexander Technique?

A What you learn in the Alexander Technique is a grace, flexibility and ease that you apply constantly to everything that you do. This is as opposed, say, to the grace and flexibility learned in dancing which are not (necessarily) applied to daily life. One of the most remarkable results is the sensation of lightness that students experience after lessons, and that stays with them almost constantly. Another is lessening of fatigue.

These feelings are the result of learning to use oneself well, which involves improved alignment and posture. Essentially, habits are changed. Correct alignment and improved use are achieved by eliminating incorrect use and good habits are substituted for bad ones. When learning good use you must first stop the cycle of deterioration, and you then start a new cycle of good use.

Q How do the lessons begin? Is there a diagnosis of the student's specific needs?

A For each student the lesson is conducted in essentially the same way, because essentially we are teaching good use, we are not treating specific problems. In diagnosing a person's

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problems--his misuse or poor alignment--the teacher not only observes with the eye, but also feels the tension with his hands.

Q Why do people come for lessons, generally?

A People come because of pain or discomfort; they also come to improve posture. Others come for professional reasons, such as dancers, actors, musicians...they learn to use themselves well in their daily lives, and this basic good, free use of their bodies enables them to perform better and to be less fatigued. But anyone could benefit from lessons. For example, say an alto saxophone player came for lessons. In a short time he has better alignment, he uses his body better, his breathing improves, and more energy is available to him. I once saw this demonstrated in a dramatic way at a lecture on the Alexander technique in New York. The teacher took someone from the audience who had never had an Alexander lesson and demonstrated: with the hands on the head and neck she gave the orders and took the person in and out of the chair very easily, and the whole alignment changed. It was obvious to the whole audience. It couldn't have happened without the touch of the teacher's hands, true, but the participant had to give the order to release as well, and then the release happened. You need both the order from the student and the teacher's hands guiding the student into a good direction. In repeated lessons we are actually influencing or re-conditioning reflexes through repeated sensory experience together with verbal commands.

Q Just for clarification, how do you use the term, "conditioned reflex?"

A If a person sits down in a chair he is going to use certain habits to accomplish that act. His muscles will function in a certain way. That's his conditioned reflex at that time. Now in the Alexander lessons, we change that for the better, so that his reflex response to the thought, or the order, of sitting will be a different response. He will use his muscles in a different way, possibly even use different muscles.

Q How do you get around the problem which is often foreseen, of simply substituting another pattern, that the student may have to un-learn later?

A There are two issues involved here. One is the question of the re-education (or re-conditioning) itself, and how it is done. I will go into a whole explanation of the lesson and what happens in a lesson. But before I do that I think I

should answer your question about imposing another conditioning on top of one that is already there. The way I see it is that you are un-learning, rather than learning something new. You are un-learning poor habits, poor responses, so that you can come to re-learning the original good use: good responses to orders, wishes, and desires. That's why Alexander calls it a re-education rather than an education, because re-education implies that you are learning something that you once knew.

Now then, the second question, how is this done?

In the lessons, first of all, the student is asked to do nothing. Even if I want the student to sit down on a chair, I don't want him to do it. He has to leave himself alone entirely, and let me move him. We are not super-imposing something on top of the habits that he already has; we are stopping him from using the habits he has. He is to be free, open and neutral in order to experience something else. What he is going to experience is the way he used to function once upon a time, before the poor habits took over.

Q What are the most common barriers that you encounter with students?

A In the beginning the greatest difficulty is for people to do nothing--to simply lie still on the table, or sit still in the chair, or stand still. When I give them the verbal orders, "Let the neck be free to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen," their greatest difficulty is simply to be still, and to say the words to themselves without doing anything muscularly. Even if they don't know what those words mean, it is as if they start moving muscles by reflex. They immediately want to start to "do" something about it. They are usually not aware that they are "doing" something. But with my trained and experienced eye I can see it, and with my hands I can feel it. For example, I may have my hand on the knee when a person is sitting in the chair and I will feel that the person has the impulse to move his head and neck, or move an arm. One can feel it throughout the whole organism if one is sensitive to it, and trained to feel it. In the beginning the student is usually not aware that he has made a slight movement; it is reflex response for him; he is not aware that he has done it.

Then we reach a stage in the work where the student becomes aware that he has moved; he may not be able to prevent it yet, but he becomes aware when he has moved. Then follows the

stage where he can prevent it. He can stop himself from actually making a movement. He can just give the directions and be still, which is what Alexander called "inhibition"; that is, inhibition in the best sense of the word, when one inhibits harmful "doings" and makes the choice to substitute improved use. When the student reaches that stage, we get to the more individual problems of the person. One person will have greater tension, greater holding in the head-neck area, another will have it in the chest area, another in the abdominal area, another in the legs or the pelvic area, and the hip joints. Now I may observe in the beginning where the greatest tension is. But until the student learns to "leave himself alone" he is not aware of it himself as a rule. What often happens is that as the student becomes freer he is able to release in the area where the strongest holding is. No sooner has he done this than we become aware of other areas that are tense and they eventually release as the lessons progress.

Other general problems...There is always head-neck tension if there is tension in any part of the body. This is a uniform pattern. If one tenses anywhere in the organism, the head-neck area will become tense simultaneously. Aside from this universal head-neck tension, which is present in almost everyone to some degree, I find that one of the greatest areas of holding and of tension is in the area of the rib cage. This is directly related to breathing, of course. I think everyone is aware nowadays, that good breathing is essential to the proper functioning of the various systems of our bodies... Now we don't work with breathing itself. We don't prescribe breathing exercises, or anything like that, but we find that as the alignment improves, as the musculature around the rib-cage releases, and allows a freer rib cage, then the breathing improves naturally. We work for organic rather than mechanistic changes in the body's functioning.

Q How would you describe or define "organic change?"

A By organic I mean--evolutionary--that it happens gradually and synergistically. You see, so many things are dependent on each other, that we work with the total organism instead of working on particular parts or particular problems. We work with the pattern of the whole organism, which is based upon the alignment of the head, neck and torso. Now if a person has tight legs, I'm not going to spend a lot of time trying to get those legs free. It is possible for me to help the person to have the experience of his legs moving freely, but if his head, neck and torso are not free, the

moment I take my hands away from his legs or the moment he makes a move on his own, he'll tighten up immediately. On the other hand, if there is a release in the head, neck and torso area, his legs will release automatically to a certain degree. I am not saying they will release one hundred per cent, because muscles can have stiffened over the years from not having functioned freely, so that it will take a little time. They need the experience over and over again of functioning freely, and then gradually they come back to their full, free use.

Q The relationship of head, neck, and torso was what Alexander was referring to in the term "primary control?"

A That's right. What he actually was referring to when he said "primary control" was the relationship of the head to the spine--whether that relationship is good or bad, that is the "primary control!" If that relationship is poor, the functioning of the rest of the organism will be poor. In his introduction to the book, The Resurrection of the Body, Edward Maisel emphasized another term which was used by Alexander before he used the term "primary control". I think the distinction is an interesting one; just let me find that part and read it here...

"But how then do we acquire a better use of ourselves, and with it an improved approach to the activities of living? If behavior is mainly movement, what is the prerequisite for good movement? As early as 1907 Alexander identified this prerequisite with the greatest lengthening of the spine possible in whatever we may be doing..."

(Here I just want to add that when we talk of the greatest lengthening of the spine, we are not talking about a forced stretching or rigidity. It is a natural lengthening. Now I will continue with the quote).

"It was this vertebral lengthening in activity which he then called 'the true and primary movement in each and every act.' (A quarter of a century later he began applying to it the much less satisfactory term, 'primary control.')

Q Do you think the term is less satisfactory?

A I don't. But I think that the two terms refer to somewhat different things. "The true and primary movement in each and every act" refers to the lengthening of the spine.

This says to me that before and during every activity, every act, you need that lengthening of the spine so that the use of the body will be good. Now in the term "primary control" Alexander was referring not only to the relationship of the head to the spine, but that the head has to be poised lightly on top of the spine to allow it to lengthen. That indicates to me that you are actually controlling the way you function, whether you are at rest or in movement. Also, the term "primary control" gives a picture of the head literally leading everything. This seems logical and in order. Again, let it be understood, that when Alexandrians use the term "control" it is not meant as a muscular control which would involve rigidity or forcing. The control comes through thinking. I want to stress this. Alexander often used a phrase to describe his technique: "psycho-physical re-education with conscious control in the use of the self." The term "conscious control" is a key term; it means that you control through thinking--through conscious thoughts. You control with your brain, which is in your head. It's not in your pelvis, and it is not in your solar plexus. There are many methods of dance and body movement, etc., which have similar ideas of what good alignment is, but they think of it as starting from the pelvis--that the pelvis has to be in a certain relationship with the rest of the torso, and they ignore the head. I think this is limiting. I think that they do get some results. In some cases they get very good results, but I don't think they always get their maximum result because they are leaving out the concept that Alexander found--that your brain is going to control everything by the way it gives orders to the organism, and that the head leads the torso upwards.

Q Changing the subject a bit, what is the teacher's part in this kinesthetic re-education? I mean, is it not possible for the student to work on his own?

A To put it most simply, the feelings we have when we are mis-using ourselves are not reliable. Let me give you an example. A man comes in for lessons and one shoulder is much lower than the other. He has been walking around like this half of his life, and he doesn't feel that it is lower. It feels "normal" to him. Now let's say that I got his shoulders to level out. He would look level but he would not feel level. That is why he needs a teacher to help him to achieve a state of good balance, and symmetry, and he needs a mirror to see that it is that way, because his feelings are going to tell him that it isn't that way.

Q But obviously Alexander didn't have a teacher...

A Alexander was a genius in the respect that he could do it for himself, but it took him nine years of painstaking observa-

tion and study, working with himself in front of a three-way mirror. Through observing himself, he started observing other people, and he saw that most people had the same kind of problem. In the last analysis there are probably some people who could "teach themselves" but most people would not be that persistent.

Q Doesn't it seem remarkable that he, never having experienced these sensations at the hands of anyone else, could devise a technique for communicating so much information?

A Yes. Alexander was an unusual man. I have been told by people who studied with Alexander personally that the touch was incredibly light, yet remarkable things happened. They described his touch as "soft as lambswool" or "soft as butter." Alexander apparently really was able to pass across the very essence of his work.

Q And what do you think that essence was?

A I think it was Non-Doing. Through a light touch, with no force, no strong manipulation, you can bring about changes.

Q This point will be interesting to many of our readers. Would you describe these changes also as structural changes?

A Yes, they are structural changes, and this is very obvious when we observe the student in the mirror. I work in front of a mirror with the student so that he can see the changes happening during a lesson. Also I take photographs of the student when he first comes for lessons, and then some weeks or months later when I think there is an obvious change. When we compare them we can see the gradual change in the person's posture and alignment. There is definitely a structural change, it is obvious during the lessons, and it is obvious over a period of time. Students find friends and relatives noticing and saying "Oh, you look much taller", or "You look thinner", yet they may not have lost an ounce; it is simply that they are carrying themselves in a more superb manner. Yes, there is definitely a structural change, but it is not done through forcing. It is really that my hands are guiding. Another way of putting it is that my hands stimulate a person to go into the direction of lengthening. The stimulus comes both from the thoughts that we think (the verbal directions that we give), and the teacher's hands touching the student to add to the stimulus, and, when necessary to inhibit the incorrect response.

¹ Edward Maisel, *The Resurrection of the Body* (New York: University Books, 1969). p. xxv.

