SIGNPOST TO AN UNDISCOVERED LAND

SIX DISCOVERIES OF F. MATTHIAS ALEXANDER

Image courtesy of Ted Dimon

DR TED DIMON

Citation: Dimon, T. Six Discoveries of F. Matthias Alexander. *The Alexander Journal*. 2023, 29, 12-32
DOI: 10.15763/issn.2998-3509.2024.29.12-32

CC BY SA

Abstract

"What is the Alexander Technique?" Those of us who have studied or taught this work have all been asked this question and it is not easy to answer. In one sense, the answer is simple enough: the Alexander Technique is a way of learning to move and do things with less tension—we've seen the many videos and books that depict the Alexander Technique as a form of movement awareness that addresses the problem of misuse in action. The basic image is familiar to all of us: the student is asked to stand in front of a chair and to sit down. Pointing out how the student pulls his head back and arches his back, the teacher then asks him to pause before sitting down, and shows him how to direct the head and neck in order to reduce the harmful tension. By being shown how to perform the action more efficiently, to use the joints instead of muscle tension, the student learns to perform actions more effortlessly, and to notice the tensions and holdings that interfere with free and easy movement.

Introduction

"What is the Alexander Technique?" Those of us who have studied or taught this work have all been asked this question and it is not easy to answer. In one sense, the answer is simple enough: the Alexander Technique is a way of learning to move and do things with less tension—we've seen the many videos and books that depict the Alexander Technique as a form of movement awareness that addresses the problem of misuse in action. The basic image is familiar to all of us: the student is asked to stand in front of a chair and to sit down. Pointing out how the student pulls his head back and arches his back, the teacher then asks him to pause before sitting down, and shows him how to direct the head and neck in order to reduce the harmful tension. By being shown how to perform the action more efficiently, to use the joints instead of muscle tension, the student learns to perform actions more effortlessly, and to notice the tensions and holdings that interfere with free and easy movement.

And yet this form of movement training and way of representing our work falls far short of what Alexander discovered and fails to address its real meaning and significance. When, for instance, Alexander identified the harmful pattern of use connected with his vocal problem, he very quickly realised that, even when he discovered the organization of parts that constituted the primary control, he was not actually able to solve his vocal problem. To apply this knowledge to vocalizing, he had to do more than direct or organize the parts; he had to find out how his system worked as a coordinated whole such that his larynx and throat functioned better. He had to learn why he interfered with this system; and he had to find a way to prevent this interference. This took him far beyond the problem of moving more efficiently and reducing tension; it opened up new insights into how his body worked, about the unconscious and instinctive nature of motor activity, and about how to "think in activity" as the basis for vocalizing in a new and coordinated way. When Alexander was finally able to prevent his habitual misuse in vocalizing, he had achieved a kind of mastery that can only be compared to that of a highly-accomplished martial artist, who is able to perform with a level of skill far beyond that of the normal person.

Yet how many of us—even when we have trained in this work—can apply the principles of Alexander's work in this way to vocalizing or performing some other high-level skill? To understand this, we must understand several key elements in our use, including how muscles work, how the parts coordinate, how we interfere with the coordinated working of these parts, how we think unconsciously, and how to replace unconscious thinking with conscious thinking. Knowing how to do this involves much more than the application of principles in activity or the practice of being aware in action; it represents nothing less than a new stage in human action and reaction based on new discoveries and insights about how we function and about the potential to raise how we function to a more conscious level. This knowledge—which is the real purpose of Alexander's work, as presented in his four books and many papers—is much more than a technique for facilitating movement: it represents a new discipline in the awareness and control of action. In this talk, I'd like to discuss six of the key discoveries upon which Alexander's work is based.

1. Shortening in stature and the primary control

The first discovery Alexander made, and the basis of all his subsequent discoveries, was what he called "the primary control of use" and how he interfered with this. Observing himself in front of a mirror, he saw that, when he vocalized, he pulled his head back, gasped in air, and depressed his larynx. He conjectured that these actions, which he later discovered were present during normal speech, were the cause of his vocal difficulties. Trying to prevent these actions, he found that, if he could stop pulling his head back, he could indirectly affect the other actions. He soon discovered that the tendency to pull back his head was part of a larger pattern of shortening in stature, which included stiffening and tightening in his arms and legs. After another series of experiments, he figured out that, to stop pulling his head back, he must lengthen in stature, but in such a way that the head would go forward and up—a relationship of body parts that he describes as "the primary control of my use in all my activities." This discovery of a primary control, and of the relationships for its proper use, form the foundation for how Alexander's work is now taught.

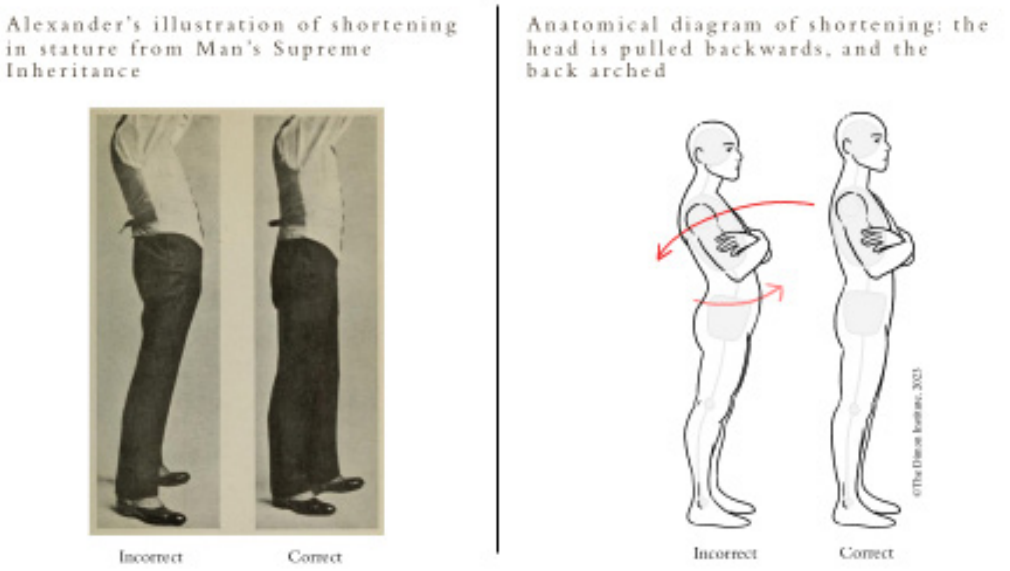

Fig. 1: Shortening of stature (image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©).

But what does it mean to shorten in stature, and how does one lengthen in stature? Most descriptions of Alexander's work answer this question by showing how we pull the head back and shorten in stature when we get out of a chair or perform some other action, and then indicate the basic directions for the neck to release, the head to go forward and up, and the back to lengthen as a way of preventing this. The idea here is that, because we tighten the neck and arch the back, we are creating tension, which we want to reduce by stopping the pulling back of the head and arching of the back. Now of course it is perfectly true that, when we perform these actions, we are creating too much tension, which we want to reduce—and sometimes can reduce—by directing the head and back. But, as we will see in a moment, the body works as a coordinated whole in space and, when we are well coordinated—which is something we can see quite readily in young children—all the parts are working together, and in such a way that the body seems light, efficient, and supported, or what we might call a state of poise. Reducing tension can help with this, but it cannot give us a clear picture of exactly what it means to be coordinated in this way, or what we're doing to shorten in stature—that is, how the parts are actually organized such that we can lengthen, not shorten, and what we are actually doing to interfere with this organization on a daily basis. To accomplish this, we must look not simply at the movement of pulling back the head and arching the back when we sit, stand, or speak, but at how we are organizing ourselves as a whole to accomplish the finished acts, which will give us a clearer picture of how we shorten in stature and, in contrast, what it means to lengthen in stature.

Fig. 2: Co-ordination in a young child. Even while using their hands, young children are able to maintain natural upright support with their head balanced forward and their spine lengthening.

We can see a clear example of this when we sit and begin by pulling the head back and arching the back, which is clearly harmful. But the interference doesn't end there. When we contact the chair and begin to come back from the hips to sit upright, we shorten in stature by throwing the upper back backwards so that the trunk becomes fixed and rigid, interfering with our ability to sit in a naturally supported way. To understand fully what it means to lengthen in stature, we have to identify not just how we shorten in stature when we initiate the movement, but also how we interfere at this last stage of the movement, and what it means to sit in an ongoing supported and lengthened way when we prevent this.

The same traits are clearly evident when we stand from the sitting position. As we come forward in the chair, we clearly pull our heads back and arch our backs. But the problem doesn't end there. As we shift our weight onto our feet and straighten our legs to stand upright, we throw the upper back back, pushing the hips forward and sinking into the legs. We finish the act, as it were, by overdoing the act of extending the trunk and legs and going past the vertical into a kind of bowed and shortened overall posture in which the neck is tightening, the head is pulled back, the ribs are fixed and the trunk shortened, the legs are braced, and the entire upper body is sinking into the legs.

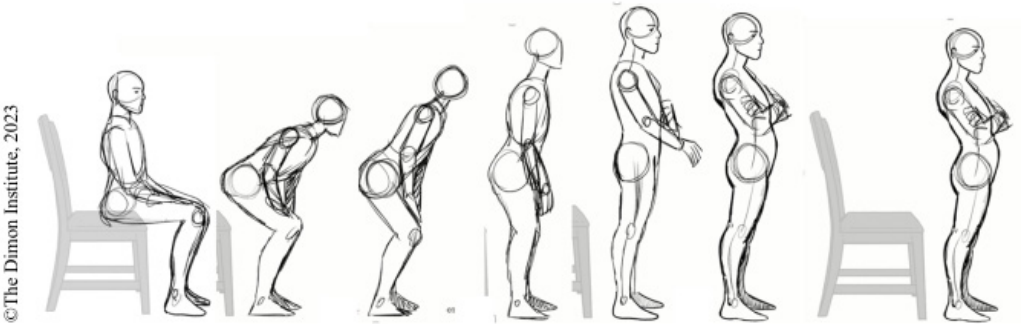

Fig. 3

All this is fairly comprehensible, and many of us can identify some of these tendencies in our students when we teach. Shortening in stature is obvious in sit-stand, so we think it's just about this gross motor movement and how, by aiming the head etc. we can lengthen. We are also shown by teachers how we do this and, when we experience lengthening, we think we've understood it. But how many of us can actually identify when we do this in action, and in addition can reverse this? The truth is that most of us don't learn to actually see this in ourselves and for ourselves. It is this knowledge that led Alexander to his practical knowledge and application of positions of mechanical advantage. We think positions of mechanical advantage are just procedures you show someone so that they can hinge at joints and lengthen their backs. But positions of mechanical advantage are not just useful positions but represent a balanced working of parts such that when we employ them in an intelligent, thoughtful way, we can lengthen instead of shorten.

Resumé
Can you see what you are doing in yourself? If you notice tightening and reducing it to facilitate better movement, this may be helpful but it doesn't represent a real understanding of what it means to shorten in stature and what it means to lengthen in stature with the head going forward and up.

If you don't understand this, you will direct and release in specific ways that do more harm than good, will not be able to properly co-ordinate the system.

2. Direction

In Alexander's account of his discoveries, documented in detail in the first chapter of his book *The Use of the Self*, we saw that Alexander identified several harmful actions he was making with his head, larynx, and breathing connected with vocalizing. These actions were part of a larger pattern of shortening in stature. He realized that, to stop interfering with his voice, he must lengthen in stature, but in such a way that the head went forward and up and the back lengthens and widens—a relationship of body parts that he describes as "the primary control of my use in all my activities." We are, at this point in Alexander's story, only about one third of the way through, and already he has made the critical discovery of the primary control, the cornerstone and defining principle of his work. He has identified the basic pattern of interference with the head/neck/back relationship, the need to prevent these harmful actions when vocalizing, and the basic relationship of parts that constitute the primary control he has defined.

And yet, for all this, Alexander finds that, more often than not, he is unable to successfully apply what he has learned to vocalizing. He checks the three mirrors he is now using and realizes that, when he recites, he is still pulling back his head—"startling proof," he says, that he was doing "the opposite of what I believed I was doing and of what I had decided I ought to do." Continuing to observe himself, he realizes that his efforts to prevent the wrong uses he had observed earlier involved his entire body, and that he was using these other parts in a harmful way that "synchronized" with the wrong use of his head, neck, voice, and breathing, and that this involved a condition of undue muscle tension, particularly in the legs. He makes a big point of this in his account, describing in detail how his former acting teacher, whom he references by name, had taught him to "take hold of the floor with his feet." He said he had done his best to oblige and that, as a result, he had cultivated some particularly harmful habits.

This is where Alexander now launches into a description of what is causing this, which he attributes to instinctive direction. "Man's direction of his use," he says, "was as unreasoned and instinctive as that of the animal." To address this, he says, he must "inhibit the misdirection associated with the wrong habitual use," which would stop this misdirection at its source. The next step "would be to discover what direction would be necessary to ensure a new and improved use of the head and neck…" To do this, he must "project consciously the directions required for putting these means into effect." Here we see that Alexander introduces the idea of consciously projecting messages, or what he called directing, but the question is why? Hadn't he already spent time directing, or at least figured out what the directions - based on the relationship of parts - he had defined were? If so, why did he now need to "project" mental directions—that is, direct in a more mentalistic way? On initial reflection, the answer seems to be that he already knows what the directions are and simply needs to organize them in a more systematic way. He has, after all, identified "the primary control of use in all his activities," which includes the basic directions in terms of relative physical vectors for the neck, head, and back. But he did not actually refer to these organizing movements as "directions" and in fact introduces them here for the

first time. The answer is that it is only now, when he is trying to address the harmful condition of undue muscle tension, that he actually speaks of "projecting messages," and he is doing this in order to establish a new condition in which the parts are not interfered with. In other words, he is introducing what he defines as "directions"for the first time. If this isn't clear, think about the issue Alexander mentions with his legs, which he says he has particularly interfered with. The direction we normally think of with the legs, which he later introduces in teaching others, is to put the knees forward or, as he phrases it elsewhere, to direct the knees forward and away. What exactly does this mean, and is there a way to do this? Arguably, you can release at the back of your neck to let your nose drop, or let your head go up, or even put your head forward. But can you put your knees forward, or let them go away? The truth is that you cannot, especially if, like most people, you are tight and fixed
in the hips and have too much muscular tension in the legs. The only thing one can do in this situation is to project purely mental directions until your hips and legs begin to let go—in other words, direct the knees forward and away. So what was Alexander doing here, and why? The answer is that he was releasing tension in his legs—tension that was quite chronic and habitual, and that required that he project conscious mental messages, divorced from any actual movement, as the basis for releasing the "undue tension" and restoring healthier muscle tone. What is significant here is what he was not doing. He was not discovering the directions for the primary control, or putting them into practice by sending his knees forward while he moved. We know this because he has already described the directions for the primary control, and because he says that he must stop engaging in activity and not do anything at all. What he is doing here is something deeper and much more critical: he is identifying the ways in which his system is interfered with. By giving or mentally projecting messages to the body parts, he is restoring a more toned and lengthened condition of the muscle tissue, which in turn allowed the primary control to work better. In other words, he was restoring and integrating a system that, he now knew, was interfered with and needed to be fully restored if he was going to be able to actually carry out the directions in activity. Doing this, — i.e. simply projecting a series of thoughts in the coherent pattern he identified, as Alexander makes clear at various points in his writings, — was a critical part of the process of understanding his problem.

Direction and non-doing

Directing, he says in the most cogent definition to be found anywhere in his writings, is "the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms." This is not simply a matter of telling or putting the head where to go, and certainly not of creating images such as a head floating up off a string, but of sending defined mental messages. This is something that cannot be put immediately into practice in activity but must first be applied in a non-doing state. This is why we place the student in a position of mechanical advantage—the semisupine position being, of course, a particularly useful one—in which the student can simply think and allow release to happen in a structured way following Alexander's instructions for ordering and repetition of the thoughts. This is not how many people today practice the Technique. The lie-down is a rather casual affair, and the directions are given in a desultory manner, often as a kind of body scanning, without real attention to how the system works as a whole. This is then applied directly to movement without any thought of the "means whereby." If you are, say, pulling your head back and arching your back, you may bring about changes that, when applied to action, result in improvements in performance. But while this is a useful part of the process of helping someone, it misses one of the primary functions of direction, which is to ultimately restore the primary control by giving chronically shortened

muscles a chance to release so that various parts of the system actually let go into length.

One of the biggest reasons why the concept of direction is so easily misunderstood is the word itself. "Direction" refers to a course along which something moves (as in walking in an eastward direction). In teaching, we often use the word in this way, as when we ask someone to think of the head going in a particular direction in space. But this isn't the primary sense in which Alexander uses the word. Another meaning of the word "direction" is "guidance" or "management," as when the director of a play instructs and guides the actors. This definition comes much closer to the way in which Alexander intended to use the word. "When I employ the words 'direction 'and 'directed," he writes, "I wish to indicate the process of projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms…" The word "direction" is clearly used here to refer to the process of projecting guiding orders—another word that Alexander uses instead of the word "direction"—to parts of the body, as the basis for replacing the old or habitual guiding orders.

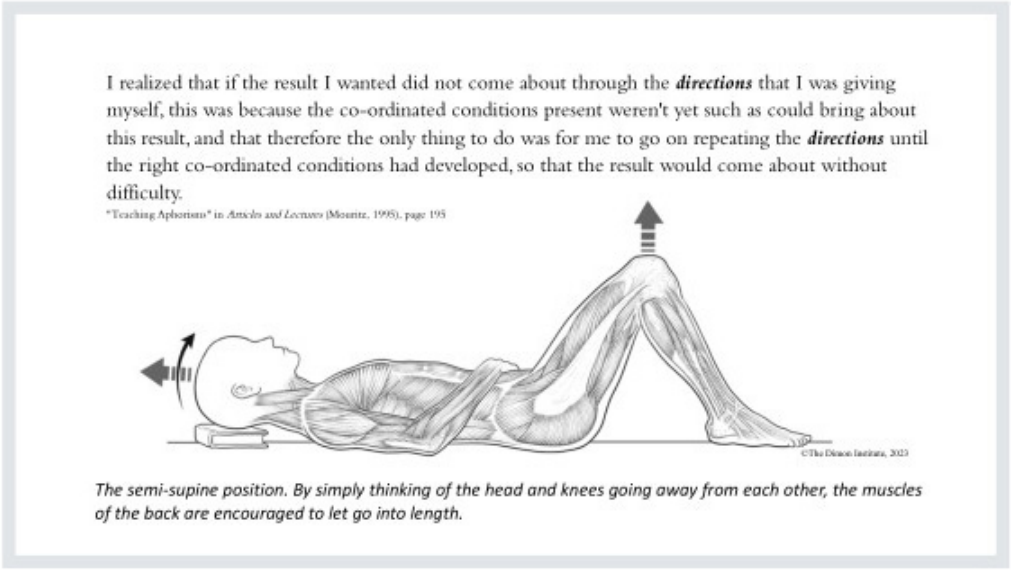

Fig. 4. (Image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

In this context, the idea of directing parts of the body in space as a way of bringing about or demonstrating the proper use of the primary control is misguided and superficial. We can certainly ask someone to release the neck muscles, or guide their head so that, when they move, the head will lead and the body will follow. This process, as we saw previously, is what Alexander called "lengthening in stature" and is an important part of our work. But this alone cannot bring about the proper working of the primary control, which requires a more indirect process of projecting messages to muscles, bringing about deeper changes before attempting to engage in activity. It is because we confuse these two things that our work isnow mischaracterized as a form of body mechanics, posture education, and facilitation of movement when in fact it is none of these. You can give someone useful tips on movement and body mechanics based on release of muscles and guiding someone's head when they move, but this is not going to restore natural function, which can only happen by placing yourself in a position of mechanical advantage and taking the time to send messages to muscles, with or without the help of a skilled teacher. For Alexander, direction is first and foremost about consciously projecting messages to muscles so that misdirected muscular activity can be prevented and replaced with new messages. This, in turn, requires knowledge about the working of the parts and how they can begin to work differently as the basis for restor-

ing the primary control. As this system is restored, by holistically connecting parts to understand its workings, direction then takes on a new and deeper meaning, that of replacing our instinctive way of doing things in activity. At this more advanced stage, direction applies directly to action.

So here is our second discovery, about which we can now say three things:

1. Direction is a thought process. It isn't aiming the head, helping the head, moving the head, and it isn't the actual movement of the head forward and up; it's the thought that allows the forward and up to happen.
2. Direction isn't about movement but about restoring the lengthening of muscles and the working of the whole. This is a very concrete goal, and it isn't just about how you move or how parts move but about establishing a coordinated working of the whole body from head to toe.

There's another part to direction, which goes back to instinctive direction—we'll get to this.

3. Direction is an amazing discovery in its own right. We can think of direction simply as a process designed to bring about a result, like paying attention or doing a vocal exercise. But as a concrete messaging process, it is actually a form of self-governed biofeedback. And because it is related to how the parts of the body coordinate and can be applied in action, it represents nothing less than a conscious way of coordinating the body—an altogether amazing discovery that no one else has ever come close to articulating.

3. Antagonistic Action

We've now seen that the main observable problem in our use is that we pull the head back and shorten in stature, and we saw that, to use ourselves properly, we have to lengthen in stature. We've also seen that, even when we've done this, we continue to send the wrong messages to the entire body, which results in a pattern of undue tension and interference, which Alexander called habitual misuse or misdirection. To address this, he began to give directions to the parts in an organized way, which we've seen is a mental process, which helps to reduce the tension.

But if directing is intended to bring about length in muscles, what exactly does this mean? When one first experiences this, you are likely to realize that muscles were tight and that, for the body to work better, they need to let go. But muscles don't simply need to release piecemeal through relaxation; they need to let go into length, which is a property of how they function.

Perhaps the single most important component of a properly-working primary control is the antagonistic action of muscles. Alexander's concept of antagonistic action is not to be confused with the modern concept of opposing muscle groups. Rather he was talking about a state intrinsic to muscle tissue in which muscles, instead of shortening, naturally lengthen between skeletal attachments. This quality is something that, when I was training, was clearly demonstrated to me by my teachers, who knew what it was and how to bring it about. This principle is absolutely central to Alexander's work, but we have tended to mis-understand it or to gloss over it entirely. Simply letting the head go up and the body to follow, or bringing about specific releases (such as releasing in the front of the hips to let the sit bones contact the chair more fully, or releasing the neck to let the head nod forward), will not establish this condition in the muscles.

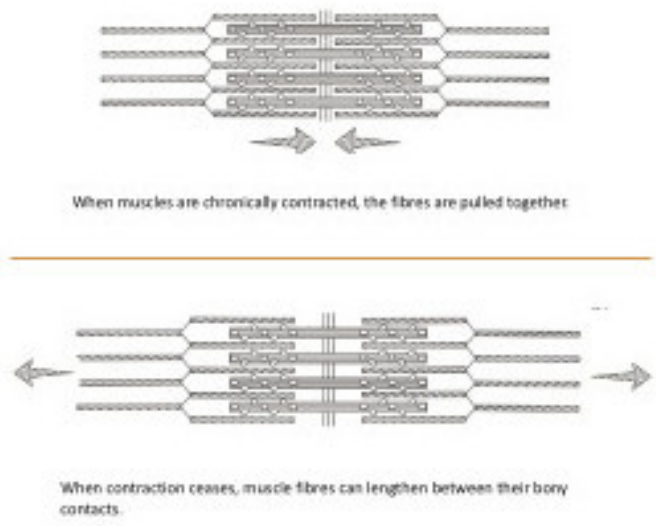

Fig. 5: Model of antagonistic action: Restoring muscle length is not simply a matter of making postural adjustments or stretching shortened muscles. In order to lengthen, the muscles must first stop contracting, which in turn allows them to lengthen. When this happens, they are able to assume their natural length in the context of their bony attachments, triggering stretch and spinal reflexes that cause the muscles to tone up and to resist being lengthened further (image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©).

To function antagonistically, muscles must let go into length, and this can happen only in a holistic context in which the trunk unwinds and the entire back begins to lengthen and widen, with the head and limbs undoing out of the back. This, in turn, can happen only when muscles that are chronically tight begin to release. In a training context this requires daily attention from the teacher, who must monitor and supervise the student's progress, and who must possess the resourcefulness and expertise required to address specific problems such as narrowing in the shoulders or chronically tight legs. To achieve this condition in himself, Alexander spent a lot of time directing because, as he quickly found out, he had interfered quite badly with his system and needed to spend time re-establishing tone and length in muscles. I was told by several first-generation teachers, for instance, that Alexander spent a lot of time sitting and directing his knees away, which is what he did to deal with the tension in his feet and legs, and he had to learn to do this in a sustained way. As he projected the guiding orders in their proper sequence to the various parts of his body, he began to restore a coordinated condition of the whole in which all the parts could work together, and the key element in this was muscle length.

An example of antagonistic action is the condition of the neck muscles in dogs, cats, and young children. If the neck muscles are shortening, this is a harmful condition that needs to be addressed. But releasing the neck isn't just addressing tension; the length in these muscles is actually a condition of bodily support, which we can clearly see in animals. Alexander said very little about this, but it is clearly part of what he knew needed to happen as part of the system working properly.

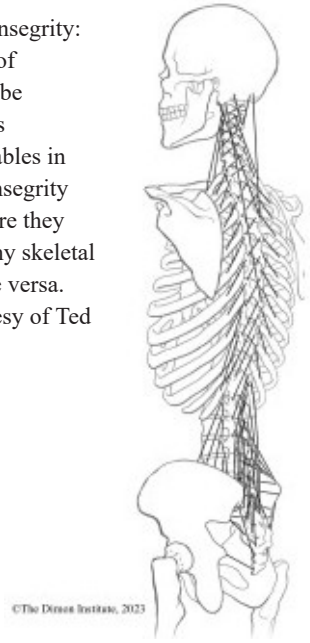

Fig. 6: Bio-tensegrity: The muscles of the spine can be represented as prestressed cables in a complex tensegrity structure where they act on the bony skeletal parts and vice versa. (Image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

Bringing about this condition by giving directions to the related parts, as Alexander explains in his books, is the goal of directing, and can only be achieved through a mental process of giving directions over intensive periods, during and after one trains to teach each trainee to ensure that these changes happen. We can debate what it means to bring about these changes, but such debates are often an excuse for not actually taking the time and making the effort to understand and address these problems in oneself and in one's students. We can deny that there is an objective measure for what it means to lengthen muscles in this way, or whether the science supports Alexander's claim of a primary control. But these again are excuses for a lack of understanding of how the system functions properly and of doing the real work of helping to restore healthy conditions in the student. When the shoulders are narrowed, a knowledgeable teacher can feel this and knows what to do about it; understanding this is part of the teacher's art and needs no other objective measures. As a general rule, however, fewer and fewer teachers and training directors know how to address such problems in a meaningful way, and instead are content to apply the directions as a kind of ritualized procedure or to facilitate movement.

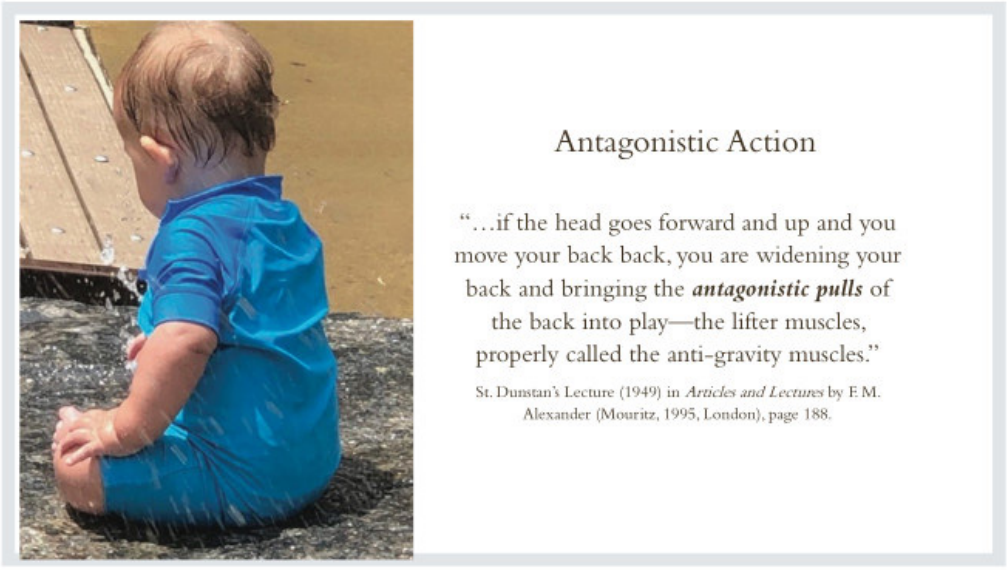

Fig. 8. (Image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

4. Coordination of parts and restored working of the primary control

How does Alexander's discovery of the coordinated working of the primary control actually relate to his vocal problem? It is easy to assume that, because his problem seems to be caused by the harmful pattern of use, simply reducing these harmful tensions—which after all is what this entire account is about—will restore normal vocal function. Yet as we've noted, we can help a student to get in and out of a chair more efficiently, to teach them to stop, to give directions, and to apply the means-whereby principle, and make little appreciable change in their vocal use. Unless we understand how the primary control actually works in a holistic context, we cannot make a real change in the working of specific parts, or appreciate how these specific parts depend upon the coordinated working of the whole.

Let me give an example of why the primary control is much more than a set of directions applied to the head, neck, and back. We all know that our work is very useful in helping people with back problems, reducing the tension we make in action and improving function—something that has been demonstrated in various studies, which appear to show a connection between use and function. But we really can say much more than this. It is rare for young children to have back trouble, and one of the reasons—apart from the fact that they often use themselves quite naturally—is that the back muscles have not become shortened as they do in adults.

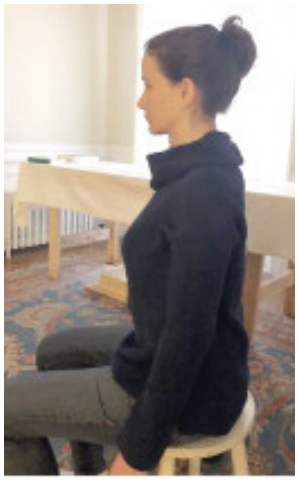

Fig. 9: Elements of the primary control:
1. Lengthening of stature with the back widening
2. Antagonistic action of muscles
3. Toning of muscles
4. Release and activation of specific systems (shoulder girdle, hips, legs, etc)
5. Reflex response of the muscular system as a whole.
6. Integration of parts.
(Image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

To restore a lengthened condition of the back muscles requires knowledge and expertise in how the primary control works as a coordinated whole. If you understand how this system works and how to restore it, the entire back musculature will begin to work in a completely new way. This goes far beyond simply applying Alexander directions directly to movement and release. I work now all the time with students and teachers—even very experienced ones—whose backs are still shortened and narrowed because they have been wedded to some idea of what they think the directions are, some way of directing the head and trunk that they feel represents the Technique, when in fact what they are doing is just a form of guided movement and is not based on a real understanding of the primary control and how it works . Alexander discovered how the musculature throughout the body works with length, and restoring that condition based on the re-educational process of establishing antagonistic action in muscles is what he was after when he worked with students.

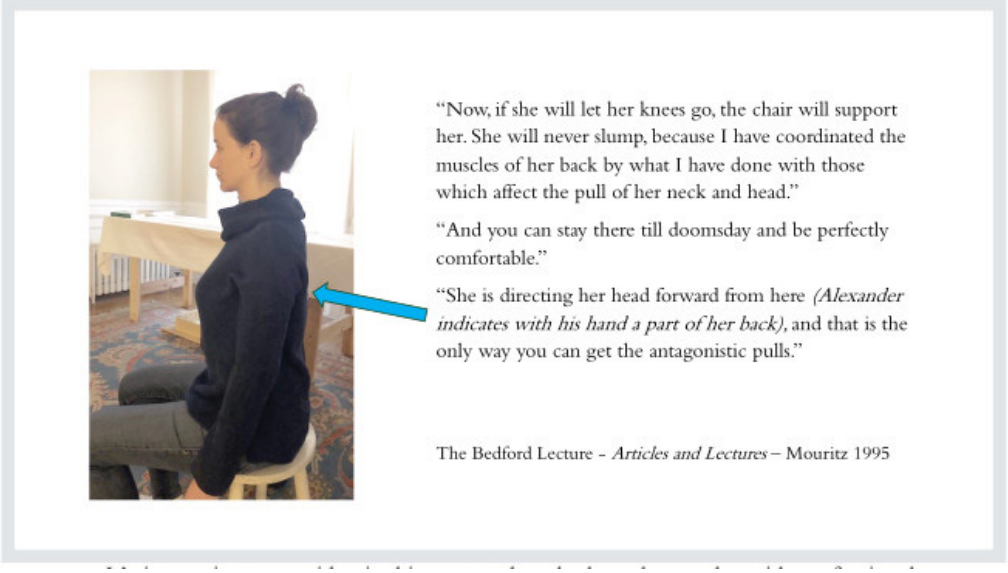

Fig. 10. (Image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

It's interesting to consider, in this context, how bodyworkers and outside professionals view the Alexander Technique. They see it as rather ineffective at addressing chronic tension and effecting muscular release; it is considered instead as a movement technique that doesn't even do a particularly good job at heightening kinesthetic awareness. For several decades after Alexander's death, his work was regarded as a high-level form of awareness training and the preeminent kinesthetic method. Nowadays we are considered as little more than a glorified form of postural correction and enhanced movement method that almost entirely fails to address real issues of chronic tension.

Bodyworkers treat muscles and connective tissue directly with manipulation and stretching. The problem is that they have little notion of how muscles work dynamically in the context of bodily support. Our profession errs in the opposite direction. We are so fixated on the notion of directing the body in space that we underestimate the importance of, and sometimes miss entirely, the idea of muscular release and length - a core tenet of Alexander's work - and so must rely on bodywork textbooks for help. But we will not get the help we need from the bodywork people. Just as we lack a clear understanding that direction doesn't magically replace muscle tension but is a concrete process that brings about release and length in muscles, bodyworkers have the idea that release can be achieved directly with stretching and manipulation. Bodyworkers practice release without direction; without a holistic conception of function we have direction without release. And release of muscle tension, in the context of directed parts, is what the primary control is really about. Our work is not simply about working with a head-trunk relationship, or guiding people in movement with the head leading and the body lengthening, or releasing the neck so that the head goes up and the body follows. It's about a complex musculoskeletal system that has a natural design based on muscle length that needs to be restored, and about ultimately replacing the habitual directions to our muscles that feels normal and replacing it with conscious direction.

Many teachers insist that guiding people in movement based on direction is what Alexander's work is really about, rejecting Alexander's own writings and claims as pedantic and unnecessarily complicated. But these are apologies, not arguments. As Alexander said himself, our work is not about getting in and out of chairs; it's a way of coordinating the system, of understanding what we are doing to put it wrong, and of preventing our harmful ways of reacting and doing things.

Key points:
The parts working properly cannot be addressed simply by giving directions, as in directing the shoulders to widen or the knees to go away. We need to know how they are actually interfered with, what to do about it, and we also need to appreciate that it takes time and muscular release. When I trained, only the most experienced and knowledgeable teachers were able to make such changes. Nowadays it is questionable how many teachers actually know what this is, and a lack of this knowledge means that they will not be qualified to train teachers in Alexander's conception of his technique.

So direction, muscle length, and coordination of parts belong in the re-educational category of restoring the proper working of the primary control when it has been interfered with.

Here we arrive at one of the core elements of Alexander's work, and perhaps the key reason why his work is so misunderstood today, even by many experienced teachers. The pattern of misuse that Alexander discovered in himself, and that we, as teachers and students of his work, address with our hands, is rather obvious, but what it signifies is not. We can work in all sorts of ways with someone, getting them to stop tightening, giving directions, getting them to pay attention. But none of this is going to make any real difference if we don't know how to identify, in a really concrete way, what they are doing to interfere with their coordination. The particular defect Alexander identifies—that of tightening in his legs— is a good example, because this is one

that few of us ever really overcome, or are even able to identify without the help of a teacher with specific knowledge of how the legs work and how to restore length to these muscles. Alexander, of course, had no teacher, so when he identifies this problem in himself, he must figure out what to do about it without assistance of any kind. He realizes that he must spend time sitting quietly while doing nothing, and project orders to specific parts of the body—in this case, the knees. It is at this point in the process, when he spends a great deal of time giving directions, that he begins to really understand how the primary control actually works. Earlier, he has defined the directions for the neck, head, and back in broad terms, but he can't put these directions into practice because there is simply too much interference. It is only now, when he sits quietly and, while refraining from action, projects mental directions, that he is able to begin to restore this system and to experience how the primary control can work properly—a process that, throughout his writings, he refers to as "re-educational." As he does this, he discovers that he is able to restore a coordinated working of the parts based on improved muscle tone, which brings about, in turn, a natural lengthening of the body as a whole in response to gravity. In this sense, the primary control is much more than a principle of head leading and body following, or a set of directions for improved body mechanics. It involves a total, coordinated system working as a reflex pattern that can be reinstated only through the process of giving mental directions for a sustained period of time.

5. Means-whereby

Returning to Alexander's journey of discovery in solving his vocal problem as described in *The Use of the Self*, we saw that, although Alexander figured out the basic organizational principle of the head and trunk early in his investigation, or what he called "the primary control of my use in all my activities," he was not able to maintain this in action. On closer examination, he discovered that the harmful movements were part of what he called his "habitual use" of himself and, in response to this, he formulated a plan for stopping the instinctive misdirection at its source and for replacing it with consciously-projected directions. This resulted in dramatic changes in his overall coordination, and he began to restore normal tone and to experience how his system could work in a more efficient way.

At this point in the story, Alexander had a good grasp of how the primary control works, which in turn gave him a good foundation for directing in activity, or what he called the "means-whereby." Yet, even having developed the procedure for how to do this, he still found it difficult to apply this new means-whereby to speaking, and he needed to figure out why. The answer, he discovers, is that his actions are guided by instinct, and this could not be overcome by being aware, by carrying out the means-whereby principle, or even by giving directions. It is easy, in reading Alexander's account, to assume that, once he identified the harmful actions he made and formulated the directions for the right use of the primary control, he more or less knew what he needed to do to solve his problem and simply needed to figure out how to successfully apply the various principles such as inhibition, direction, and means-whereby. But we must remember that these principles were developed in response to a problem, and this problem, which he hadn't even identified at this stage in the process, was far deeper than words can convey. He realized that his actions took place as a kind of instinctive response to the stimulus to speak, and he couldn't control this response because it was the instinctive or built-in nature of all action, which can't be superseded by stopping, directing the primary control, or being aware in action.

But what exactly is instinct and habit, and why is it so important? Alexander discovered that the way actions take place, or how we carry them out, is fundamentally instinctive or habitual. "I was indeed suffering from a delusion," he wrote, "… that because we are able to do what we 'will to do' in acts that are habitual… we shall be equally successful in doing what we 'will to do' in

acts which are contrary to our habit." He now realized that his way of using himself was deeply ingrained and habitual, and that what had appeared to be a physical problem turned out to be a complex pattern of neuromuscular activity. This habitual use was not only deeply ingrained; it was also a psychophysical pattern of activity that came into play, at an almost entirely unconscious level, once he engaged in activity.

When, for instance, we sit down in a chair, most of us perform this action very harmfully by pulling the head back, arching the back, and tightening in the legs. It doesn't matter how well the body may be working, how aware you may be, and how much awareness you apply to the movement; when you actually start to sit down, you will tighten and shorten your muscles in order to perform the movement. This may seem a very obvious thing to say, especially to those who feel they are aware of their bodies or are practiced in movement techniques. But no amount of body awareness is going to change the fact that, when you actually engage in movement, you will tighten and contract muscles because the habitual nature of the action will take over, in spite of your best intentions.

How then do we perform the movement in a new way, if being aware or trying to perform the action better doesn't work? The simple answer is that we have to focus on the process, to give our full attention to the means and not the end. Any specific action we perform will involve tightening the neck, arching the back and so on, so instead we have to engage in an indirect process, and give our entire attention to this process, as the basis for sitting in a new way. This involves three key elements. First, we have to put aside our end and, as a starting point, make the decision that we will definitely not perform the action, because the intention to perform the action will engage all our wrong habits. Second, we have to give our directions for the new and coordinated working of the body. Third, we have to perform a new movement as the basis for getting toward our goal. In this way, we create a series of steps that gets us to our goal, but in a new and coordinated way not associated with our old habit.

All this is of course easy to say; the difficulty, when we try this on our own, is that we have to do something that feels completely new and unfamiliar, which is why the help of a teacher is so indispensable. If, for instance, the teacher has demonstrated how we can sit without pulling back the head, we will then try to repeat this action, not by adhering to the new principle but by using all our old habits to perform the movement the teacher showed us, thus defeating the purpose of the entire exercise. Trying to do the movement in the new way will simply not work, if we are all the time thinking of doing the movement in the old way, which is what this way of approaching the problem amounts to.

In order to overcome this tendency, we have to think very carefully about what we are trying to do and how to do it. We must think, in a positive way, about what we are actually trying to accomplish. If, for instance, simply bending the knees and trying to pay attention to ourselves as we sit down won't work, what then should we do? The answer is that we have to bend, not only in the knees and ankles but also in the hips, because to lower our body in space requires that we balance over our feet, and if we only bend in the knees, we are not balanced and cannot lower ourselves efficiently. And what does it mean to bend in the hips and knees and ankles? It means that we have to go into the monkey position. The monkey position, in fact, is the foundation for performing the movement of sitting, and for lowering our body in space, in a coordinated way. If after giving directions we assume this position and then continue to give our directions in this position, we have in fact done the first step of the means-whereby principle as it applies to sitting in the chair.

The conceptual factor

In looking at what is involved in attending to the process of performing an action, or what we call the means-whereby principle, one problem that inevitably arises is the issue of conception. When we perform a movement such as sitting down, we don't normally think that we have a conception or idea of how to do it, since we do it so unthinkingly. In fact, we have a very definite albeit unconsciously enacted, idea of how to execute the action, of how the action is to be performed, and this idea or conception gets in the way of performing the action in a new way.

To demonstrate this, suppose that the teacher points out to the student how he is sitting in a harmful way, and shows him how to do the action in a more coordinated way. After demonstrating the action several times, the teacher then asks the student if he can now carry out this action on his own. It might seem that the student will now be capable of carrying out the instructions, which after all do not seem terribly complicated or difficult. Yet this will not be the case. In spite of repeated attempts and demonstrations, the student will find it almost impossible to carry out the instructions without reverting to his usual harmful habits.

The question we have to ask here is, why? The answer, which we have already hinted at, is that, for all intents and purposes, you are asking the student to perform an action that seems completely unrelated to what they consider as sitting. When the teacher demonstrates the action vicariously, it is done for him, which is something he can manage. Doing it on his own is something else entirely. Now you are asking him do something strange and unfamiliar so that, for all intents and purposes, it is not sitting but something else. You are in essence asking him to perform an action that is so different than sitting that, in spite of his best intentions, he won't do it and he won't be able to do it.

This is the why the matter of conception is so critical. The act of sitting, whether we know it or not, has a feeling attached to it. The way we sit feels like sitting. Since the new action is unrelated to how we sit, it doesn't fit our idea or conception of sitting but feels like something different. How then can we sit in the new way, if the act we are being asked to perform seems so unrelated to sitting that we don't even want to try it? This is one reason why learning the monkey position is so important: as we familiarize ourselves with it, we become more and more comfortable with this new act, and recognize its role in sitting. As we learn to do this, we can begin to accept that we have to do something new, and what this something is.

How then does one learn to stop in the face of this stimulus to perform an action, if performing an action refers to something we do in a fundamentally habitual way? The answer is that one must give directions for a period of time, as the basis for approaching the activity in a new way. When you are able to get the directions working, and to keep them working, you are ready to apply this in action, and doing this—and not simply performing monkey with a bunch of directions added on—is the heart and soul of the means-whereby. When we perform an action, we will send the old messages, and this is why we have to spend so much time thinking in preparation for doing something. This process of thinking is the heart and soul of the means-whereby, which is not just about focus on how we perform an action but on the process of giving directions. When we perform an action, the desire to send the old messages will be huge; to make sure that this does not happen and that the new messages come through, we must be sure not to perform the usual action and, instead, focus on the process—a "flank movement," as John Dewey put it. This also is part of the means-whereby. The means-whereby principle, most of all, is a thinking process, the principle of paying attention to the process of thinking, and of breaking an action down while thinking, in order to keep the old directions from taking over. The means-whereby is not just the monkey position applied to sitting but the process of thinking consciously in action. And none of this can make sense without knowing how the primary control works and how to restore it. It is only when the primary control is restored that we are able to see what the real issue is.

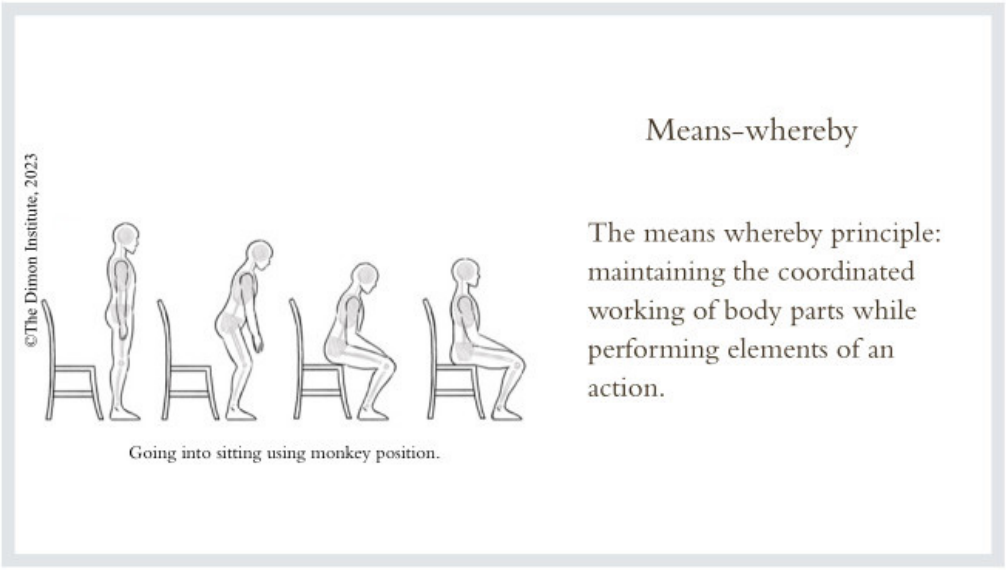

Fig. 11. (Image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

Directing in this way is a new kind of process—one in which we humans are quite unversed. It is relatively easy, when we are sitting quietly, to learn how to direct. It is much harder to do this for sustained periods and maintain a series of directions as part of a newly coordinated state. To maintain this series of directions in the face of a real stimulus to do something is harder still. Here, the desire to do, the tendency to become preoccupied with the intended action, will be far stronger than the intention to direct, so that we must project the directions, as Alexander says, many times before we can expect to maintain them in action.

All this may sound obvious, but most students and even teachers of this work don't see this because they never get to the point of restoring the working of the primary control sufficiently to appreciate what they are really doing in activity. Only when one spends periods of time doing nothing, giving directions, and bringing about a new integration of the system, is it possible to see that, at the moment of deciding to do something, these improvements will be lost. At this point, one is faced with the very real challenge of learning to maintain the new directions in the face of our ingrained habitual way of doing things. In this context, direction is no longer about bringing about improvements but about learning to replace the subconscious messages with conscious ones, which represents something more than movement or awareness but a new stage in human evolution.

What then does it mean to direct? Is it about restoring the system or about replacing our unconscious direction with conscious guidance and direction? The answer is that it is both. To rectify the harmful, misdirected condition of the muscular system, we must first learn to direct in a non-doing state so that muscles have a chance to release, which allows muscles to resume a more elastic state and the whole system to re-organize. It then becomes possible to direct in activity, and to begin to maintain these directions even when confronted with a stimulus. As we learn to do this, we can apply these directions more and more successfully in activity, which is of course where they are meant to be applied. In other words, we direct both for the purpose of restoring the system and for the purpose of performing actions in a new way, but we must first do one in order to do the other.

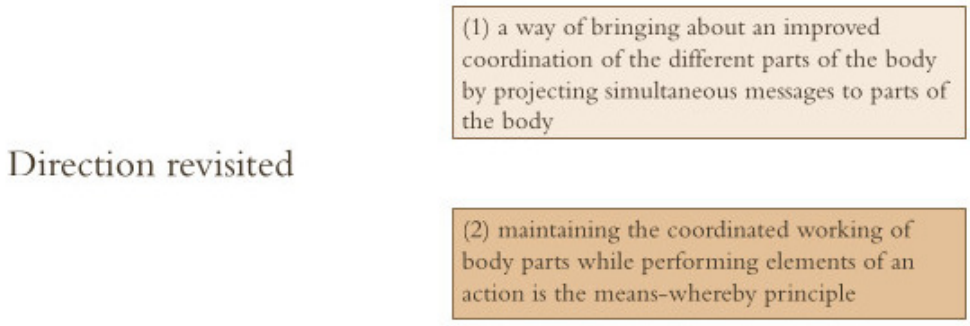

Fig. 12. (image courtesy of Ted Dimon ©)

Key points:
• Conscious direction replaces old direction; when you can do this you are achieving conscious control.
• It's not just about prevention but also about replacing the old direction, which gives it a kind of evolutionary significance because we are really speaking about a stage in evolutionary development when instinctive direction is replaced by conscious direction. This is the real means-whereby, which is not simply about directing the head/neck/back while you focus on monkey.

6. Conscious prevention and control

In the last section, we discussed the importance of paying attention to the means-whereby as a way of overcoming our habitual manner of performing actions. As we saw, this is not simply a matter of breaking an action down into constituent parts, but requires a completely new approach to the performance of actions that relies not on feeling but on thinking. It also requires that we step outside of our usual conception of how to perform the action, with the result that we will be doing something that feels new and different and even unrelated to the end we are trying to achieve.

We now come to the final acts of the drama laid out in the chapter "Evolution of a Technique" —the point where Alexander identified his harmful vocal use as it actually happened and finally succeeded in preventing it. He was able to do this, he says, when he finally realized that he was relying on his sense of feeling and that, at the critical moment, he reverted to his habitual use. When he was able to maintain the new directions right through the moment when he actually began to vocalize, he was able to prevent this misdirection, with the result that he was able to vocalize in a completely new way. The question is, why was he not able to do this sooner? The answer is that, once we have the intention to act, we do things according to our habit, even if we choose to do otherwise. Habit, in this context, is not simply the way we perform an action, but the fact that it takes place as a kind of unconscious reflex reaction to the stimulus to act. Alexander recognized this phenomenon fairly early on in his investigation, but he didn't realize its full significance until he was able to bring about the improved working of his system and then found, to his dismay, that he still reverted to his old direction when faced with the stimulus to do something, or what he called a subconscious or instinctive control.

If there is one idea that is largely unaddressed in Alexander's work, it is the concept of sub-conscious or instinctive control. This idea, in fact, is so little understood that it is virtually ignored or glossed over in most of the literature on our work; yet it represents the single most important

theme in Alexander's written works. When we carry out an action, we do this in response to a decision, whether we make this decision consciously or not. This quite understandably gives us the feeling that we are in charge of our actions. What Alexander discovered was that he was a not in charge and that, when faced with the stimulus to do something, he always reverted to his habitual response. The only way to deal with this, he said, was to refuse to act, or to withhold consent to the stimulus, which would hold in abeyance the age-old or instinctive response and give him a chance to strengthen the new or conscious direction of the system.

In this context, inhibition takes on a new level of significance. In our work, we often put inhibition at the front of an activity—stopping or pausing before we do something. This is not entirely wrong, because of course the student, at the beginning stages of learning, must be asked to stop before doing something, or else we could hardly expect to bring about improvements in his or her use. But pausing in this way completely fails to do justice to the problem, as if all we need to do is to pause before we start to get out of the chair and all will be well. If it were that simple, Alexander would have solved his problem relatively easily, since he already knew how the primary control had to work and only needed to stop his old way of doing things and replace it with the new use. He quickly learned that this didn't work. The real issue, as he says quite clearly in his account and indeed throughout his books, is that the guidance of our actions is instinctive, and that the entire force of our evolutionary development is behind this habitual and instinctive use. The only way to overcome this is, first, to gain experience in giving conscious directions as the basis for bringing about an improved working of the primary control. Next, he must refuse to consent when the idea of reciting came to him. This ability to stop in the face of a stimulus is the real meaning of inhibition and, as we can see in Alexander's account, it doesn't come at the beginning but at the end—or at least at a rather advanced stage—of the process. This is why, when we define inhibition as the pause before action, this not only over-simplifies but absolutely trivializes the real meaning and significance of Alexander's work (see for instance how Alexander defines inhibition in Chapter 5 of *The Universal Constant in Living*). In Alexander's personal account, inhibition doesn't even figure into the equation until, at about the halfway point in his narrative, he recognizes that he is at the mercy of his subconscious responses and begins to come to grips with the enormity of the problem. In this context, stopping takes on a whole new significance. He is not stopping simply to remember his directions, to pause before performing the action, or to maintain his awareness. Stopping represents the process of confronting, and preventing, the entire subconscious process underlying his misdirected actions, enabling him finally to prevent this subconscious activity and to replace it with conscious direction, opening the way to a new and conscious stage in the guidance and control of action.

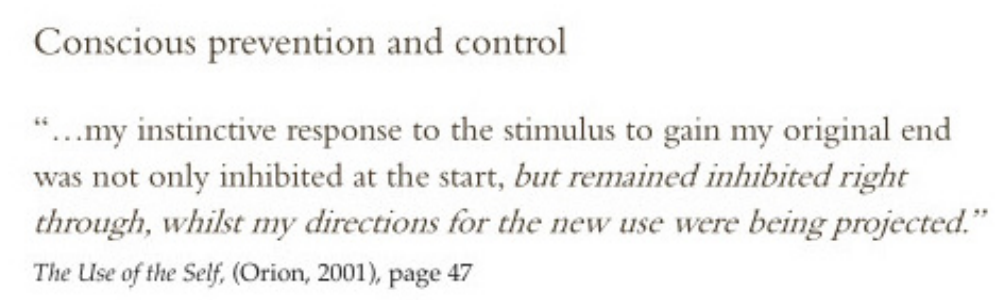

Fig. 13.

This is rarely how we teachers view Alexander's work in general, which we think of mainly in terms of being aware in action. We thus fail to address the much deeper problem of habitual activity, or what Alexander called "subconscious guidance and control." This term is not just fancy theorizing. Our actions take place at a subconscious level, and this is the fundamental problem that Alexander discovered in himself, long after he discovered the primary control. This is why the core problem of our work is not simply to have the experience of releasing, going up, lengthening, or even being aware while moving, since we can do all these things and still miss this critical issue. The fundamental problem of our work is to identify how the actions we make are subconscious and habitual—a fact that only becomes apparent when, having taken the time to work in a prolonged and sustained manner on directing and means-whereby, we are in an improved condition and can see what happens when we return to activity. It is only when we begin to fully restore the working of the primary control that we can recognize this deeper problem in ourselves; in the absence of this, we get stuck in thinking that going up and improving how we perform actions is the key to this work, which is one reason that we become wedded to our teachers and the experience they give us: we never get to the point of fully recognizing what we are doing to put things wrong in ourselves. No teacher can give us what is required to solve this problem, because we are creating the problem ourselves. The only real solution is to learn to stop the unconscious activity that puts the system wrong. It is in this context that we must learn what it means to stop and, in so doing, to recognize the deeper problem our work is meant to address and its profound significance as an educational process. The problem isn't that we need to slow down, to be aware, or to move with the head leading. We have to identify our habitual and harmful way of doing things, and the need to learn to withhold consent as the basis for preventing our harmful habitual use and learning to perform actions at a new and conscious level.

Key points:

• If you're teaching direction and head balance and not addressing actual interference, you're not doing FM's work.

• The real meaning of inhibition is that, when we've learned how the system works in a co-ordinated way, we will revert to our habitual use. To prevent this, we have to learn to stop, even when actually performing an action. This is where inhibition really comes in at the most meaningful level. Half of our work is about restoring the primary control; half is about prevention in action.

• Most people never identify the prevention problem because they are so busy glomming direction with action that the whole thing becomes just directing in activity, without any real restoring and without anything real to prevent.

• When we speak of action, we are speaking of something that is both physical and mental. This is one of the most significant and profound of FM's discoveries, yet in all the years I've done his work, there has been almost no discussion of this issue, which has been dumbed down and ignored in favor of simplistic definitions and cheap marketing. When we see that the old direction happens in response to the idea to do something, we now have a problem that is not about the body per se, nor movement, but about the instinctive nature of behavior, which is what this work is really about… because all the physical problems and issues mask this deeper problem of instinctive direction.

Conclusion: the real meaning of Alexander's work

The Alexander Technique, as taught today, has little resemblance to the real work of its founder. When Alexander started out to study his vocal problem, he made a deep and sustained study of how his body worked in action, how to coordinate it properly, and how to prevent it from malfunctioning by learning to replace subconscious with conscious direction. This process was based on his discovery of a basic pattern of head/neck and back which we, as teachers, look at and work with.

But merely working with this pattern by teaching people to get in and out of chairs, or to move with more ease, will not solve the problem of use, as if we only need to study these directions and we can improve someone's use. We must gain personal experience and real knowledge of how this system works, based on an understanding of how it is designed, as well as the mental process of projecting conscious directions as the basis for restoring its function. This is something that fewer and fewer teachers do, and fewer training directors teach, mainly because we have studied very briefly and then gone on to teach. For this reason, few of us today have the depth of knowledge Alexander had. We study ourselves for three years and then tend to focus on teaching, without continuing the process of self-study that Alexander himself went through, or making the necessary personal investment required to lead to a better understand of our work. This is truly sad because, whatever we may think, Alexander's work is not about teaching and hands-on work but about knowledge of our own use, based on the study of our own use. And it is only based on this—not on hands-on work, or simplified concepts of going up—that we become teachers with real knowledge and depth.

Another compelling reason why our work has become oversimplified is market pressure, which causes us to oversimplify various elements, without regard to the real meaning of its founder's discoveries, which go far beyond methods, marketing, and hands-on work but represents a breakthrough in human evolution. As one of the founders of AmSAT, I am somewhat embarrassed about the fact that, as a national organization, we spend a great deal more time focusing on marketing and promoting ourselves as somatic practitioners than we do on articulating and advancing the discoveries and insights on which our work is based. Can you imagine how medicine would look today, if all that the medical people did was to promote their doctors and the treatments they provide? This is not in fact how medicine proceeds. There is research, study, papers are written, new theories advanced which are based on former grounded theory and practice—in fact, there is so much going on that, whatever else we may think of the medical profession, they put us to shame in terms of their actual standards and training and background. Worse, we continue to promote our work based on cheap imitations of Alexander and actually insist we have something important to say. It is no wonder that, in this climate, it is getting increasingly difficult to find, in the current state of the profession, what the "something important" actually is.

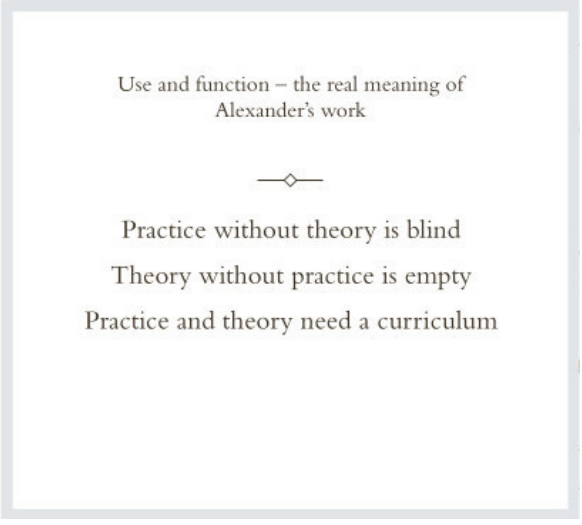

Fig. 14.

Theory, practice, and curriculum

I said at the beginning that our work is based on real discoveries, and it is not enough to speak in terms of principles. Why? You can know something about the head trunk relationship and yet not see how you interfere in yourself, or fully comprehend how this relationship actually works. You can teach directions, or apply them to action, and yet have no idea what the directions actually mean in terms of restoring the primary control, and so on. Without an understanding of the discoveries on which they're based, you have a completely watered-down idea of our work. To be a proper field, real theory is needed, guided by Alexander's own experience and writings, linked to coherent practice and defined stages of mastery of his Technique.

Knowledge of Alexander's discoveries is also reflected in the kinds of self-knowledge that they lead to, which are definable stages in one's own growth and understanding. If there is real knowledge to be gained, based on real discoveries, then we need a concrete curriculum for achieving this knowledge. For our practice to endure, it cannot be based simply on a bunch of principles that are linked to Alexander's theory as expressed in his books. The practice, based on disciplined self-study, must be grounded on a solid theoretical foundation. This, in turn, requires the development of a fully-articulated curriculum based on the theory and practice.

Because we look at our work primarily in terms of teaching and not, as in Alexander's case, at the study of our own use, we have lots of ideas about getting people to loosen up. We think if you get the body to lengthen, bring about release, guide the person in movement, and thereby make improvements—all of which involve working with the pattern of use that interferes with the primary control—you are therefore addressing the person's use. But the Technique is not a form of direction and release in movement. The very notion that we are a method, with different styles of teaching, misses the much more fundamental point that Alexander made a series of discoveries of far-reaching significance, and as long as we teach this work purely as a method, will we never be able to fully grasp or convey to others what these discoveries actually are. Alexander's work is not a method for directing body parts in space, becoming aware of yourself in action, improving posture, or even directing the primary control. It is a method based on knowledge of how the body works, how to restore this working, and how to prevent the misdirection of this system in activity. As such, it is a breakthrough in health, education, and psychology and not simply a method for moving more easily. People who represent the Alexander Technique as a form of movement awareness, body mechanics, body mapping, posture training, or emotional work may be teaching in Alexander's name, but they are not teaching his work.