

## Working to a principle

In a typical Alexander lesson, we spend a lot of time in front of a chair sitting down and standing up. It's understandable that pupils should think this is to teach them how to sit properly. Modern life demands that we spend many hours seated each day, so it's as well to make sure that we are using our body in ways that do not restrict our breathing or cause pain and unnecessary tension.

But an Alexander lesson is about more than that. Alexander obviously got frustrated with pupils who could not see that what he was teaching had wider and more general applications beyond the situation of a lesson:

'It's not getting in and out of chairs even under the best of conditions that is of any value: that is simply physical culture. It is what you have been doing in preparation that counts when it comes to making movements' (*Aphorisms*, endpaper).

He explained in *The Universal Constant in Living*, working to a principle means we are not limited by our habits. We can transfer the principle we have learned in lessons to other situations and discover new solutions – new ways of doing things.

Learning to “do” by this procedure [the AT] is not learning to “do” exercises on a trial-and-error plan, but learning to work to a principle, not only in using the self but in the application of the technique outside the self. A person who learns to work to a principle in doing one exercise will have learned to do all exercises, but the person who learns just to “do an exercise” will most assuredly have to go on learning to “do exercises” *ad infinitum*. (UCL, p. 164)

The movements of sitting and standing are relatively simple compared to, say, hitting a tennis ball with accuracy and power. *But, they rely on the same underlying principle.*

In another context, the principle which upholds the dome of St Paul's cathedral is the same as that which preserves a child's arch of bricks build over a toy railway line. Recognition of the principle as the same is a vital step towards building domes, but of course a cathedral is neither technically nor spiritually 'nothing but' a child's toy. Equally there is a difference in scale and value, though perhaps none in principle, between human reasoning and that of the [laboratory] white rat (*Behaviour* by D.E. Broadbent, p. 115).

Once you have learned the principle of “keeping your length” or “head leading” in an Alexander lesson, it can be used to carry out all your daily activities in a process leading to endless benefits, fascination and amusement.

(Apropos Gary Adelman, 17 Sept 2020)

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