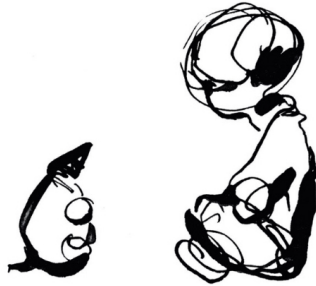


"I wonder if there is
a school of unlearning."



Charlie Mackay

Beyond Back Pain

Back pain is the main reason why I started to pursue the Alexander Technique. I first heard about it in acting school. I even read a book¹ about it at the time and one of the final sentences stuck with me. It suggested something along the lines of "it's not a question whether you can afford to try the technique, it's a question whether you can afford not to." I was intrigued. Still, it took me another few years to finally start taking lessons, when a sequestered lumbar disc with two bulging discs above and below had left me in massive pain and fear that my back would fall apart. Ten years prior I had suffered a spinal fracture that required surgery, two vertebrae were fused and I have one disc less as it is. Damaging more discs below the fused area felt very serious - clearly I could not afford not to try the Alexander Technique!

I wanted to take responsibility and very quickly decided to go for the training course to intensify the learning for myself. And after over 1600 hours of training I can honestly say that I'm more fascinated with the technique than ever. Graduating feels more like a beginning than an end and I'm looking forward to continuing the process, to keep on learning and deepening my understanding of the principles. I'm excited to see how my experience of the directions and what it means to go up while staying grounded changes over time.

¹ By Richard Brennan

My training course journey has not been all smooth sailing. While I have found tools to better manage pain, back pain has persisted and I've been really grappling with some of the ideas along the way, looking for and finding answers elsewhere. I've kept on asking myself what it is that I get out of the work and what makes me still believe in it so much that I would love to also pass it on to other people, even though the main problem that got me started, my back pain, has until now not been solved.

As I graduate I would like to summarise some of the thoughts that come up when I try to answer those questions for myself at this point in time, reflecting on key areas that have kept me going and wanting to learn more beyond alleviating my back pain.

Opening the mind through the body

I have read many books on personal development, mindfulness and self-awareness. Having started the Alexander Technique journey with physical problems I totally underestimated how deep this work can go and I'm still fascinated by the fact that it all starts with the simple everyday movement of going from standing to sitting. Through the work at the chair I got to experience with my whole self a lot of the theoretical concepts I read about. I got to experience how habits are locked into the subconscious mind and that it could take a while to become aware of what I was actually doing. I got to learn to see individual habits in the context of my whole self. I got to truly experience how powerful it can be to pause, how pausing can make room to let go and allow something new to happen. I got to experience mind-body-unity by noticing how just the thought of sitting down produced changes in my body. I got to experience how much I was focused on the end, to sit, with no appreciation of the movements in between and what it means to be present in action instead. I got to experience how concentrating on sitting down the right way made me stiffen and how much it helps to broaden awareness in all directions and stay present within the space. I got to experience that a new and better way of doing something may feel completely wrong at the beginning and that it takes time to change, to allow for a process to take place.

Training my observational skills and broadening awareness around my basic movement patterns at the chair made room to notice patterns elsewhere. I started to notice more and more how my body reacted in certain situations. I started to notice habitual thoughts and beliefs. And slowly but surely it dawned on me that the same tools of awareness, inhibition and directions I've been practising can be applied to my thoughts and other areas of my life just as much as to my head-neck-back relationship. Practising the tools over and over on the chair, learning to pause before sitting down and training to hold and broaden awareness in action, has made it so much easier to apply the same principles in other situations, to allow space for choice and change in all areas of my life.

Less is more

Before I started my Alexander Technique journey - the way I grew up, at school, in competitive gymnastics and dance, working for a Silicon Valley tech company - I very much learnt to live by the principle of working harder to achieve something. Work was associated with pushing through, strength and endurance.

The Alexander Technique opened me up to a whole new way of working. Again not as a theoretical concept, but through experiencing. I got to experience that less can be more and how harmful or limiting over-concentration can be. I experienced that progress can come from stopping the wrong thing and simply allowing space for something new rather than aiming for doing the right thing, how pushing for the right thing can indeed be counterproductive.

Work is more and more associated with staying present, pausing, broadening awareness, asking the question where can I do less. It sounds simple, yet it is not easy and requires gentle practice. It has taken me time to build trust that less can indeed be more and "to do it the easy way"² can actually be enough. The process is still ongoing, it feels very vulnerable at times, but also very liberating.

² A quote from Walter Carrington that Hella Linkmeyer shared with me often, it makes me think of her and miss her

Being curious not judgmental

For me the Alexander Technique has been a wonderful practice to train curiosity and embrace the unknown. Coming to the work with a very strong inner critic, being very hard on myself, and a core belief of not being good enough, the work helped me tremendously to strengthen other parts of myself, one of which Jörg likes to call my inner scientist. I remember early on how much I wanted to find the right way of sitting down, how annoyed I got with myself when undue habitual tension in a certain area persisted and how much the aphorism “just stop doing the wrong thing and the right thing will do itself” triggered me. I wanted to stop the wrong thing so badly, I just did not know what it was!

Over time this shifted. I got to see noticing undue habitual tension as a positive milestone and persisting tension as an opportunity to get to know it better. I started to really appreciate my overall coordination, my whole self, and that it is not possible to fully know why something is holding, as tension may persist because of miscoordination elsewhere. I got to really appreciate that we work with directions, and that how Patrick Macdonald³ put it “right and wrong change and should change as your body and coordination change” and that “you must learn to think in trends and tendencies and not in fixed positions”.

I started to find a lot more joy in the exploration, bringing awareness to the experience itself, moving and touching like I’m moving and touching for the first time. This shift has extended far beyond the chair into all areas of my life. In very practical terms it makes every activity more interesting and enjoyable, and it brings more lightness and openness to my thinking.

Taking responsibility

Caring for my elderly parents over the past six years I have put a lot more thought into ageing and taking responsibility for ageing well. Training curiosity and the ability to adapt and embrace change is a big one for me that the Alexander Technique helps me with. But in very practical, physical terms I think it is crucial to

³ Patrick J. Macdonald *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, page 4: *The Variations of Right and Wrong*

bring more awareness and better coordination to my head-neck-back relationship, learning to work with gravity rather than against it.

As balance declines with age and the risk of falling increases, improved overall coordination and the quality of movement will make a huge difference. Falling forward and up rather than back and down or sideways may prevent more serious injuries. Allowing for expansion and space in the joints slows down wear and tear. And experiencing how much my breath has freed up without directly working on it - as a side effect of improved coordination in the head-neck-back relationship - makes me wonder about other organs as well. I'm convinced with better movement on the outside you get better movement on the inside.

I'm grateful that I have discovered the Alexander Technique and that I had the opportunity to immerse myself and go deeper into the work during the training course. I'm excited to continue the journey of learning, working and ageing with the Alexander Technique as a big part of my life.

Bille Dau, January 2024



The end
look how
far we've
come