

Learning Ease with the Alexander Technique

By Varda Shepherd

The Alexander Technique has been my passion for a quarter of a century. Few tools I have encountered in that time have left me with such a depth of practical understanding in working with self and others. As a teacher of this skill I find myself constantly learning, frequently inspired and always expanded by encountering possibilities for us humans beyond the grids and sets of conditioning. I am fascinated by what I witness when I accompany others in their redirection of the whole self to improved functioning. It is mind-boggling to me that a set of simple principles articulated by Frederick Matthias Alexander many decades ago could be so effective as a guide to unleashing the person's potential as a whole entity moving through life, regardless of gender or culture.

F.M. Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869. In his twenties he moved to Sydney and became a professional reciter of dramatic pieces. In the course of his performance work he developed vocal problems which various doctors were unable to rectify. Alexander was determined to resolve his challenge and spent years researching the way he used his voice, developing a method which ultimately enabled him to continue reciting. He discovered a primary relationship between neck, head, torso and limbs which when optimised could reliably provide coordination and well being whether in activity or at rest. He went on to teach his method to many people from a broad range of professions. He later trained people to transmit the technique and since then many teacher training schools in the world have continued to develop the propagation of Alexander's understandings. There are presently Alexander training centres in Melbourne and Sydney, with the Byron Alexander Centre due to open a 3 year teacher's training programme and a 4 year Advanced Diploma early in 2007.

Learning the technique is a process of re-education. A set of tools is conveyed to the pupil who then learns to apply them in daily existence. The aim is eventual self-reliance.

The hands-on lessons offered by teachers of the technique reveal a personalised series of recognitions of the applicability of the tools, leading to refined ability in employing the body-self in any situation. The pupil receives a trained teacher's guidance for a course of lessons whilst acquiring an experiential understanding which can be applied and developed in every waking moment.

The Technique is so many things to me. My personal journey as a teacher has brought me to work with many people who have been traumatised or abused. Such people often live with high anxiety levels. The technique brings many benefits through gaining a positive connection to the body-self and the crucial capacity to self-soothe. Many people I work with suffer from depression, some receiving medication for their condition. It has been my pleasure to accompany pupils to more continually buoyant emotional states to the point where they have been able to reduce or stop medication. People with orthopaedic issues, others suffering from headaches, chronic fatigue, asthma and RSI all find relief and support for their challenge in meeting the technique. Having tools to help to refrain from the habitual response in the case of addictions is a strong support in the long term challenge of quitting.

Initially the technique brought the complete resolution of my chronic tendonitis from piano performance. Later it meant that I could synthesise my abilities to new levels, allowing knowledge from different disciplines to come into alignment. I was enabled to understand and honour the emotional, the cerebral, the physical, the spiritual, and bring them into my on-going enquiry of how being in this world can be celebrated, how I employ this instrument which I inhabit all the time, how I can deepen my respect and appreciation of this wondrous gift.

The technique provides an infrastructure for every activity, whether in yoga, sport, performance arts or gardening, whereby enjoyment of the body and appreciation of its abilities contribute to raising quality of execution to an aesthetic experience. Yoga teachers, dancers and devotees of other forms of bodywork who study with me fall in love with the enhancement the technique brings to their practice. I think the technique is an invaluable and irreplaceable infrastructure of understanding on which to build any utilisation of the body.

Recognition of the habitual element in every movement is part of the learning. (In most cases, people default to a tensing of the neck in relation to the head, back and limbs when they carry out any activity). Most people embody a mix of excess tension and depletion to the point of collapse, states in the body-self which can change for the better if there is a gap, an opening to improved options in motility. With recognition of the habitual, a pause to allow the person to refrain from the habit and then the redirection of the body to more advantageous use, profound changes in functioning can occur. Learning to refine awareness of the kinetic leads to a sense of subtle, exquisite elegance, engendering a calm and clarity which accompany better decision making.

What is meaningful to me about the technique is that I can pass on a tool with which to enjoy being in the body, no matter what it has experienced previously nor how it is engaged currently. I enjoy that applying the principles leads often to more respect for self and others with less coercion.

I would like the educational system and the mental health system to adopt the Alexander Technique as a recognised modality in the teaching of our youth and the healing of our unwell. As a teacher who is also trained in many modalities of arts and therapies, I have never seen such rapid progress amongst people with disorders through verbal intervention alone – in other words, when the Alexander Technique has been part of the treatment, success has been far more durable.

I encourage anyone to ask me anything about this work – I welcome the opportunity to find new ways to explain the growing understanding the technique brings to my life. It is a joy and a privilege to share what I have been taught so generously.

Notes about the author;

Varda Shepherd was born in Zimbabwe in 1956.

In 1986 she completed a music performance and teaching degree at Tel Aviv University while studying the Alexander Technique, then trained as an AT teacher, graduating in 1989. Later she studied music and movement therapy.

Varda learnt Qi Gong with Master Peng Jiu Ling and the basics of Chinese medicine with Nili Bassan. In 1997 Varda migrated to Australia, and studied narrative and art therapy.

She runs a private practice in Byron Shire, teaching the Alexander Technique and counseling individuals, couples and families employing a range of therapeutic modalities. As the Director of Byron Alexander Centre she will be the primary teacher, receiving guidance and support from foremost proponents of the Alexander work from around the globe. To contact Varda, phone her on 6680 4434.

For more information about the Alexander Technique or to find a teacher in your area, visit www.alexandertechnique.org.au

International Alexander Awareness Week is being celebrated in 11 countries in October 2006. Information sessions and promotional lesson vouchers will be available across Australia – for more details visit the website for the Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (AUSTAT) at www.alexandertechnique.org.au