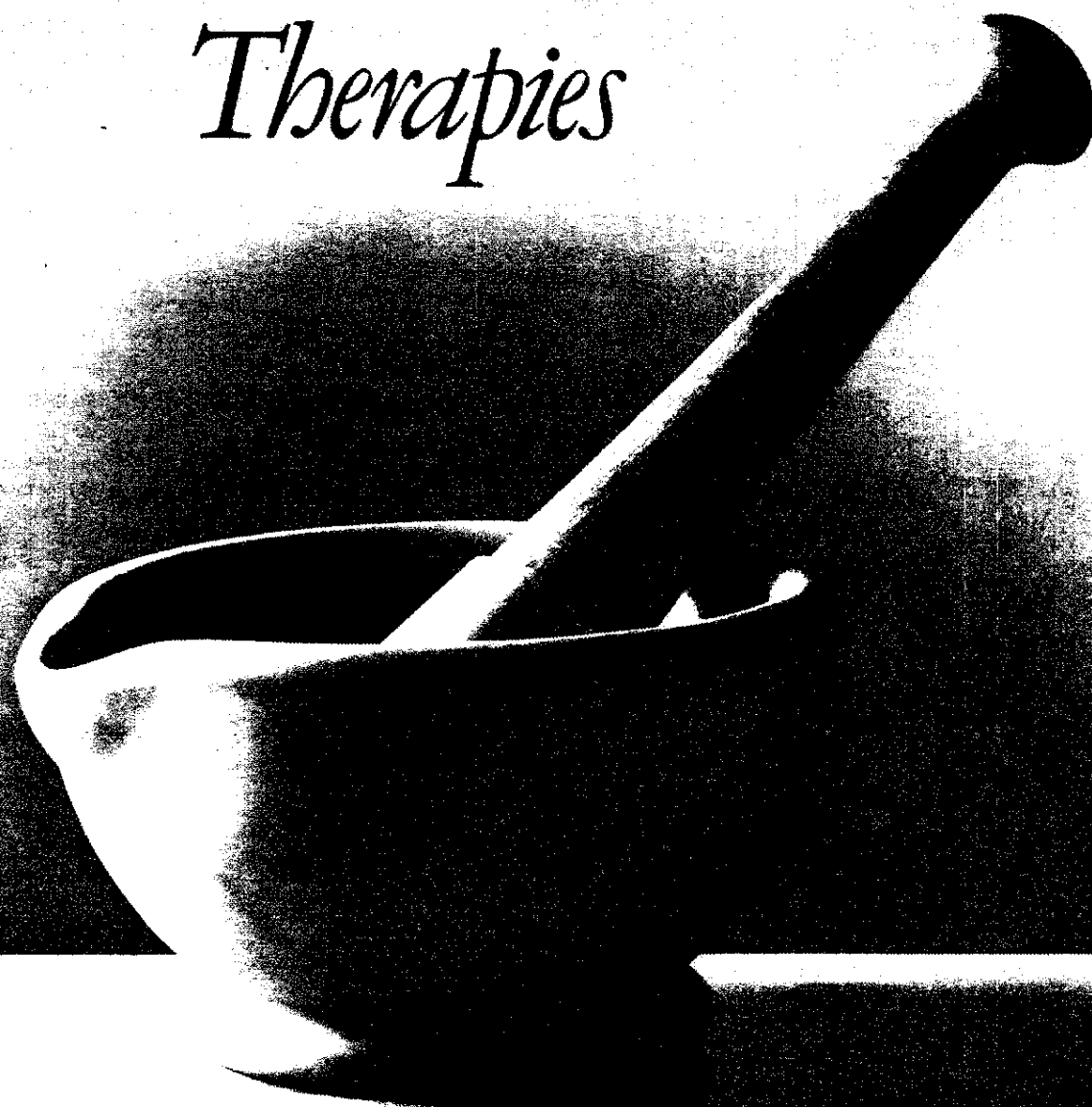


# ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

*A Guide to Natural  
Therapies*



Dr ANDREW STANWAY

# The Alexander Technique


## Definition

A technique to which the late Mr F. Matthias Alexander gave his name. It has been described as a method of posture training but it goes far beyond this simple concept and should be thought of as being more a technique by which mind and body are harmonised.

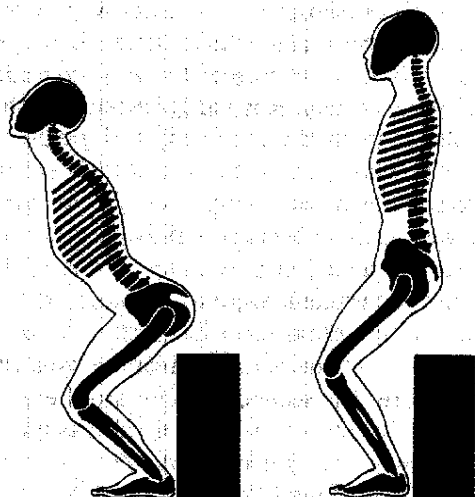
## Background

F. Matthias Alexander was born in Tasmania in 1869 and became a reciter of poetry and humorous pieces. It was as a result of habitually losing his voice that he started to take more notice of his own body, its movements and balance. By studying himself in front of a mirror while reciting, he became aware that he was using his body wrongly. He noticed that every time he started to recite he pulled his head back and tightened his throat. Although such a seemingly strange posture felt normal to him he reasoned that it would be sensible to remedy it and so practised until he could recite properly without producing these strange movements and tensions. His voice improved and he no longer lost it when reciting.

Alexander trained himself to breathe and hold himself better and to pay a lot more attention to posture generally and soon felt much healthier and altogether more self-confident. He found himself encouraging and teaching others to do what he had found valuable and the good results spoke for themselves. He then created a system, based entirely on meticulous observation of himself and others, which encouraged people to unlearn the harmful or simply unhelpful habitual movements of their everyday lives, so freeing them of strange, 'unnatural' postures and movements. He found that the worst offenders used their bodies badly when changing from sitting to standing or lying to sitting, often by throwing their heads backwards.



Being taught to lengthen 'forward-and-up'



The incorrect (left) and correct (right) ways of sitting down

After ten years of teaching in Australia and New Zealand, Alexander went to London in 1904. His work and ideas slowly gained recognition and between 1914 and 1918, and 1940 and 1943 he worked in New York. He left his younger brother, A. R. Alexander, to develop his methods in the USA. His book *The Use of Self* was published in 1932 and from then on his teachings spread widely throughout the western world. He died in 1955 aged eighty-seven and left a small number of teachers to carry on his work. Today there are training schools all over the world but the main ones are in London. There is a Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique with major schools in Israel, Zürich, London, San Francisco, Chicago and The Hague but the majority of teachers of the technique are still to be found in and around London.

**How is it done?**

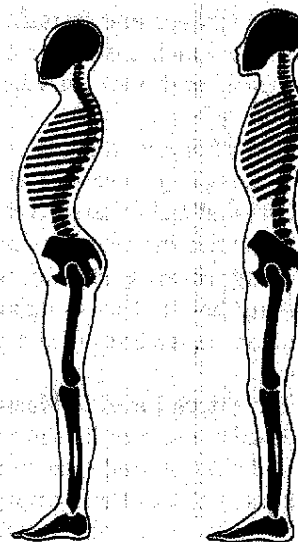
Unlike many alternative medical therapies, the Alexander technique is not simply a 'treatment' in which someone does something to someone else. Rather it is a self re-education process, encouraged and led by an expert. When you think about it, even the most simple daily movements, such as getting up and opening a door, are highly complex and involve the careful balancing of many muscle groups. Alexander teachers help the individual rediscover his basic, natural posture and movement patterns by liberating the body from learned, superimposed ones. In this way neuro-muscular co-ordination is improved generally. This means that at first as the old, 'wrong' movements and postures are corrected the new ones feel strange but soon these feel right with all the attendant improvements on the mind and body. There are no exercises as such to be done by the Alexander student but it may take up to a year of practice in one's daily life to get the full benefit.

By the time most of us have reached adult life we will have acquired harmful postural habits which induce mental and physical tension. Alexander's principle is a new way of organising oneself and it's a serious business. Just as with any other useful therapy the first stage is to make some sort of diagnosis. The Alexander teacher (and I say teacher because the vast majority are not doctors) does this by establishing which forms of misuse and bad posture are present in the pupil.

The pupil is asked to lie on a flat, firm surface at couch height. He is then encouraged to 'inhibit' or prevent any seemingly normal reflex movements as the teacher handles and moves his body. Slowly the pupil learns a whole new vocabulary of body movement as the teacher moves various parts of the body to relieve tension and adjust posture. The pupil learns to associate certain groups of words and instructions with the correct position in which the teacher places him and it is this that he continues on his own when his teacher is not there. Clearly the pupil has to be completely involved in the process which may require eight forty-five minute sessions over many weeks and perhaps further follow-up visits. Over this period the pupil learns not only to inhibit bad movements, tensions and postures, but positively to 'direct' his body to do the right thing. The idea is that after such re-education much of this learning becomes second nature, although most people find that conscious attention to it will be needed.

The Alexander technique is in no way cranky or way-out; at least, in the best hands it isn't. All Alexander said in essence was that for each of us there is an optimum posture and movement pattern which suits us best. The techniques used by Alexander

The incorrect (left) and correct (right) way of standing



teachers simply help the pupil return to this optimal resting state without tension after the normal movements of everyday life. After all, we all have to stretch for things, and many of us sit badly at office desks, hunch over the wheel in our cars and go to sleep in awkward postures in front of the television. The trouble is that for the non-Alexander trained person these bad habits become ingrained and produce physical ill health.

#### How does it work?

The Alexander technique is not orthodox but it is not inconsistent with accepted principles of physiology and psychology either. It has nothing in common with the many techniques of auto-suggestion, relaxation, transcendental meditation or other methods of mind control. Basically the method teaches a person to discriminate between movement and posture cues in such a way as to enable him to eliminate the parts of a learned response pattern that interfere with optimal performance or function of the body. To understand this better, let's look at some basic facts about Man and his ancestors.

A four-legged animal has its head in front of its body and its neck muscles are constantly acting to hold its head up against gravity. The forward movement of the head pulls on the spine and the head's movement 'leads' the body into its various activities.

The same basic mechanism applies in Man. As we start a body movement we move our heads in the direction we intend to take and these tiny movements are recorded by minute variations in the lengths of the muscle fibres in the neck muscles. If we consider how a baby learns to walk we see that the first stage involves the raising of its head against gravity. Once head control is achieved the body follows and soon walking. Babies and young children have easy, unimpaired head control. As the child gets older though he becomes subject to anxiety and stressful and posturally unnatural situations which can cause abnormal contractions of the spinal and neck muscles, so shortening the neck a fraction.

In addition to the frankly stressful conditions in which we live, many people are lazy about the way they walk, sit and hold themselves and over many years their bodies become rebalanced to cope with their slouching, rounded shoulders, rounded backs and drooping heads. This slouching posture alters the expansion capabilities of the chest and so impairs breathing.

Professor Frank Pierce Jones in Massachusetts, not content with what he knew to be the results of the Alexander Method that he had seen in his own and other people's lives, set about explaining all this in high-powered scientific terms that would be acceptable

to sceptics. Much of Alexander's original work was written in philosophical rather than scientific language and this did nothing to recommend it to a scientific and technological society. It is partly because of this difficulty that the method has not enjoyed greater popularity, especially among the medical profession.

The Alexander technique lends itself to experimentation very well, mainly because a skilled teacher can change posture in a subject very quickly. The subjects in Pierce Jones' experiment were asked to grade the effort required to maintain three different types of posture. The first was the person's usual relaxed (often slouching) posture; the second was his usual erect posture (his 'best' posture); and the third was an experimental posture (as guided by Alexander principles). All the subjects found that they needed more effort to maintain their 'best' posture than they did to maintain the Alexander posture and that the Alexander posture was more effortless even than their usual 'slouched' posture. These findings were all subsequently confirmed using electromyography to measure actual electrical potentials in the muscles of the neck.

The subjects described their Alexander-trained movements as 'smoother, easier and lighter' compared with their normal ones and Pierce Jones set out to confirm this by using slow motion films. He found that the subjects' Alexander trained movements were carried out faster than their original movements and concluded that the power provided by the muscles must have been proportionately greater, since the end position obtained was the same whether the subjects were using the Alexander method or not.

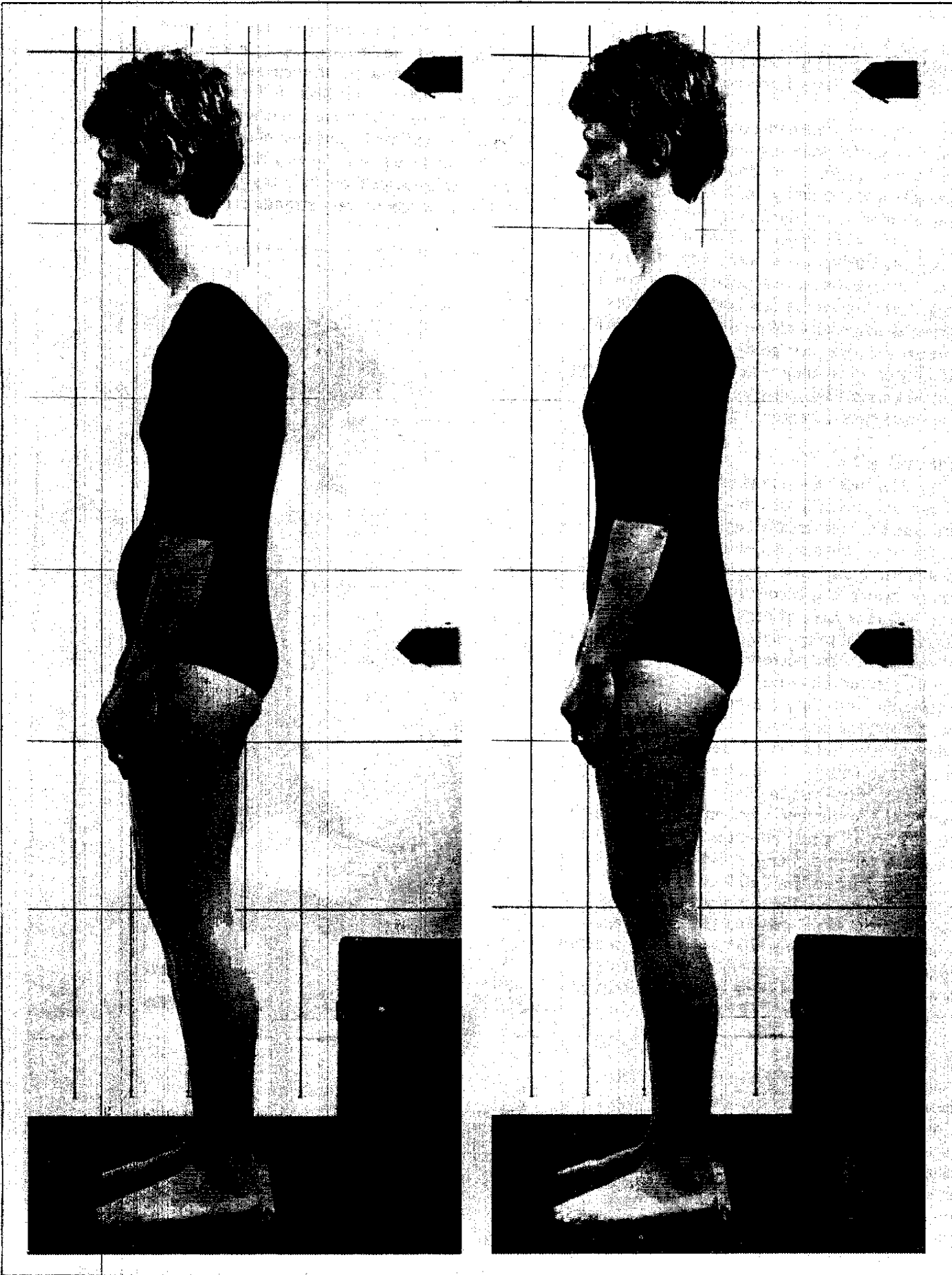
Pierce Jones' and other people's work supports the following hypotheses about the Alexander principle:

1. The basic postural reflexes of the body are integrated with other reflex systems (which comes as no news to practitioners of yoga, *see page 153*).
2. Under civilised conditions these reflexes are partly inhibited by habitual, learned responses which disturb the relationship between the head, neck and trunk.
3. Once this inhibition is drawn to the attention of the person, he can be taught to prevent it with general improvement of body function.

But probably the best experimental work has been carried out by an Englishman, Dr W. Barlow (who is married to Alexander's niece). He knew Alexander personally and has carried out numerous studies on this subject over the last quarter of a century. Dr Barlow is a physician in a London hospital and sees patients treated by all the conventional means that modern medicine has to offer. Yet he finds that the Alexander technique has much more to offer in many cases. He has yet to find a case of backache —

(opposite left) Standing slouched; (opposite right) Standing with head 'forward-and-up'

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE



that scourge of western man – that he cannot help with the aid of the technique and also gets excellent results with migraine, depressions and neuroses of all kinds.

His major study of the technique involved the minute anthropometric measurement of fifty Royal College of Music students in London. He subjected them all to Alexander training and took further measurements after six months. Forty-nine of them were up to  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches taller and had greatly improved in terms of musicianship. In another study he examined the effects of the Alexander technique on students at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London. The teachers at the School did all they could to help these students improve their posture, breathing and so on using their usual training techniques, but after one year all were measurably worse off. The Alexander technique subsequently improved them all.

#### What is it used for?

Because the Alexander method aims at redressing postural balance, it is of most value to actors, musicians and dancers, who greatly benefit from the training. However, because it increases a person's sense of well-being and even improves frankly unwell people on occasions, it is becoming increasingly popular as a kind of medical therapy. It should be stressed that it is not primarily a way of curing specific ailments although a few doctors use it as an addition to their armamentarium of treatments.

The Alexander technique has been useful to people with specific postural problems, breathing troubles and speech defects. Alexander himself never meant his method to become a type of curative medical therapy but rather to be a self-help method.

People often ask whether it has anything to do with meditation, yoga or similar practices. The answer is that it depends very much on the individual. Some people combine yoga or Zen Buddhism with the Alexander technique but the technique itself is not inherently spiritual. One of the world's leading experts was quite happy to call it a sort of 'super physiotherapy with additional benefits'. In the right hands though it can go way beyond whatever the best physiotherapy has to offer.

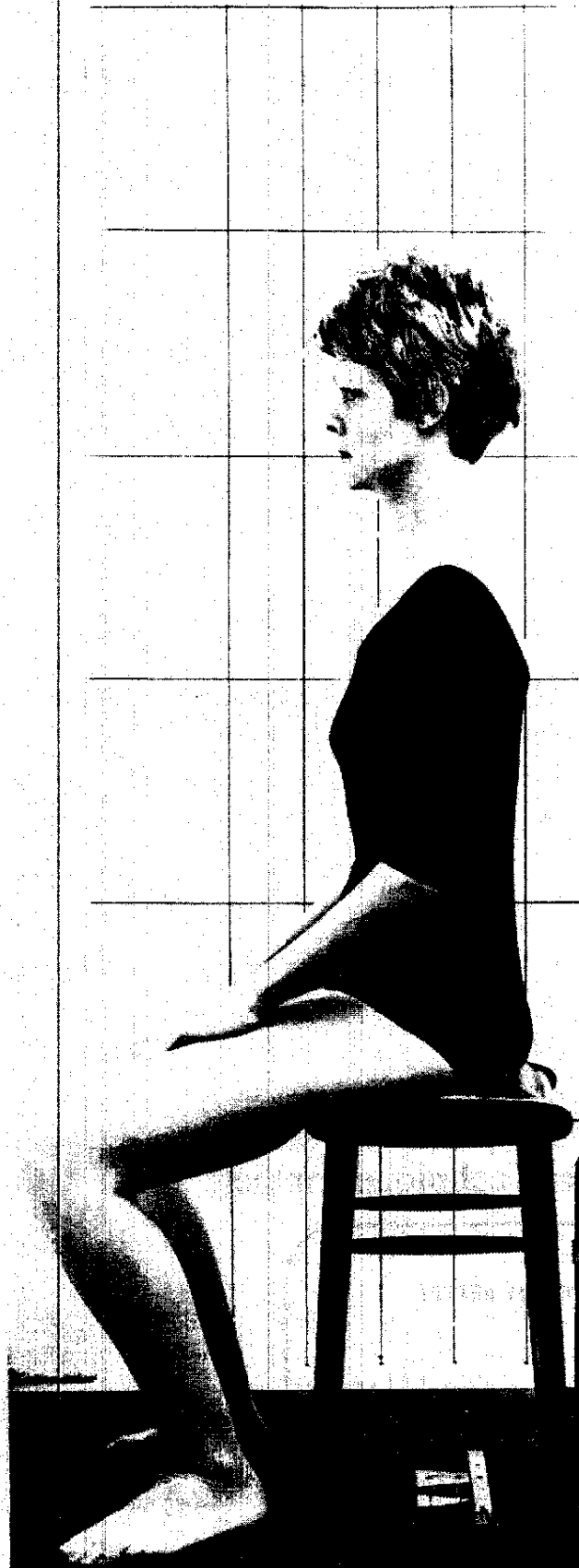
#### Does it work?

Quite simply the answer is 'yes'. Like almost any treatment that involves the individual attention of a skilled and sympathetic person for long periods of time, the Alexander technique undoubtedly works as a kind of supportive psychotherapy for many people. One leading practitioner tells how his patients slowly unwind mentally as well as physically and gradually the real cause of their problems emerges, such as a difficult interpersonal relationship or some other

domestic or work upset. But Alexander has more to offer than this as can be seen in people who have had very little verbal contact with their teacher. Quite how it works is a matter that is likely to be debated for years but most of us in western medicine have completely overlooked the importance of correct posture in the head and neck and the way that information is fed back from muscles there to many parts of the brain. This may seem a very strange concept at first



(opposite) Sitting collapsed  
(below) Sitting 'poised and free'



but can be better understood if we consider how muscles receive their nerve inputs.

The lengthening (or shortening) of muscles is not simply related to the 'all or nothing' switching on or off of their nerve supply. There are two systems of nerves in muscles that we know about today – indeed until fairly recently we only knew about the first. This first system works by contracting and shortening muscle fibres. When this system stops 'firing', the muscle relaxes. The second system is a collection of nerves that don't actually go to the muscles that we can feel in our bodies but to masses of microscopic bundles called muscle spindles. These are buried deep in the muscles, lie lengthways in between the muscle fibres and are involved in muscle lengthening rather than contraction.

Muscle spindles have their own internal muscles which feed information about their state of contraction or relaxation back to the brain. These spindles are the fine tuning system of our muscles and also prevent excessive contraction and relaxation of muscles during activity. They therefore act as a sort of shock absorber or damper in a highly complex way. It can be shown that over-shortening of a muscle (such as is seen in certain bad postures and habits) causes the muscle spindles to go 'dead' so that there is no feedback from them to the brain. This might not seem very important but is in reality because the brain connections of all the millions of muscle spindles from all over our bodies interact with all kinds of higher centres that play a vital part in our awareness of what's happening around us. Suffice it to say that powerful pain-killers like morphine act by dulling or temporarily inactivating this very same area of the brain that is 'turned off' when our muscle spindles cease to function.


When we understand all this it then makes a lot of sense to talk of people feeling altogether fitter and healthier simply by getting them to breathe properly (and more deeply) because by doing so they are activating muscle spindles that have been dormant for some time. *For more details of this kind of phenomenon, see page 155.*

But for all this detailed knowledge we still don't know why so many conditions from back pain, arthritis and breathing disorders to stress diseases are helped by the Alexander technique. Like so many areas of fringe medicine, the technique deserves far more serious research than it has so far enjoyed. It shouldn't be difficult to convince most western doctors that there's something in it – the patients (pupils) speak for themselves and the work of Barlow and others like him cannot easily be dismissed or ignored. If only because the Alexander technique is a safe, self-help technique that can save any health care system a fortune, it deserves far greater popularity and attention.

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