

## **“I’ve Had My First Alexander Lesson—What Do I Do Now?”**

**By Catherine Kettrick, Ph.D.**

(This is a handout I give to all my beginning pupils. I was teaching in Switzerland and innocently asked “Would you like a handout?” This is the result).

If you are like many new students, you probably experienced new kinesthetic sensations in your first lesson and are now wondering how to re-create that experience. You may be puzzled about heads and bodies and why heads should go forward and up and bodies should follow. You may wonder what thinking has to do with moving. And probably most of all you just want to know what to do to make it all happen again.

The paragraphs below outline some basic concepts, and answer some of the most common questions new students ask.

### **Basic Concept #1: Muscles can only pull.**

Place one arm, palm up, on the table. Now bend your elbow. If you simply followed that instruction, your hand should have moved closer to your shoulder. There are muscles that reach across your elbow joint and attach to your lower arm. When you “bend your elbow” you are contracting those muscles—making them shorter. Muscles can only get shorter when you contract them, they cannot get longer when you contract them. This fact is true for all of the skeletal muscles in your body.

### **Basic Concept #2: Your body has a natural “resting” length.**

Try this experiment: hold up one index finger and with your other hand, palm down, push on our finger, and move your index finger around. What happened? Was your finger easy or hard to move? Now stop pushing on our finger. What happened? Is your finger easy to move now? What made it hard to move your finger? You were pushing on it. What made it easy to move? You stopped pushing on it.

You can “push on” your body and make it shorter by contracting various muscles. For example, if you contract the muscles in your back, they will get shorter, bringing the top of your back closer to the bottom of your back, and causing your chest to “stick out.” Stop contracting those muscles and your body returns to its previous state. If you contract the muscles in the front of your body, you can “pull” your body down into a slump. To get out of the slump you only need to stop contracting the muscles you contracted to cause the slump in the first place.

### **Basic Concept #3: There are only two ways your head can move in relation to the rest of your body: down and not down.**

Your head is delicately poised on the top of your spine. You can interfere with that easy poise by tightening the muscles in your neck. (Try it, but do so gently!) If you observe closely, you will notice that your head is pulled away from its natural resting poise, usually in a back and downward direction. To stop your head moving in this downward direction, you only have to stop tightening the muscles in your neck, and your head will “move up” because you have stopped pulling it down.

#### **Basic Concept #4: Your head moves first.**

When we begin a movement, the first part of our body that moves is our head. This idea may not seem obvious at first, because we tend to think that our leg moves first when we walk, or our hand moves first when we start to reach for something. However, if you are a very careful observer, you will notice when you reach across the table for the cup on the other side that the very first change that happens is a change in the relationship of your whole head to your whole body—if you are like many people, you probably have moved your head in a back and downward direction, toward your body, by unnecessarily contracting the muscles in your neck. If you don't overtighten the muscles in your neck, your head is free to move easily and delicately on the top of your spine as you pick up the cup.

Letting your head move easily forward and up on the top of your spine, and letting your whole body (spine) follow is a coordinating movement. It gets our body ready to do anything—and the “anything” is a gestural movement—reach for a cup, take a step, speak.

#### **Basic Concept #5: The poise of your head on the top of your spine affects your balance and coordination.**

Left alone, your head is and easily lightly balanced on the top of your spine, and is easily able to move and adjust to any moving you do. Unfortunately, most of us often overtighten the muscles of our neck, which prevents our heads from moving freely, and thus interferes with our easy coordination and balance.

#### **Basic Concept #6: Almost all of us are all born with the ability to move easily, naturally and gracefully.**

Think of a cat leaping lightly from the floor to a table. Or of Michael Jordan flying through the air to dunk a ball. Or of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing. We are all inherently able to move as freely and easily as any of these, but we often start interfering with our own natural coordination. It is normal to be natural and easy in our movements, free from any chronic muscular stiffness or pain. It may not be average, but it is definitely normal.

#### **Basic Concept #7: What we're used to feels right because we're used to it.**

We move the way we do—walk, talk, sit, play, sew, read, work at a computer, run—because that particular way feels right. It feels right because we have been moving that way for so long that we have gotten used to it. As an example, clasp your hands together with your fingers interlaced. One or the other of your thumbs will be on top. Now pull your hands apart and clasp them again so that the other thumb is on top. This position will probably feel very wrong to you. The same will be true if you switch a ring to another finger, or your watch to the other wrist. However, if you persist in clasping your hands the “wrong way,” or leave your watch on the other wrist, you will soon become so accustomed to that condition that the previous “right way” of doing it will now feel wrong.

#### **Basic Concept #8: What feels right may not be right.**

When we make any movement we get feedback from nerve endings in our muscles about the movement we have just made. We use this feedback to judge whether or not we have moved as we intended. Unfortunately our judgment can be wrong. It is wrong because of Concept # 7:

we have moved in a certain way for so long that it comes to feel natural and right, and we use this feeling of natural and right to judge our actions. However, how we are actually moving may be very different from how it *feels* like we are moving. For example, new students in Alexander Technique lessons sometimes feel like they are "falling forward" rather than standing upright, even though looking in a mirror can tell them they are upright, other students in the class assure them they are indeed standing upright, and in fact they do not actually fall forward. They feel like they are falling forward because they are in fact forward of where they normally like to hold themselves, which is back of upright. The information coming from our sensory nerves is accurate, but the way we interpret the information we are getting is no longer accurate. If we did interpret it accurately, we would be able to stop leaning back when we stand. You cannot make accurate judgements from inaccurate interpretations.

### **Basic Concept #9: Feelings come last.**

How do we manage to move? The start of any movement has to be an idea—you see a cup on the table and want to pick it up, for example. If you decide to act on that idea, you direct yourself to move in a certain way (one that feels right and natural) and you reach out and pick up the cup. The feeling sense that occurs as you are reaching out to get the cup happens only *after* you have directed yourself to move. Remember, the nerve endings are there to give you feedback on how you *have* moved. They can't give this feedback in the absence of movement. Therefore you can't get this feedback until after you have moved.

### **Basic Concept #10: We are always directing ourselves in movement.**

We make most of our movements unconsciously, that is, we do not give any conscious thought or awareness to noticing how we are moving, or to directing ourselves to move differently. With the Alexander Technique you can learn how to notice how you are doing what you are doing and learn to make a choice about whether or not you want to continue as you have been doing. You can learn how to stop directing yourself in a way that is inefficient and wasteful (e.g. pulling your head back and down to begin walking), and "leave yourself alone" to let yourself move in a more easy and effective way.

### **Basic Concept #11: To change the way you move you must change the way you think.**

This concept has two parts. The first part is to realize that our old way of moving, the one that feels natural and right to us, is habitual. Habitual moving is what we do unconsciously and without thinking. Habitual moving is what we do when we have a goal—to reach for a cup, for example—and immediately go for our goal without any thought about how we will reach it. Immediate reaction is almost always habitual reaction. Therefore, to change how you move, your first reaction to any decision to move, or to do something, must be to wait a moment and do nothing. The second part of this concept is how to continue to do nothing and still reach your goal. Remember in Concept #4 we said that your head moves first, and in Concept #5 that the poise of your head affects your balance and coordination. You want to be able to reach for the cup in the easiest and most effective way possible.

Alexander experimented for a long time, and devised a series of directions that helped him to not interfere with his coordination while doing any activity. His directions are: My neck to relax, so that my head can go forward and up, so that my back can lengthen and widen. Notice that each direction depends on the prior one. If you are tightening the muscles in the back of your neck, you will be pulling your head back and down. When you let the muscles in your neck

relax, your head can easily move forward and up. When your head moves forward and up, you can stop any unnecessary tightening of muscles in your body, and your whole body will lengthen and widen. (PLEASE NOTE: These are NOT orders for you to DO something; these are orders to STOP doing what you do not need to do in the first place).

**Basic Concept #12: Learning a new way of thinking takes practice.**

If you clearly direct your neck to relax, and do not try to *do* what feels to you like relaxing your neck, your neck will begin to relax. But remember that you have had many years of experience in tightening your neck. Remember (Concept #10) that you are continually directing yourself, and part of that directing includes orders for unnecessarily tightening your neck or back or arms or legs or some other parts. This old unconscious thinking is much stronger than your new thinking. Your new thinking is working and it is effective, but you may not notice it yet. However, if you will consciously and consistently practice this new way of thinking, and be willing to continue with it even if you can't feel any results yet, you will find that it becomes easier and easier to think in this new way whenever you want.

**Basic Concept #13: If you don't interfere with the easy working of yourself, the quality of everything you do will improve and continue to improve.**

"Leaving yourself alone" by continuing this new way of thinking will allow the easiest and most effective movement to happen in any given situation. If you are singing, this new way of thinking will allow your voice to come out clearly and freely. If you are dancing, it will allow your movements to be free and your artistic intention to come through clearly. If you are working at a computer you will be able to only make the movements necessary to the task, and reduce symptoms of strain and stress from the previous unnecessary tension you used. Working with these concepts consistently will allow you to develop the skill of noticing *how* you are doing what you are doing, and of changing how you are doing it *while continuing with your activity*. You will have a means for accomplishing any goal or task you set yourself in the most enjoyable, efficient and easy way.