

Alexandrians in Full: Reclaiming an Essential Dimension of Use

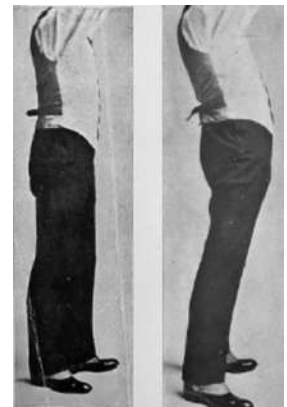
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Here I argue that the specific psycho-physical coordination revealed by *Breath as Postural Process*[™] (BPP), the work that I've developed since 1985 and in which I am now offering certification, lies at the heart not only of F. M. Alexander's insistent advocacy of "the great principle of antagonistic action" in his early respiratory work—particularly but not solely *The Theory and Practice of a New Method of Respiratory Re-Education* (1907)—but also of his broader conception and embodiment of "a satisfactory use." Moreover, I say that only by the exercise of a coordination sufficiently like that of BPP, did he (and can we!) realize a dynamic and truly lengthened use, because the same coordination that moves the rib-cage and supports optimal gaseous exchange also supports general lengthening, by distributing the abdominal contents and forces so as to provide optimal musculoskeletal and hydraulic support within the body. It could as well be called *Posture as Breath Process*!

From what Alexander wrote alone, there is surprisingly little detail about his own use, particularly as described in *The Use of the Self* (US), Chapter 1, "Evolution of a Technique." There, he offers many observations on what misuses he had to avoid—pulling the head back, depressing the larynx, gasping through the mouth—but less on the specifics of a new coordination. He refers primarily to the directions of lengthening and widening, and the role of inhibition, but provides minimal guidance on the positive elements of "satisfactory use." His early respiratory writings focus almost entirely on what *not* to do. The result is a rather vague image of Alexander's own use—his mature, integrated postural quality, what I have termed in general as *posturality*. As he himself noted, it was "impossible to describe ... in detail my various experiences during this long period," and so, in time, he in his own person "became the book," so to speak, with his earlier, pre-1910 writing serving more marketing than instructional purposes. Keeping that in mind is helpful when parsing his early texts.

Nonetheless, it is clear that by 1910, Alexander had realized a "lengthened and widened" posturality. The photographs first published in a periodical that year and later appearing in the 1918 edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* show a clear change in kinematics (movement as perceived visually): grossly, a backward shift of the legs from the ankles and a forward inclination of the torso from the hips. What the images obviously cannot show are the internal movements—those of breath coordination and postural stabilization—and the muscular and gravitational forces producing them (kinetics). It will no doubt be suggested that this shift can be attributed to Primary Control, but that concept wouldn't come into his thinking until at least the mid-1920s, being finally introduced and elaborated in US only in 1932. The 1910 photos, Alexander notes, "...show quite clearly not only the correct position of the feet, *the fundamental problem* [emphasis added], but also how the whole body... is thereby thrown into gear," thus virtually asserting that the global coordination was solely a function of foot placement. Yet shortly thereafter in the text, he also states that "the teacher must himself *place the pupil in a position of mechanical advantage*" [emphasis added], affirming the crucial role of the teacher, using skillfully guiding hands and nuanced understanding of postural mechanics to bring about the intended posturality. Apropos, shouldn't we finally agree that Alexander's main contribution to human posturality, together with the vital recognition of Unreliable Sensory Appreciation, was the use of the hands as instrumentality of a Knowing Self to show people directly and sensorily what words alone could not?



For many years, then, as documented from the early respiratory writings through *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (CCCI) in 1923, Alexander's ideas and actions around use or posturality were shaped primarily by two principles: the more external one of "position of mechanical advantage," as above, and the more internal one of "the great principle of antagonistic action." The latter, in Alexander's own words, leads to the "correct use of *the muscular system of the thorax* [emphasis added] in its fullest sense as the primary motive power in the respiratory act." So what exactly is this principle of antagonistic action? In muscle physiology, it refers to the coordination of opposing muscle groups: when one (the agonist) contracts, its counterpart (the antagonist) reflexively lengthens, allowing

movement. This interplay is straightforward in joints like the elbow, where biceps and triceps alternate roles in flexion and extension.

When it comes to respiration, however, the antagonistic interaction is more complex—mainly between the diaphragm and the abdominal musculature. But it's not a simple binary relationship, as at the elbow. Their coordinated actions are both spatial and temporal, involving shifts both specific and subtle in tone and timing, making straightforward description difficult. Alexander surely understood this, but didn't enlarge upon it in 1907, probably in part due to sheer complexity and in part to protect his own methods, as the giving of lessons was his livelihood. Not having methods to protect and willing to grapple with the complexity, I've undertaken that deeper exposition in 1) my book *The Posturality of the Person: A Guide to Postural Education and Therapy*, particularly Chapter 7, "Breath as Postural Process," 2) my article *The Theory and Practice of Alexander's Breathing Method* (*AmSAT Journal* No. 15, Summer 2019), and 3) now in the present writing.

All that of course lies open to the motivated reader, but the essential point from both the 1907 text and later *CCCI* is this: achieving maximum control and development in breathing depends on commanding the coordination that creates the expansion and contraction of the chest. The real issue is *how* to do this. For Alexander, the answer was clear: "the teacher, by means of his manipulation, assists [the pupil] to secure the correct readjustment and co-ordination (the desired 'end'), thus ensuring a series of satisfactory experiences." These are to be repeated until the old habit-pattern is replaced, however gradually, by a new one. Put bluntly: what's essential, according to Alexander, is that we acquire the ability, whether assisted by a teacher or on our own, properly to *MOVE OUR RIBS*. That's the core premise-practice of *Breath as Postural Process*[™].

To be clear, any breathing method that emphasizes increased diaphragmatic excursion—including so-called "belly breathing"—fails to achieve this. If the abdominals are more-or-less relaxed on inhalation as the diaphragm contracts—descends—the viscera are displaced downward and forward, leaving the rib cage relatively inert. It is only through the antagonistic action of the diaphragm's contraction over the fulcrum of the viscera, as transmitted hydraulically against a dynamically stabilized lower abdominal wall, that the rib cage is lifted, thus creating the due expansion that Alexander described. N.B.; in BPP solely for gaseous exchange, the exhalation is mainly vegetative or passive, i.e., the effort at the end of inhalation is relaxed such that the contraction of the rib cage is effected principally by the action of gravity and the elastic recoil of the lung. Obviously, for the multifarious applications in humankind of breath management for performance (including Whispered Ah!), opinion and instruction abound.

It is inconceivable that Alexander did not carry his early and impassioned respiratory work forward into his evolving practice-theory of Use. Strange too that none of his principal followers—Tasker, Barstow, Westfeldt, Wielopolska, Macdonald, Carrington, the Barlows, Jones—seem to have picked up on and continued this line of teaching, as evidenced at least by their own published work and pronouncements and that of their successors. Perhaps they, and even Alexander himself, were overly-reliant on the Primary Control that promised a singular solution to the complex problem of posturality, much as B. J. Palmer's upper cervical adjustment (the "Hole in One") did in early chiropractic—this I say from firsthand experience as the son of a chiropractor. And thus has it apparently continued through the generations of Alexander teachers.

In any case, with *Breath as Postural Process*[™] there is now a reliable, if challenging, framework that brings this essential dimension of Alexandrian Use back into focus, in a superlative approach to the conscious cultivation of a posturality that unifies the inner movements of breathing and the outer ones of both being and doing. "Who have ears to hear, let them hear." The table is set and the meal laid; we are invited to partake, and thereby to become *Alexandrians in Full*.

Ron Dennis, Ed.D., since 1990 based in Atlanta, trained and certified in 1979 under Judith Leibowitz at the American Center in New York. His career comprises—in addition to teaching—membership, service, and leadership in ACAT-NY and NASTAT/AmSAT. Author (2013) of *The Posturality of the Person: A Guide to Postural Education and Therapy* and of *Alexander Revisited: Contemplation and Criticism 1979-2014*, in his writing of more than 45 years he has striven to clarify the conceptual foundations of the Technique and to illuminate the coordinational implications and requirements of "a satisfactory use of the self" as realized by F. M. Alexander. Information about BPP certification is available from rondennis@joimail.com.