

# Alexander's Error

By Michael Protzel

We Alexander Technique teachers have all been inspired by F.M. Alexander's insights. Through his ideas, we recognize that the self acts as a whole, both creating and absorbed in an habitual manner of use; that focusing predominantly on ends diverts attention from means; that we interfere with head-neck-back coordination but do not notice; and that, as a result, functioning declines. To me, these are the jewels of Alexander's invaluable legacy. Added to this was his amazing ability to change his habitual manner of use from the inside out, and to guide others to change theirs. Yet, I believe Alexander did not recognize, and thus did not factor into his theory of use, a significant psycho-physical event.

Alexander argued that we interfere with innate coordination by unnecessarily tensing in response to an idea to do something. I suggest that there is an antecedent event that makes tensing unavoidable. Our habitual tensing reactions, while clearly *affecting* the functioning of head, neck and back, are not the interference itself. They are a level removed. Our core tensings — be they in the neck, the torso, the pelvis, the legs — are not unnecessary. They manifest in reaction to forces that render such reactions inevitable.

## *Lifting Ourselves*

Sustaining our upright form is a defining human act — a basic component of all of our standing and sitting activities. In other words, we lift our own weight. And we do so all day long. *This weight we are lifting is perpetually falling down to earth, generating substantial force as it falls.*

How does our perpetual falling impact our ability to lift ourselves? How might our consciousness influence our falling? Can we interfere with our falling? How? What are the consequences of doing so?

Alexander's theory of use does not answer, or even consider, these questions. To the best of my knowledge, Alexander does not factor in our falling at all — nor our control over it. These are serious omissions.

Our falling down to earth is not some inconsequential event. It is a cataclysmic event. Our falling is not something that happens *to* us. We are not passive pawns of gravity. We direct our falling moment-by-moment, to our decided advantage or disadvantage. Trying to understand how human beings coordinate without deep consideration of the whys and wherefores of our falling is like trying to understand how plants grow without considering the influence of the sun or water.

A force is generated along the precise trajectories of our fall. Our consciousness controls these trajectories. We, in effect, tell ourselves where to fall. We have been doing this our entire lives, mostly without awareness, through an act of consciousness I call "committing body weight." Dropping a mere three-pound book clearly demonstrates the power inherent in gravity-driven mass. Our bodies are substantially heavier, packing far more power. When we commit body weight through our balance points — the tali in simple standing, the sit bones in simple sitting — the force of our falling triggers innate processes that convert the energy of our falling into the bio-mechanical energy of optimal coordination, producing full extension with minimal effort. We literally *go* up. No need to *hold* ourselves up. The force of our falling provides our very own renewable and sustainable power supply. We all discovered this power source in the first year of life, as we mastered the art of committing body weight in learning to sit and stand.

## *Toppling*

Innate processes cannot function up to their potential without capturing the full force of our falling. When we mis-commit body weight — away from our balance points — we lose some of our natural power. In addition, when we mis-commit body weight, the force of our falling drives us off our precarious perch (the tali and sit bones being tiny surfaces upon which we balance). We topple.

Our *will to be upright* automatically takes over. Sustaining uprightness is non-negotiable. No matter the circumstances, our brain will figure out a way to keep us upright, if at all humanly possible. In reaction to our

toppling while standing, we subconsciously brace leg joints. This stops our topple. Were we to not brace, we would just keep on toppling. Our will to be upright is too powerful a survival instinct to allow this. It is also a matter of survival that we maintain a level head. As we topple, the only way to achieve this is to tense the neck and torso. Without such a subconscious righting reaction, the head, neck and torso would be significantly off kilter, making it rather difficult to function.

Having these recovery capacities is wonderful —as a back-up. The trouble is that, instead of being an emergency plan, this subconsciously initiated and controlled *topple/then brace and right* method of coordination has become our normal routine

### *Faulty Sensory Appreciation*

Learning to mis-direct our falling is virtually a rite of passage in Western Civilization. Early in life, we develop habitual behavior patterns that involve mis-committing body weight, thereby initiating our own toppling — which, in turn, necessitates significant muscle effort to counter the toppling. These habits are reinforced with staggering repetition throughout childhood, when we are most impressionable. The prime example is sitting back into a chair-support. In doing this, we commit our weight too far back. There are no anatomical supporting structures behind the sit bones to receive and transform the force of our falling. As we repeatedly rely on the chair-back for support, innate supporting processes — in the legs, pelvis and up along the full length of the spine — weaken. Further, to keep a level head we must strain to pull the neck and upper torso forward as the lower torso is falling backwards. Sitting back in a chair, **no matter how we do it**, *necessitates* tensing the neck and shortening the stature. This soon morphs, when we work at a desk or eat at a table, for example, into the common slump.

This egregious mismanagement of our weight spills over into how we stand. Common standing postures — leaning backwards with our weight way back on the heels, or leaning forward from the hips with weight borne excessively on the balls of the feet, or leaning to the side with our weight supported by one leg — all clearly demonstrate the impact of our mis-directed falling.

While we understand intellectually that our body weight is always falling down to earth, we do not experience it adequately. As toddlers, we are sensitive kinesthetically, expert at committing body weight. However, as we grow up and focus more and more on the outside world, our attention to kinesthesia wanes, and our ability to accurately commit body weight declines. Yet whenever we topple, our subconsciously controlled bracing and righting reactions bail us out. Our consistent ‘success’ in achieving the end result of uprightness makes it easy for us to ignore the underlying forces at play and how we employ them to our own detriment. To us, it is as if nothing at all is happening.

**This is the epitome of faulty sensory appreciation. Our toppling — and the myriad muscular reactions that ensue to keep us functional — all happen out of awareness. Operating in the background, this omnipresent syndrome is at the heart of our habitual manner of use.**

### *A Flawed Model*

In *The Use of the Self*, Alexander sets up a model illustrating the connection between our idea to do something and our subsequent interference with our head-neck-back relationship. This model portrays our idea to do something as the beginning of such interference. Acting upon this idea in an habitual manner, we mal-coordinate. If we can inhibit reacting habitually, by choosing not to needlessly tense, then we can nip this interference in the bud. Implicit in this model is the notion that, *prior to* having the idea to do something, we were not interfering with our coordination. This prior lack of interference is what makes inhibition effective as a preventative measure. If we can avoid doing the wrong thing in response to our idea to act, we are left doing the right thing. Clearly, if we were *already* interfering with our coordination prior to having an idea to act, then this idea to act could not be considered the *precipitating* event that generates misuse. Alexander’s model, however, does posit it as the precipitating event — followed directly by our needless and interfering muscular tensings.

I suggest a different model that, in my estimation, more closely reflects the reality of the situation:

(1) Prior to having the idea to do something, we are already sustaining our uprightness.

(2) We sustain uprightness according to our habitual manner of use. We do not need an idea to do something ‘extra’ to evoke our interference with innate coordination. This interference is already manifest — in how we are acting in response to our will to be upright.

(3) Only by denying the fact that sustaining our uprightness is a monumental human activity in itself could we suggest that the triggering of our habitual manner of use somehow *begins* with our idea to do something ‘extra.’ The idea to do something ‘extra’ is *not* the beginning.

(4) The idea to do something ‘extra’ begins only a *transition* from one upright act (for example, simple standing) to another upright act (for example, standing while reciting).

(5) With our habitual misuse fully manifest in the primary act of sustaining uprightness, making a transition invariably exposes our core imbalance. In the simple act of standing ‘still,’ our imbalance is masked by the muscular bracing that provides a held stability. In letting go of the holding so that we can move, our imbalance is for the moment unmasked. We topple. This creates a need for bracing and righting anew — tasks that we execute subconsciously without any sense that we are doing them. It’s a vicious cycle.

(6) The misuse that exists *prior to* the idea to do something ‘extra’ is the core misuse we need to address and change in order to re-establish our innate coordination.

### *Alexander’s Voice Problem Revisited*

Although inhibition is a constructive tool that helps us to recognize and change habitual reactions to a wide variety of stimuli, it cannot be applied to our *will to be upright*. Our will to be upright is a stimulus to which we give continual consent. We cannot *not* give such consent. We are always falling—and always reacting to the force of our falling. When we unintentionally and unknowingly set ourselves toppling, we *need* our tensing reactions to preserve our uprightness. Our survival depends on it.

Every moment we are upright is a “critical moment.” Lifting ourselves is a challenging task. To do it optimally, with a minimum of effort, requires adept management of innate resources; most importantly, directing the force of our falling. Alexander was already performing the act of sustaining uprightness when he had the idea to recite. At the very moment he was working to inhibit his habitual *reciting* responses, he had already given consent to his habitual *uprighting* responses. This consent, given subconsciously, was translated into the muscular bracing and righting reactions needed to hold him up and keep his head relatively level. That Alexander did not *notice* his misuse until the moment he began to recite, does not mean that it wasn’t there. Alexander’s passion for reciting, and his voice problems, did more than provide the motivation for his self-study. They also focused his attention on the particular moment when his idea to recite was put into action. Had he been similarly motivated to study himself in the act of sustaining uprightness, he would have discovered his habitual misuse patterns in this act as well.

I contend that Alexander’s lack of recognition of weight commitment phenomena led him to misconstrue what he was seeing in the mirror. Here is my view on how events unfolded to produce in Alexander what we have come to call “pulling down:”

The young Alexander did not recognize how much effort he had become accustomed to using in simply holding himself up. When it came time to recite, this holding interfered with an expressive, animated performance. To move and speak expressively, Alexander had to let go of the habitual tensings that were holding him upright, holding him still. At the moment Alexander let go of his neck and back, his underlying commitment of body weight was exposed. His neck and upper torso started to fall forward. Since Alexander intended to remain standing and to continue looking at his audience, this forward fall needed to be stopped to keep him from falling flat on his face; and his head needed to tilt backwards so that his sight-line would stay steady in spite of his forward falling neck. These instinctive muscular reactions were not pulling Alexander down. They were, in fact, holding his spine and head *up*.

Alexander's extraordinary perseverance in self-observation, and his astute understanding of the impact of habit, enabled him to become increasingly sensitive to the tensings that were holding him up. In changing his use, Alexander was doing more than inhibiting tensing reactions. He was eliminating the need for them — a grand achievement. He was changing his underlying condition of toppling. This affected his use *all the time*, including the moments *prior to* his idea to recite.

Without knowing it, Alexander was refining his weight commitment. He was creating a more and more balanced condition on an ongoing basis. Innate processes were coming back to life — less bracing was required to hold himself upright. It was this change in his underlying condition that enabled him to initiate action more effectively — to make the transition from 'stillness' into more demonstrative movement, such as reciting, with less disturbance and contortion. The fundamental problem was not in Alexander's "manner of reaction" but deeper, in his *manner of sustaining uprightness*. This precedes and sets the stage for all subsequent reactions.

### *Conclusion*

Our perpetual falling to earth and our manner of sustaining uprightness are inextricably linked. In committing body weight, we steer our fall, thereby directing a powerful force. Our response to that force is automatic. When we fall through our balance points, going up "does itself" — resulting in optimal uprightness sustainable indefinitely. When we fall away from our balance points, the force of our fall sets us toppling, triggering bracing and righting reactions, making the act of sustaining uprightness a lot more difficult and stressful.

By not experiencing the force generated by our falling, or our control over this force, or our reactions to it, we are missing watershed events. By re-establishing a relationship with these events — recognizing them as integral aspects of every act — we become better able to let the neck be free, the head go forward and up, the back lengthen and widen.

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