

Constructive Conscious Control

In *Constructive Conscious Control...*, Alexander (1923) writes that conscious guidance and control in the use of the self is necessary for mankind to adapt successfully to his changing environment. It is “primarily a plane to be reached.” (Mouritz, 2004: p. 8fn.)

Alexander’s technique provides an approach to working on one’s manner of use in order to reach that plane of being by preventing unwitting habits that interfere with the integrated working of the organism as a whole; i.e. the Self.

End-gaining habits result in neck muscles being over-involved in carrying out the daily round of activities such as walking or sitting. As a consequence, other muscles, chiefly those of the back, are unable to perform their appropriate function (see *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, Alexander 1918: p. 59). This state of affairs, with its associated sensory feelings, becomes habituated and regarded as “normal” by the individual.

So-called “mental” activities, which include the thinking mind, are aspects of our manner of use as are “physical” acts such as moving and arm. The psychophysical nature of behaviour was a surprise to Alexander. Like most Victorians, he had assumed thinking to be the voice of the spirit or soul within the body. Today, it is less common for people to believe in the existence of the soul as a separate entity. Conscious thought is explained as the subjective experience of complex neuronal connections, the brain being an organ no different in its physical nature to other organs of the body.

The ability to think consciously is a valuable human tool; a tool to be used for working out solutions to problems and then to be put aside when not in use. Unfortunately, many people routinely leave their thinking process running on in the background like an unwatched TV. The incessant mind chatter distracts them from satisfactorily attending to, and experiencing, what is happening in the present moment.

Poor use, whether it manifests as undue muscular tension or mind-chatter, distorts sensory appreciation. Taken that all measurements require a fixed point of reference, one cannot make an accurate observation and assessment without a base line of calm. To state the obvious, we can only observe through our senses and if our sensory register is distorted by habitual misuse, then sensory appreciation will be unreliable. Accurate observation is essential for skilled activity such as assessing a pupil’s manner of use. To restore sensory reliability then, as Alexander wrote, one must know how to stop or, in other words, how to quieten inappropriate psychophysical activity and come to a state of balance. (Compare *Thinking Aloud*, W. Carrington, Mornum Time Press 1994: p. 136.)

Evidence suggests that applying the Alexander Technique (i.e. inhibiting the “too quick and unthinking reaction” and directing one’s energies to employment of the Primary Control of Use) brings better organisation to the preparatory central neurological set [1] and to the muscle ‘set’ [2] leading to overt behaviour. The corollary to this is better-organised “mental” activity. When habitual, self-generated mind-thought is allowed to quieten then one is able to attend more to the here-and-now. Sensory impressions combine to form a unified field of (monitoring) attention, which includes proprioception of the ‘self’. The spotlight of more focussed attention will identify particular features, which may or may not require action to be taken, but

it is not fixed and lightly moves on. Observing and experiencing come closer to the true moment of being.

“Bare” or “non-active” observing of this kind is a basic requirement for all skilled activity, which includes Alexander teaching. Decisions regarding what to allow – or not allow to happen (not to ‘do’) – can be made and acted upon more reliably. As an exercise, see if you can notice the point at which one observation ends and another begins. Again, see if you can observe the moment at which your mood changes – say from sadness to happiness – at the moment where true being exists.

By patiently and attentively applying the Technique in daily life one can reach a developed sensitivity and understanding of process where sensing, thinking and ‘doing’ meld into a unified experience which Dewey called “thinking in activity” – constructive conscious control.

[1] “Improvement in Automatic Postural co-ordination Following Alexander Technique Lessons in a Person with Low Back Pain,” Ciaccatore, Horak & Henry, *Physical Therapy*, June 2005.

[2] Jones, F.P., “Method of changing stereotyped response patterns by the inhibition of certain postural sets,” *Psychological Review*, 1965, 72: 196-214.

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