

EXPLANATION OF THIS PAGE

This web-page is comprised of three written pieces:

- (1) Criticizing Alexander's Observation Statements and Theories, by Michael Protzel
- (2) A Reply by Kathleen Ballard
- (3) A Reply to Kathleen Ballard by Michael Protzel

(An invitation has been extended to Kathleen Ballard to Reply to Michael Protzel's Reply)

The first two pieces were published in Statnews, (Volume 6, Issue 16, June 2005, Pages 24-25)

The third piece was submitted to Statnews for publication. Statnews decided to not publish it.

Criticizing Alexander's Observation Statements and Theories

By Michael Protzel

I enjoyed reading Kathleen Ballard's article, Research on the Alexander Technique, addressing Karl Popper's ideas on how knowledge and theory become established in a field of study, how subjective sensory observations are formulated into theory, and how the reliability of that theory is tested (Statnews; May, 2004). Of particular interest was the following statement by Dr. Ballard:

“Both published observation statements and explanatory theories must be subjected to critical discussion and reasoned arguments by peers, i.e. by other members of the profession, who devise ingenious methods and severe tests to attempt to find flaws in the statements and theories and try to refute them...This harsh treatment is necessary to eliminate the weaker statements and theories, to get nearer to the truth and to ensure that only the best corroborated and most robust survive.”
(page 20)

F.M. Alexander's observations, theories and insights into the underpinnings of human activity have inspired us all. Through his work, we recognize a “self” acting as a whole; one that creates an “habitual manner of use;” where focusing on the “ends” diverts attention from the “means”; where we interfere with our head-neck-back relationship but do not notice; where functioning declines. To me, these are the jewels of Alexander's invaluable legacy.

Yet, have Alexander's ideas really been “subjected to critical discussion and reasoned arguments by peers”? Have they under gone “severe tests to attempt to find flaws...to get nearer to the truth”? I do not think so. I believe that our community, by and large, assumes that all of F.M. Alexander's ideas on the use of the self are true, and that our job as his 'offspring' is to work to better understand these ideas, so that we can learn to do what he did, and teach what he taught, using the principles and methodologies he set forth.

Are we so sure that Alexander's observations and explanations about use and mis-use are 100% accurate? I, for one, see significant error. Alexander argues that we tense muscles unnecessarily, particularly the neck, and that this is how we interfere with our general coordination. To prevent our unnecessary tensings, Alexander says, we

must “inhibit” our habitual response at the “critical moment” -- when we first have an idea to act. We must say “no” to any attempt to directly gain our end, “no” to tensing the neck.

But what if there is an underlying condition that makes tensing the neck, as well as many other tensings, unavoidable -- beyond the reach of inhibition? This would change things a bit, would it not? I suggest that there is such an underlying condition. It is the state of toppling we create when we mis-direct the falling of our body mass. Our falling down to earth is not some inconsequential event. It is a cataclysmic event, generating substantial energy. Our falling is not something that happens *to* us. We are not passive pawns of gravity. We direct our falling moment-by-moment -- consciously or subconsciously -- to our decided advantage or disadvantage. We do so by controlling the trajectory of our fall, an act of consciousness I call “committing body weight.” The trajectory of our fall has a decisive impact on how we upright ourselves, something we are doing morning till night, in all sitting and standing activities.

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 fall into the bio-mechanical energy of optimal coordination. We literally *go* up, with no need to *hold* ourselves up. On the other hand, when we mis-commit body weight -- away from our balance points -- the force of our falling drives us off balance, setting us toppling. As soon as we start to topple, our *will to be upright* takes over. We automatically summon muscular bracing reactions that keep us from toppling completely, and muscular righting reactions (including tensing the neck) that keep the head relatively straight and level under the unsettling circumstances of our topple. These reactions are matters of survival. We cannot inhibit them. Moreover, our unintended, self-directed toppling -- and the myriad muscular reactions that ensue to keep us functional -- all happen out of awareness. This omnipresent syndrome is at the heart of our habitual manner of use.

Alexander's observations and theories do not factor in the powerful force generated by our constant falling, nor our control over this force, nor its effect on our use. These are serious omissions. It is impossible to understand how human beings coordinate without a deep understanding of these phenomena.

We Alexander teachers like to view the study of the use of the self as a scientific inquiry. But can we honestly consider our work science if we are unwilling to critically examine the ideas of F.M. Alexander, or to consider new theories? Can we honestly consider our work science if we are unable to engage in robust debate about the use of the self? And do it with no fixed idea of truth?

I have written three articles explaining my views: *Down To Earth*(1999), *Why Do We Tense Our Necks?* (2003) and *Alexander's Error* (2004). All three are available on the Internet at www.kinestheticventures.com. I welcome dialogue with my colleagues. I can be contacted at protz@gannlaw.com.

Kathleen Ballard Replies to Michael Protzel

In his introduction Protzel refers to the article *Research on the Alexander Technique*. He highlights the statement that “in a field of study,... observations and theories must be subject to critical discussion, reasoned arguments and tests to find [any] flaws.” This promised to be an interesting article but unfortunately it is spoiled by inaccuracies.

Michael Protzel's claim that Alexander did not take account of i) the powerful forces at work in an individual obliged to engage in muscular bracing, nor of ii) the harmful effect that interference with the postural mechanisms has on our use, runs counter to my reading of *The Universal Constant in Living*, chapter II, pages 16-28, Mouritz edition. Furthermore, Protzel's discussion of the interaction between body mass, gravity and the ground in terms of ‘constant falling’ is illogical.

Falling means descending by the force of gravity from a higher to a lower place. (Collins English Dictionary

3rd edn) But when we are sitting or standing still, however badly, we are in a state of equilibrium with the environment, not falling. The manner of interaction with gravity and a supporting surface is influenced by an individual's manner of use and habitual reaction to these stimuli. Good use entails directing our attention to the stimulus provided by the supporting forces under our feet, sit bones etc. when we `commit body weight' to the ground or chair under them, and then choosing an appropriate response.

In *UCL* pp 16-19, Alexander's description of the overtense, distorted condition of a pupil and of the benefit gained from lessons, shows that Alexander was able to teach this individual to inhibit, direct and respond positively to the `hands on' work. Although he did not employ the language used in the paragraph above, Alexander must have had an implicit understanding of the facts presented. It is difficult to envisage the Technique being so successful if this were not so.

A new pupil with such severe problems is not likely to have much awareness of events taking place in lessons until neck and other tensions are significantly reduced. In the early stages, learning is likely to be implicit. As an individual's awareness and ability to inhibit and direct increase, they allow the teacher to guide the individual toward more balanced and co-ordinated body attitudes and move them easily to sit or stand. The individual learns to observe, inhibit unwanted responses and project directions while at rest and immediately before and during what Alexander called `the critical moment'. (*UoS*, 1932, page 30, Methuen edition)

Neck tension often responds to inhibition and direction via an indirect route. By learning to recognise and avoid body attitudes and ways of moving that provoke muscular bracing, neck tension can be reduced through attention to the manner of use of the self as a whole.

Michael Protzel Replies to Kathleen Ballard

I thank Kathleen Ballard for responding to my article, *Criticizing Alexander's Observation Statements and Theories*, *Statnews* (Vol. 6, Issue 16, p. 24) and engaging in a discussion about the roots of mis-use. There is no more important topic.

Ballard mis-states my position when she says that I claim that "Alexander did not take account of...the harmful effect that interference with the postural mechanisms has on our use." Of course he did. I am claiming that he did not have a detailed understanding of the *source* of such interference.

The section of *The Universal Constant in Living* that Ballard cites involves Alexander's recounting of his work with a pupil suffering from osteo-arthritis. In these pages, Alexander summarizes his understanding of mis-use. He talks about "over-reaction of muscle groups," "habitual interference," "misdirection," and links them to "the wrong employment of the primary control." But Alexander offers no in-depth explanation of how habit, faulty sensory appreciation and misdirection lead specifically to neck tensing and a shortened and narrowed torso.

Ballard criticizes my use of the word "falling" as not in keeping with the dictionary which says "falling means descending by the force of gravity from a higher to a lower place." And she concludes that "when we are sitting or standing still, however badly, we are in a state of equilibrium with the environment, not falling." Although it is true that the descent of a gravity-compelled object can be stopped, it can only be stopped by a *counter-force* that is stronger than the downward force that gravity supplies. Imagine a not-yet-ripe apple hanging from a tree. The apple is not descending because it is being held up. The strength of its connection to the tree is a counter-force greater than the downward force of gravity acting upon it. When the apple gains weight and the connection is no longer strong enough, the apple descends. But the apple was *always* generating a downward force, even before it broke loose from the tree. It is in this sense that I say we are always falling.

Our falling bodies generate substantial force that has ongoing impact. We command this force by directing the trajectory of our fall, whether or not we are aware of doing so. When well-directed, the force of our falling powers our innate uprighting system -- as falling water powers hydro-electricity. Harnessing this power enables us to sustain uprightness indefinitely, with minimal effort -- in all sitting and standing activities. When we mis-

direct our falling, however, we begin to topple. Our will to be upright automatically seizes control, and provides the muscular counter-force that stops our topple (our descent) and that keeps our head relatively straight and level. In other words, we strain to hold ourselves up.

In early childhood, we lose kinesthetic connection with our falling. We begin directing it to our decided disadvantage, most particularly in the common act of falling backwards in sitting, an act we repeat again and again and again -- without awareness of its impact. Falling backwards aborts our innate uprighting system which is activated when our falling weight tips *forwards*. In losing access to this exquisitely efficient power, we begin concocting an effort-filled, alternative means of uprighting. This leads to the “over reaction of muscle groups” and skeletal distortions cited by Alexander in *UCL*. They are all derivatives of our deeply ingrained habit of falling backwards.

Ballard considers our “neck and other tensions” to be “unwanted” responses. This fails to recognize the purpose these responses serve. In real life, when we are lost in habit and the force of our falling drives us off balance, we can either (1) topple completely, or (2) respond by tensing to stop our topple and keep our head relatively level. There is really no choice here. We will respond by tensing every time. It is a matter of survival.

Ballard argues that “good use [in interacting with gravity] entails...directing our attention to the stimulus provided by the supporting surface under our feet or sit bones...and then choosing an appropriate response.” It is far too late at that point to choose. We exercise our choice well before our weight reaches the supporting surface. We do so, for good or for ill, by how we direct the trajectory of our falling. It is not our responses that need changing. Our responses will change of their own accord when we change the underlying act that compels such responses. (In walking, for example, our full weight falls toward the front foot soon after we place it on the ground. When our weight falls forward of the talus there will be one set of neuro-muscular-skeletal responses, when it falls laterally there will be another, etc. Moreover, a difference as small as a centimeter in the trajectory of our falling will change our uprighting response.)

Ballard suggests that Alexander must have had “implicit understanding” or else, she argues, how could “the Technique be so successful.” The Technique is successful because of the inspiring hands-on experience it provides, and because it teaches recognition of the force of habit, faulty sensory appreciation, endgaining and the importance of the head-neck-back relationship. I, for one, have learned so much from these profound teachings. But Alexander failed to recognize the overwhelming impact of the force of our falling -- and how its misdirection lies at the heart of our habitual manner of use. This omission keeps the Alexander Technique from being even more successful. When the source of head-neck-back interference is explained and demonstrated to new pupils, this helps them make sense of their self-created tensings and skeletal distortions. More importantly, it helps them re-establish a kinesthetic connection with their falling, which enhances their ability to direct it more consciously. This deepens and accelerates the learning process.