

Have you lost your sense?

(The sixth one.)

Do you know how to drive a car?

Of course!

Ride a bike?

Sure!

Move and express yourself without seriously injuring yourself?

What?

If the car you drove just chugged along in first gear or if the bike you rode had buckled wheels, would you notice? Or would you just continue chugging and wobbling along thinking all's normal?

And yet many people are unwittingly disconnected in a similar way in the manner in which they move and in the way they express themselves, unaware this disconnection may be the root cause of discomfort, dis-ease, aches and pains.

Well over a century ago FM Alexander, of Alexander Technique fame, knew from his own experience that the way we use our minds and bodies affect the way we function, for good or ill. He went on to develop not just a mind/ body indivisibility theory but through years of painstaking observation and experiment, he developed a practical way of giving people the actual experience of this unity. Many did experience this, and now many still do: Aldous Huxley, Sting, Maggie Smith, George Bernard Shaw, Madonna, John Dewey, Paul Newman; Nobel Prize winners and leaders in sports, performing arts, and medicine. And yet the essence of Alexander's work is still considered by students of his work to be the best kept secret.

Due to the continuing rapid change of life in our modern world and as a result of our poor way of adapting to these changes, this maladaptation oftentimes results in unnecessary and possibly serious aches and pains. The general way of dealing with this is to seek verbal or written advice.

From a "how to" book, perhaps:

"Do these important exercises this way."

"Breathe this way or that."

"Sit up straight at work and at home."

"Be mindful at all times."

All sincere of course, but all doomed to fail I'm afraid. Why? - It's the wrong language! This disconnection I'm referring to needs to be addressed kinesthetically!

Our kinesthetic sense, referred to as the lost sixth sense, is our internal perception of movement in space. (The other five senses for the most part focused on perceiving stimuli externally.) But it is this kinesthetic perception that

has become distorted to the point where we don't even recognize its importance. When we lose our ability to perceive correctly, we lose our

ability to even recognize that we don't perceive correctly. Scary thought.

Alexander discovered the means for dealing with this in himself and then went on to teach others. (The detailed story of the evolution of his technique can be found in his book 'The Use of the Self'.) Over many years Alexander began to develop a hands on craft that actually restores the kinesthetic sense. With his hands he would guide people through various activities, showing them at first how to NOT react to old messages of mind and muscle but to learn instead to inhibit them, and then, via this developed hands on skill, he helped give new messages/ signals/ impulses which he called "directions," resulting in the messages being received and reliably embodied by the student. It is a remarkable and completely unique skill and no other modality or body of work can boast this. Thankfully, Alexander was able to teach this kinesthetic skill to others, opening up his own training school in London in 1931 in order to do so. Yes it is challenging to learn this unique skill in order to teach others, which is why an accredited teacher of the Alexander Technique has to complete 1600 classroom hours over a minimum of 3 years.

So what, you might ask? So someone does regain this kinesthetic thing ? Then what?

You might also ask then why this educational technique has so many startling therapeutic benefits. Benefits all supported by research. For instance, a study among 579 subjects on the effectiveness of Alexander lessons in addressing back pain and published by the British Medical Journal*, found an 85% reduction in pain. More importantly, these improvements lasted over time. Other peer reviewed published research covers: stress, pain management, respiratory function, Parkinson's disease, RSI, back pain, surgical ergonomics, spinal co-ordination, posture, knee osteoarthritis, gait study in the elderly, and more. ***

It is indeed challenging to explain why this work has so much success dealing with so many seemingly disparate conditions like back pain, neck pain, desk bound injury, psychological well being, Parkinson's, vocal strain, TMJ, skill acquisition, public speaking, performance anxiety, actor training, stress related discomfort, playing a musical instrument more effectively, improving performance in athletes and dancers, and minimizing falls in the elderly. The list goes on and on. The question that is often asked, "How on earth can it possibly address all those things?"

If we look at illness and dysfunction from the perspective of the whole self and not just from the perspective of the particular symptom experienced and labeled, we would see how all aspects of our life are indeed interconnected. The thread of this connectedness is the kinesthetic sense. So much so, that in disconnecting from our kinesthetic sense, we effectively lose our ability to navigate life itself.

By nature we are already connected, it is the way we disconnect that is the problem, and it is the problem we continually refuse to see. -"*Sensory appreciation conditions conception -You can't know a thing by an instrument that's wrong.*" FM Alexander. As our culture tends to look for singular causes of illness and dysfunction, we therefore compartmentalize our health and wellbeing.

The importance of having reliable kinesthetic sense as the essential underpinning for health and well being, hardly appears on today's radar. Add to that the joke life plays on us; undue muscle tension actually blocks our awareness of this tension or proprioception (sensory feedback via proprioceptors in muscles helping us recognize and regulate position, motion and muscular sensation). This is why the truly uptight person can be found saying, "what, me tense?" It is also why people experiencing the Alexander work in the hands of a competent teacher understand the tensions and disconnections they actually have in the moments they release them.

Going through the process of understanding and undoing our maladaptive patterns (arising from the distorted way we navigate our modern day environment,) we actually find connection. Our individual maladaptive patterns are as unique as our individual psychology and as such are addressed individually. That is why The Alexander Technique is taught on a one to one basis. Classes may help as an introduction to principles of the work, but real changes are made in individual lessons where the skilled hands of the teacher come into play.

Our new technologically driven world assails us with stimuli to the point of overload. Take stress as an example. We tend to think of how we embody stress. However if we take stress as a stimulus and strain as a response, the picture starts to change. Clearly we need to deal with both. (Victor Frankel – *Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*)

Knowing how to best respond to stimuli is a required skill because if stimulus overload is not dealt with, it can even cause our own system to crash.

When our kinesthetic sense starts to crash strange stuff happens: collapsing and over tightening our bodies when sitting in chairs and at desks, cranking up the jaw when speaking, locking up neck and shoulders while driving, walking or wobbling side to side as we age. The list is endless. The above can even feel

normal to us, par for the course; and as such, we too easily embody these norms. These norms or habits begin to feel right, and when they do it's a sure indication our kinesthetic perceptions have indeed gone skew-whiff!

If we were to lose proprioception altogether we really would be a complete mess. One such case regarding proprioception loss, reported by famed neurologist Oliver Sacks, tells of a young woman *“who had not been able to move properly at all.... She eventually acquired a stiff and slow movement and nearly normal speech (yes voice is affected also), which is believed to be the best possible in the absence of this sense. She could not judge effort involved in picking up objects and would grip them painfully to be sure she did not drop them.”* **

So if you're still stuck thinking “I only need help for my symptom of back pain, or for dealing with this or that particular stress, or swinging a golf club like I think I should, or making a speech, or for my carpal tunnel syndrome, or my inability to be mindful, or to deal with chronic aches and pains, or” then STOP! Your Self is involved in all of the above, plus everything else you do and experience! Doesn't it make sense to deal with the whole picture (the whole self), rather than just dealing with the bits of it? And the way in which you go about dealing with all these bits, will in turn affect your level of back pain, your effective speech making, your ability to deal with stress etc. Again, how we use our minds and bodies affect the way we function.

Do you still want to be like a bike with a buckled wheel, or a car just chugging along? In fact the car analogy applied to the faulty kinesthetic sense would be that of a drunken driver thinking all that's wrong with the chugging car is a misfiring spark plug. (FYI, it is proprioception that is tested by cops checking for alcohol intoxication.)

Regaining the lost sixth sense is the unrecognized master key to maintaining health and well being in modern day life, both generally and specifically. The hands on kinesthetic skill that Alexander discovered and developed is the key to dealing with it. Thousands worldwide have, through this work, unpicked the lock of unnecessary pain, tension and disconnection. And as unnecessary symptoms of a fragmented self disappear, life itself just becomes easier.

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- **Randomised Controlled Trial of Alexander Technique Lessons, Exercise, and Massage (ATEAM) for Chronic and Recurrent Back Pain.** Little P et al (2008). British Medical Journal 337:a884.

** **The Man who mistook his wife for a hat.**

*** **Information on all these studies can be found at: www.amsatonline.org**

John A Baron started his professional life as an actor in his native England, playing leading roles in TV and film as well as working with many UK theatre companies. Leaving the acting profession behind, he then

developed and eventually sold his own advertising and publishing company in London. After qualifying as a teacher of the Alexander Technique he opened his studio in Rome Italy before moving and finally settling in California. He has brought the Alexander work to: Google Inc., Allianz, Sundance Festival, SF Ballet, Esalen, SF Opera and others, becoming co director of the AEC in Berkeley, a training school for the Alexander Technique. He has had several articles published in Alexander trade journals. His co-authored article Farm Boy was included in 'The Journal of Critical Psychology, Psychotherapy and Counseling', a peer reviewed international publication.