

# The ALEXANDRIAN

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## EDITORIAL

by Ron Dennis

To leaf through Hartvig Nissen's *A B C of the Swedish System of Educational Gymnastics*\* is to have at a glance a vivid insight into the postural values of the era in which F.M. Alexander began his work:



It is important to realize that these values or ideas are real entities, transmitted by language and culture from one generation to the next just as surely as genetic characteristics. The difference is, of course, that while we cannot change our genetic inheritance, we can change our ideas; this ability is "man's supreme inheritance," the evolutionary gift to which Deborah Caplan refers in this issue's lead article. Later in the issue, Joan Frost again calls our attention to the power of ideas—"culturally-induced conceptions," as she calls them—in her analysis of the work ethic and the Alexander Technique.

Also in the issue, two new books on the Alexander Technique, those of Judith Stransky and Michael Gelb, are reviewed by Walter Carrington and Frank Ottiwell, respectively. A further note on these reviews: Judith Stransky is an American-trained Alexander teacher, Michael Gelb is British-trained. This past summer, when their books came to our attention, an editorial decision was made to solicit a British reviewer for the American's work, and vice-versa, in the spirit of promoting dialogue among Alexandrians of diverse backgrounds.

We continue our historical coverage of the Alexander literature by reprinting H.M. Kallen's review of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* from *The Dial* of June 6, 1918. An early pupil of Alexander's in the U.S., Horace Kallen (1882-1974) was a philosopher and educator, one of the founders of the New School for Social Research in New York City, and an outstanding leader in the American adult education movement.

\*Subtitled *A Practical Hand-Book for School Teachers and the Home*. Boston: Educational Publishing Company, 1891. Reprinted in *Health, Physical Education and Recreation Reprint Series*, Roger K. Burke, Consulting Editor (Brown Reprints, 1970).

## The Alexander Technique: Education for the Aching Back

by Deborah Caplan, M.A., R.P.T.

Back pain is one of the most common yet perplexing conditions encountered by the medical profession. Whether the cause (e.g., disc protrusion, muscle tension, arthritis, spinal curvatures, etc.) is difficult or easy to determine, providing effective treatment is often the major problem.

Herein, I believe, lies the explanation: most patients with back pain need to be *educated* in addition to receiving any indicated treatment; educated in correct use of the back in daily activities. Such instruction should be an integral part of all treatment programs. Few people with back pain realize that they often sit, stand or bend incorrectly and thereby re-injure the back and prevent it from healing.

During the many years I have worked as a physical therapist, teaching the Alexander Technique to patients with back pain has proved to be one of my most rewarding experiences. The benefits of Alexander's work are manifold, and I want to mention a few ways in which I find it of particular value to back pain sufferers. The first has to do with an important discovery Alexander made while developing his Technique: he was having a problem with the way he used one part of himself, his voice, but found he could not solve this problem without correcting the way he used his *total* self. This approach—dealing with the totality to solve a specific problem—is particularly valuable when treating back pain. A problem may manifest itself in one part of the back (the lumbosacral disc, to give a common example), but cannot be expected to become better permanently unless the entire body is used in a well-organized way during all activities. Lessons in the Alexander Technique provide this emphasis on correct use of the entire body, and simultaneously help increase the beneficial effects of any physical therapy or other treatment prescribed.

The Alexander Technique provides a solution to another problem relevant to back pain. It is true that many back problems are caused or aggravated by mechanical stresses placed on our vertical spines. However, I disagree strongly with those medical specialists who believe back pain is the inevitable price we pay for the luxury of walking on two feet. The fault lies not with gravity or our uprightness, but with inadequate use of an evolutionary gift: that of conscious awareness and control of our supporting musculature. The Alexander Technique teaches us how to use this conscious awareness to eliminate harmful use and replace it with beneficial use. This skill is valuable for all to have. For those with back pain it is often a necessity.

(continued on page 4, col. 1)

## The Alexander Technique: Joy in the Life of Your Body

by Judith Stransky with Robert B. Stone, Ph.D.  
Beaufort Books, 1981, 308 pp., \$14.95 hardbound

W.H.M. Carrington, Reviewer

This is an attractively designed and well-presented book that is sure to be popular. It suggests things to do, and feelings to explore, and altogether promises insights into an intriguing subject that has always seemed tantalizingly difficult to grasp, and of which so much that has been written has seemed paradoxical and confused. I wish that I could recommend it; but I cannot assert that it gives a reliable description of the Alexander Technique.

Admittedly, the Technique is not easy to write about, nor is it easy to explain without recourse to practical demonstration. It demands the acceptance of a principle (the principle of *prevention*) that strikes many people as unattractively negative, and contradicts many of our fixed beliefs and preconceptions. It also proposes the adoption of practical procedures that are not only startlingly unfamiliar, but quite unappealing as well. Simply, it invites us to find out what we do wrong that causes our troubles, and then to stop, or ensure that we refrain from doing these things. It enjoins that we should be aware and observant of what we do wrong, but at the same time, it urges us to act in accordance with reason, and to disregard our feelings, so that we adventure into the unfamiliar and the unknown without seeking the comfort and reassurance of feeling "natural" and "right". These are simple things but they are not easy: most people find them unattractive, and would much rather be given things to do and things to feel.

Judith Stransky responds to this difficulty by introducing the work of Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais whose approach, she says, goes hand-in-hand with the Alexander philosophy. She gives some "exercise-movements" to cultivate "Awareness Through Movement" as Dr. Feldenkrais recommends. This would not have been Alexander's recommendation: he did, indeed, know Feldenkrais (but who said that Feldenkrais had lessons from him?)\* In fact, he had lessons from me until the day that Alexander saw his newly published book, *Body and Mature Behaviour*, and told me to desist. Alexander was emphatic about the danger of confusing two incompatible principles and considered Feldenkrais's approach to be gravely misleading. The principle of prevention does not accord well with the principle of doing and feeling.

Judith Stransky says that "there are many approaches to good use": Alexander would have said that he found only one, through the observance of the principle of prevention, through the practise of non-doing, and the conscious employment of the primary control.

She says that the essence of his work is non-doing: and this would be true, if you understand by "non-doing", refraining from doing the wrong thing. (Alexander did not advocate or practise "quietism", but very much the reverse.) She also says, quite correctly, that "the feelings we have when we are misusing ourselves are not reliable"; yet, the next section of the book is headed, "Simple Ways to Get the Alexander Technique Feeling." If our feelings are not reliable, what is the point of giving people something to do, and then asking them how they feel?

(continued on page 4, col. 2)

## Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique

by Michael Gelb - Introduction by Walter Carrington  
Delilah Books, 1981, 146 pp., \$12.95 hardbound

Frank Ottiwell, Reviewer

My first impression of this book was that of a very handsome and pleasing object, unusually well put together, with good substantial paper and a clear typeface set in such a way as to positively invite reading. The excellent photographs are large and clear.

The content I find really completely satisfactory. The book is exactly what it says it is: "An Introduction to the Alexander Technique." I wish I had written it myself.

Readers of *The Alexandrian* will be familiar with the basic content and ideas, but I think will find as I did that the ideas are presented with a simplicity and directness that make them newly clear. Part I, entitled "Alexander: The Man and His Discovery," for example, is a story I thought I need hardly read again, as useful as I knew it would be to those to whom the book is addressed. However, freshly told as it is, it was as absorbing and interesting to me as a well-told tale whose familiarity becomes somehow part of the pleasure.

Part II, "The Operational Ideas," is the text, and so to speak the meat, of the book—particularly for those who are at the stage of already having had some lessons. It details seven aspects of the technique that it can only benefit old and new Alexandrians to read: Use and Functioning, The Whole Person, Primary Control, Unreliable Sensory Appreciation, Inhibition, Direction, and Ends and Means. I learned and/or re-learned something from each of these sections, and found nothing with which I would essentially disagree. Since I would like all of my pupils to be familiar with these Operational Ideas, it seems to me that I will use this book, and particularly this section, as a very useful teaching aid.

Part III, entitled "Learning How to Learn," is the most personal and conversational part of the book, dealing with much of the writer's own learning experience as well as the experiences of a number of other teachers, from Margaret Goldie and Irene Tasker to teachers of Mr. Gelb's own teaching generation. This section also deals extensively and usefully with the application of the technique to children. John Dewey's thoughts on education and the technique are appropriately sprinkled throughout.

Part III closes, and closes the book, with a section entitled "What Can I Do Myself?" This is a question we all have to face regularly. Mr. Gelb's answer seems to me to be the most realistic of those I have read. He neither says "There is NOTHING you can do by yourself!" nor lures innocent readers into thinking that with a few simple Do's and Don'ts they will be able to do something they have never done before. I won't spoil it for you by giving his answer. I'm sure it will seem perfectly simple and practical when you read it.

The book is written easily, without being understated, and clearly, without being dramatic. It is a book I would recommend to students who ask "Is there something I can read?" I hope a paperback edition will soon be available to make *Body Learning* easily accessible to a wider audience.

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Frank Ottiwell is Director of the American Center for the Alexander Technique, San Francisco.



# The Work Ethic and The Alexander Technique

by Joan Frost

One of the prerequisites to the successful application of the Alexander Technique is an awareness of culturally-induced conceptions that have become a part of our psychological make-up. Much of our Western culture as we know it has been built upon the religious work ethic, which places a high value upon employing effort, whether physical, mental, or both, towards the achievement of some goal. It seems fruitful to investigate the validity of the work ethic concept with respect to the Alexander Principle—essentially that one has the potential, through the practice of conscious reasoning, inhibition, and direction, to apply oneself in a manner most appropriate to whatever task is at hand.

One of the principal stumbling blocks Alexander encountered in the process of improving his voice was his idea of what constituted the right way of approaching the problem. In his own words, "... my trying to do the thing which I believed was the right thing to do was based upon the conviction that if I knew what the right thing was, I should, by trying, in time be able to do it, and it was only after a prolonged experience of constant failure that I was driven to the discovery that I was not doing the thing I believed I was doing when I was 'trying' to do it." We naturally assume, unless otherwise told or shown, that we know what the right way of approaching a problem is and that it is only a matter of trying hard or long enough before we will achieve our goal. Indeed, the more effort expended, the more worthwhile the result. It seems to be our unconscious acceptance of the work ethic that creates a tendency to employ effort before stopping to question either the amount or quality of that effort.

Another tendency arising from our sanction of the work ethic is that of giving us, on both individual and cultural levels, an appreciation for only large consequences, and further, the idea that bigger or more is better. We tend to perceive only gross effects, and to overlook the beauty and power of simplicity. A simple, clear thought can easily begin to be overworked, embroidered, and made complex, so it becomes worth striving for.

An important educative aspect of the Alexander Technique is that it teaches one to stop and consider, to be sensitive to the "means-whereby" desired ends may be achieved. In this process, many existing ideas and beliefs are opened to fundamental questioning and are subject to change. Thus I have experienced in my pursuit of the Alexander work a more open awareness, a resiliency, a healthier psycho-physical balance, and an economy of movement and thought. The more deeply I understand myself and what it means to employ conscious control, the closer I come to my greatest potentiality, which I may then carry over towards the betterment of society at large.

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What is't to live, if not to pull the strings  
Of thought that pull those grosser strings whereby  
We pull our limbs to pull material things  
Into such shapes as in our thoughts doth lie?

—Samuel Butler, 1835-1902

(Contributed by Jean Clark, STAT, London)

## From Our Readers . . .

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As an amateur singer, I originally came to study the Alexander Technique to help resolve chronic tension in my throat and neck. I had no preconceptions about how it worked or how it achieved results, and I was initially skeptical about vague verbal explanations of it. I knew, however, that the body had ways that the left brain knew not of, so I suspended judgment. When my judgment returned, I discovered that the tension in my neck had disappeared and that finding my "locus of control" surprisingly enabled me to focus my mind and to control my emotions better. Also, the Technique obviated the need to have osteopathic adjustments for a somatic dysfunction due to an injury.

Perhaps, it might be valuable to prospective students if I described some of my reactions. From the first lesson, "breakthroughs" in awareness or significant restructurings were accompanied by feelings of nausea and slight dizziness. At many lessons, I have experienced that "lightness" that Alexander describes: Ichabod Crane encountered the Headless Horseman, the Alexander student encounters the "bodyless" head.

I have continued to study the Alexander Technique beyond the recommended minimum of twenty lessons and am constantly amazed at how increasing refinements uncover large areas of dysfunctional habit. . . .

Judith A. Grace

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. . . With regard to your note on Coghill [Vol. I, No. 1], it is certainly important to warn people against citing results from other people's work that they are not fully familiar with in support of the Alexander Technique.

However, Coghill was one of the great pioneers in the field of mind-body study and the fact that he recognized the validity of Alexander's work was of great value to us. I think the point is not whether his scientific conclusions agree with Alexander's, but that a man of his breadth of knowledge and experience appreciated the importance of what Alexander was teaching right from his first reading of *The Use of the Self* and before he had any demonstration. Too many Alexander people these days seem to be anxious to "prove" Alexander's Technique, as though there could be some doubt about the validity of a method that is always open to experimental, i.e., operational, verification. As Professor Dart says, "You don't have to prove it—it has been proved. Get on and teach it!" Of course this is not to say that we have all the answers; on the contrary, Alexander himself used to insist that we are only just at the beginning of the beginning—it is all to discover and find out! The fact is that nearly everybody interferes with the functioning of their postural mechanisms—they pull themselves down. This is demonstrably harmful. If they can be persuaded not to do so, the results are demonstrably beneficial. . . .

Walter Carrington

# Conscious Control of the Body

by H. M. Kallen

Nature and civilization are names. Nature stands for the conditions of human life that we find; civilization, for the conditions of human life that we make. In neither are we particularly prosperous or particularly at ease. For civilization is the adventure of a race seeking to escape from nature, and nature is the goal of a race seeking freedom from the oppressions of civilization. "Back to nature" is the universal device, employed even by Germans—and no people is more worshipful of its own Kultur-toxins. There exists a widespread and distinguished gospel of life summed up in this maxim; and its apostles vary from the pulpiteer Wagner, famous for his promulgation of "The Simple Life," through the pietist Tolstoy, famous for his practice of it, to the prophet Edward Carpenter, famous for his definition of its righteousness. The title of Mr. Carpenter's definition is, indeed, final in the condemnation of the man-made world—"Civilization, Its Cause and Cure."

To the fellowship of Wagner, Tolstoy, and Carpenter may be added F. Matthias Alexander. To the diversities of preacher, pietist, and prophet may be added that of scientist. But where his predecessors see the cure for civilization in an abandonment of it, Mr. Alexander sees the cure in a growing control of the human organism at work in it.

In many ways Mr. Alexander's theory and practice bear a striking resemblance to Freud's. It may be said, in fact, that Mr. Alexander treats the body as Freud does the mind. The work of the two men seems to me to be supplementary, and I am not sure that Alexander's is not more fundamental.

The observations on which he bases his work are, briefly, these: The human body is an organism having an inconceivably ancient inheritance of adaptations to conditions of life to be found only in nature. The instinctive responses of the body—its postures, attitudes, adjustments; how it walks, sits, runs, attends, moves its trunk and arms, and so on—are responses coordinate with conditions to be found only in a very primitive world, in which unreflective bodily activity is at maximum and thought at minimum. The growth of the body did not keep pace with the complications of the nervous system. The complication of the nervous system meant the coming thought and the emergence of a new and human world, the world of civilization. But the physical organs with which we utter and obey thought are the old animal organs of the expression of instinct and impulse and appetite. These organs do not fit well into a world of books, desks, skyscrapers, machines and drinks. The physical organs

with which we utter and obey thought are mostly not arranged to respond to the evocations of posturings, manners, and movements which are the signs of social consciousness and response. The soldier's, machinist's, farmer's, desk-worker's, and gentlewoman's postures and movements are distortions andcripplings of their bodies. There is hardly a man or woman in the civilized world whose efficiency is not lower, whose energy is not wasted, whose physical system is not in strife—"the scene of a civil war, and the heart, lungs, and other semi-automatic organs are in a state of perpetual readjustment to opposing conditions," those of nature and those of civilization.

The effect is a growing depletion of the nervous life of civilized mankind—breakdowns, hysterias,cripplings, and accompanying quackeries like physical culture, osteopathy, and mental healings, aimed to relieve these conditions but failing in the long run. The cause of their failure is that they affect symptoms, not causes. And the causes here are conflicts within the organism itself, conflicts generated by opposing directions of action in the conditions of life itself. One way out would be to abandon civilization as Tolstoy and Carpenter suggest. But that is neither feasible nor courageous nor desirable. In the mind which has created civilization man has an infallible instrument for the correction of its evils. The way out is the re-integration of bodily action, by means of conscious control.

To attain this control, however, requires a long process of re-education. A clinical experience of more than twenty years has convinced Mr. Alexander that most people are the victims of what he brilliantly calls a "debauched kinaesthesia." They have a sense of physical ease or adjustment which is habitual and fixed. That sense sets the standard of posture for them. Yet from the point of view of correctness, the feeling of comfort and ease may accompany the most deleterious posture. Thus there is, in terms of the mechanical arrangement of the body, one position, and one only, which is the position of "mechanical advantage," though because of vicious training and long-standing habit, that position may at first make the subject feel as if he were set out of shape. The readjustment of the organs in terms of the position of "mechanical advantage," and the attainment of a new kinaesthesia are thus basic to a handling of the body at maximum advantage in all the activities of life. Conscious guidance and control will do this; and as Professor Dewey says, Mr. Alexander "possesses and offers a definite method for its realization."

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## CAPLAN (continued from page 1)

Perhaps the most dramatic way Alexander's work benefits people with back pain is by eliminating the feeling of helplessness many of them experience. With most cases of back pain, the ultimate responsibility for getting better lies with the patient, not the physician, and Alexander's work gives the patient the tools needed to take on this responsibility. Correct use of the entire body during all daily activities is, for many, the best "medicine" for an ailing back.

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## CARRINGTON (continued from page 2)

Judith Stransky is an experienced and successful teacher, as this book makes clear. She evidently wants the Alexander Technique to be more widely known and appreciated, as we all do; and as a vehicle of publicity her book may serve its purpose quite effectively. But as a statement of Alexander's teaching and technique it falls far short of what he would have approved. She remarks that she never knew him, which is perfectly true. I worked as his assistant for a good number of years and gained some knowledge of what he thought about his own work: that is why I cannot recommend this book.

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\*See Stransky, p. 72.—Ed.

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