

Mindfulness in 3D

The Alexander Technique for the 21st Century.

Peter Nobes

Preface to the new edition.

In 1964, Lulie Westfeldt, one of the first teachers to graduate from FM Alexander's original teacher-training school, published a book entitled *F. Matthias Alexander: the Man and his Work*. Shortly after, Walter Carrington – another of the first-generation teachers – reported that the book had "...not attracted much notice apart from two rather poor reviews in the *Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph*..."

Gone are the days when Alexander books get reviewed in national newspapers! Fortunately, however, it is now possible to see many more reviews online.

Most of the reviews of the first edition of this book were very positive. "We finally have a book that speaks the honest truth about what the Alexander Technique actually is. This book is a joy to read." And "I highly recommend this book and encourage others to embrace this work. It will change your life! Thank you, Peter, for sharing the essence of this practice!" That's about as good as it gets, especially coming from two Alexander Technique teachers.

The review in *STATNews*, the magazine of the mainstream professional body for Alexander teachers, starts "This is a wonderful little book that belongs on every AT bookshelf." As a first-time writer, "Funny, clever and fresh", posted on Facebook by a trainee Alexander teacher, was gratifying.

There were, of course, also some negative reviews, which did at least have the benefit of highlighting some of the common misconceptions that tend to dog the technique.

A one-star review on Amazon says: "Won't cure your back pain – or anything else." But contrary to popular belief, Alexander Technique is not about curing back pain. There is nothing about curing back pain in FM Alexander's books, so why would there be in mine?

As I say in Chapter One, medical science has concluded that the Alexander Technique is highly effective for back pain. But it isn't a treatment, or a cure. And even if the Alexander Technique did 'cure' back pain, it's not possible to learn it from a book, despite what some other publications might suggest.

You can probably learn good posture from a book and you can, maybe, learn to release muscle tension from a book. You can learn to sit and stand differently but you cannot learn the Alexander Technique from a book. Beware of books that say you can.

Another review starts “There is nothing about how to apply the technique...” There is also nothing in FM Alexander’s own books about how to apply it. He even says “... it always must be clearly understood that the correct sensory experiences to be acquired by means of this technique cannot be described in writing or by way of the spoken word in such a way as to be of practical value.”

Criticising an Alexander book for not saying how to apply it is a bit like criticising a book on the benefits of cycling for not giving you instructions on how to balance a bike.

Why can’t the Alexander Technique be learnt from a book? Because it involves changing HOW we do things, and if we try to change the HOW – the “means-whereby” in FM Alexander’s terminology – without someone showing us what the new means-whereby is, we’ll be using the old, familiar, means-whereby to try to change our means-whereby, and nothing will have changed.

Until we know what the new way is, how can we look for it? The actual experience of an Alexander lesson is not what it looks like; it’s not what most people think it’s going to be like. A first experience of the Alexander Technique is frequently unlike anything most people have ever done.

As I say in the book, some ‘traditional’ Alexander teachers use ‘chairwork’ as a teaching method, and it is very easy to mistake the point of it as learning how to stand and sit well. But what they are teaching is not a different way of getting out of a chair, it’s a way of switching on a mind/body aliveness, which leads to natural movement and to standing and sitting effortlessly.

That cannot be described – it has to be experienced.

The effortlessness can, perhaps, be described, but not how to bring it about. Frank Pierce Jones said in *Freedom to Change* about his first experience of the Alexander Technique with FM’s brother, AR Alexander:

He made a few slight changes in the way I was sitting (they seemed quite arbitrary to me and I could not remember afterward what they were), then, asking me to leave my head as it was, he initiated the upward movement without further instruction. Before I had a chance to organize my habitual response, the movement was completed and I found myself standing in a position that felt strangely comfortable. I was fully conscious throughout the movement, and it was a consciousness, not of being moved by someone else – Alexander appeared to be making no effort whatever – but by a set of reflexes whose operation I knew nothing about.

In addition to the reflex effect, the movement was notable for the way time and space were perceived. Though it took less time than usual to complete the movement, the rate at which I moved seemed paradoxically slower and more controlled and the trajectories that my head and trunk followed were unfamiliar. The impression was that of a sudden expansion in both dimensions, so that more time and space were available for the movement.

Try learning that from a book! It would be, as Jones says, quoting Aldous Huxley – another client of FM Alexander’s – like describing the colour red to someone who was colour blind.

So, what is the point of a book on the Alexander Technique? Firstly, it can show you why it is worth pursuing. As Walter Carrington said: “It is a pity that we are always more anxious to describe the Technique than to explain the problems with which it is designed to deal.” Here is a book that, rather than attempt to describe the Technique, talks about all the reasons why your life would be enhanced if you found a good teacher and had some lessons.

Secondly, I wrote this book partly in response to all the books that suggest that they *can* teach you the Alexander Technique or cure your back pain, and ‘coffee table’ books that show ‘correct alignment’ or say that the Alexander Technique is about posture or bodywork: books that miss out the crucial *mind* part of the mind/body unity that the Alexander work teaches.

Thirdly, FM Alexander said: “We must always remember that the vast majority of human beings live very narrow lives, doing the same thing and thinking the same thoughts day by day, and it is this very fact that makes it so necessary that we should acquire conscious control of the mental and physical powers as a whole...”

There is very little about “acquiring conscious control of the mental powers” in most Alexander books.

I haven’t tried to put into words the heightened consciousness and the mind/body alertness that the Alexander Technique leads to. But I have provided ideas on how to stop doing the same thing and thinking the same thoughts day by day, ideas on how to get off autopilot and start making conscious choices. Or how to, in the words of a description of this book on Amazon, “Learn How to Stop Doing Literally Everything Wrong.”

I suspect most people assume that they are fully conscious and that they make choices, but in their first Alexander lesson they discover how much ‘more’ consciousness is available, and how little they actually make choices in their lives.

I would add to FM Alexander’s statement that most people think the same thoughts etc that, in my experience, most people think the same *way* and do things the same *way* day after day. They look at their phone the same way every time it pings. Sit curved over their PC the same way every day at work. Turn over the pages of the newspaper with the same hand movement every time they read it. Pull the same face every time they think. Take exactly the same route to the office. Stand the same way every time they talk. Have the same reaction every time another driver cuts them up. Make the same judgement every time they hear a particular accent.

These are all habits. We do need habits: when I set out to drive somewhere I don’t want to have to work out whether I am supposed to straddle the white lines on the motorway or stay between them.

I do want to ‘automatically’ drive between the white lines. But we let the bit of us that does things ‘automatically’ take over inappropriate parts of our lives, limiting our aliveness and creativity, causing us pain and damage, and even endangering our lives.

I heard someone talking on the radio about ‘negative hallucination’, which sounded really exciting until I realised it meant little more than not noticing the lamp post in front of you when you are walking along, frowning at your phone. Ouch!

Since writing this book, I have seen a Phone Zombie step into the road and get knocked down by a bicycle, and another one scurry onto the wrong end of an escalator and get flung onto her back with her legs in the air. Fortunately for her she was wearing nice underwear that day.

I’m not keen on FM’s wording. I think most people reading “control over the physical powers” will think it means making conscious decisions about, or thinking about, or making new choices about what their bodies are doing. Actually, it’s about consciously choosing to switch on mind/body alertness, then “get out of the way” and let our bodies do things naturally.

‘Body’ habits are not body habits, so it’s pointless trying to change what your body does. Muscles don’t do things on their own; they tighten because nerve signals tell them to, and most nerves come from the brain. When you curve over your PC, it’s not your body that’s curving. You are curving your body. Or, more accurately, you – mind/body – are curving. You don’t need to stop your back from curving; YOU need to choose not to curve.

I got an email today from someone interested in the Alexander Technique because she wants to ‘connect to her body more’. I can help her with that, but not in the way that she expects; her mind and body ARE already connected. They are one. She has to learn to stop habitually separating them, by making new choices. New choices are made in the mind, not the body.

There’s often a sense of being ‘out of control’ when we start to drop our habits, even though we are actually more in control of ourselves. This feeling of entering the unknown can be scary. Like learning to balance a bike, it is a sensory experience that can’t be explained. It involves trusting an unconscious part of ourselves.

I said that a first experience of the Alexander Technique is unlike anything most people have ever done. One of my trainee teachers said that my book “maps out the territory of a new world. It can’t take you to that world but it can show you it’s there and give you a sense of its shape and potential.” It reminded me that one of my teachers, more than quarter of a century ago, used to say that the Alexander work leads to unknown territory.

It’s a territory where we stop doing the same things and thinking the same thoughts day by day. Territory where we have improved posture and no back pain, but, more importantly, where we are fully conscious and in charge of our own lives.

Read the book - then go and find yourself a good teacher.

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Peter qualified with STAT and is now a member of ATI. When he isn't teaching Alexander, he builds wooden boats and then rows, paddles and sails them.

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