

BODY EDUCATION

The Alexander Technique teaches you to get rid of bad body habits and start using the body efficiently. MC stands corrected.

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After a day at the office, slumped in front of the computer, I'd get very tense around the neck and shoulders, a stiff pull that would slowly become a dull pain that doesn't quite hamper my daily living, but does make it rather uncomfortable. Exercise helps to strengthen the back muscles, thereby alleviating the discomfort, but it doesn't completely rid the body of tension. It was starting to worry me when a friend pointed out it could simply be the way I use my body—the way I walk, sit and stand, and introduced me to the Alexander Technique, or AT, a method of adjusting body postures to relive damaging stresses

The method was created by an actor, Frederick Matthias Alexander, who as a young thespian was in danger of losing his voice. Doctors were not able to help. One day, while practising in front of the mirror, he noticed he was taking gasps before talking, creating a pull around the neck. Intrigued, Frederick began a personal quest to learn to use his body better, and consequently went on to teach his findings to others. The technique is especially popular with performing artists – actors and musicians – and counts Hilary Swank, Keanu Reeves and Paul McCartney among its practitioners.

Curious, I decide to look up the lone AT teacher in town, and we arrange to meet at his apartment which doubles up

as his studio. Gabe Evens is a jazz pianist by profession, currently with a teaching gig in Kuala Lumpur. He had suffered severe tendonitis in his 20s from his piano playing, and when visits to doctors did not help, he approached an AT teacher. Upon listening to his problem, she started to work with his head and neck. "I didn't know what my neck had to do with my hands, but incredibly, it actually made them feel better," says Gabe. "The Technique shows you that everything in the body is interconnected." Impressed, he continued with the administrations and before long, signed up for the 3-year training course.

The objective of AT is to help us shed bad physical habits and to recondition the

body to regain the ease and grace of our childhood. "It is a method that teaches us to use our body more efficiently, in all our waking, and to some extent sleeping, life," says Gabe. We were born with natural poise. As children, we walked with erect spines and with our heads balanced easily on our necks. As we grow up, however, the bad habits kick in due to observing others around us, in response to stress and even in adapting to new technology. We all have unconscious movement habits, and without knowing it, place undue pressure on our bodies even if it's just lifting a book or reaching for the coffee cup. And while it feels comfortable for some to slouch, research has shown that it puts strain on the spine and associated ligaments, leading to long-term health problems.

Standing next to Gabe, who is holding himself incredibly straight but relaxed, I feel I am slouching horribly, but he calmly says not to worry, he'd gotten past the judgemental stage a long time ago. He pulls up a straight-back chair and asks that I sit down and stand up a couple of times, which I do somewhat self-consciously. "Ok, I'm going to tell you where you are going wrong, so don't be offended." (I won't be, unless he tells me I look like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.) "Your knees appear to be slightly locked; you are jutting your hips forward. Your neck is sticking out and at the same time you are pulling your head in and upwards. All this is creating unnecessary stress in your body." (Nope, I just look like a turtle.)

Gabe then proceeds to lightly pull my neck up, adjusts my head this way and that, and gently corrects my back posture. "The primary directions of the technique is to allow the neck to be free, to let the head release forward and up and to let the back lengthen and widen. Do you feel a difference?" As a matter of fact, I do. There is a sense of weightlessness to my neck and shoulder area which is

liberating, and I seem to grow a little taller in height just by lengthening my spine. "We are habitually compressing our bodies and therefore shortening our spines," explains Gabe, holding on to my head. The backbone of AT is the relationship between the head, the neck and the spine. How we manage this relationship will subsequently affect the rest of the body, including hands and feet. So can't we help ourselves by simply by sitting up straight? "It's not just about posture, it is also about poise. It's when you're moving that you misuse yourself the most. If you improve the use of

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your body, your aches and pains can get better," says Gabe.

As soon as he let go, I can feel the slump creeping back into my posture, like a piece of thread unravelling from its spool. Reconditioning the body is harder than I think which is why several sessions are needed to kick out the old and bring in the new. It costs RM100 for an individual one-hour session, during which time Gabe will teach, refine and enforce conscious thought into our every move. "You have to think a lot," says Gabe. "You have to recognise the force of habit and consciously redirect the body."

Most people who seek help through the AT do so if they have a chronic pain which hampers their usual activities. One of Gabe's students, Toh Sumei, had problems with her knee, aggravated by a hike on the Pyrenees, and causing her

pain especially when using the stairs. She was concerned about the long-term impact, and was exploring alternative means of healing when she came across the technique in a barefoot running forum. "Call it self-preservation, but if by chance I live to be a geriatric, I'd like to at least be one who runs marathons and hikes," she says in an email interview.

After one session with Gabe, she was impressed by the positive effects. "Whatever it is, I ended the first session feeling taller and moving much more freely, even gracefully! At the same time I was feeling very awkward, even though Gabe assured me I was holding myself with much improved balance and much less tension, and very much more alert," she enthuses. She also became very aware of how her body is positioned in relation to her movements, and that by thinking it through, she could take the stairs without pain. "Not all the time at first, if I reverted to not thinking about it, the pain would manifest again. It was amazing, like I could 'allow' the pain to occur or not at will," says Sumei.

It's been four months since her first session with Gabe, and Sumei sums up her experience succinctly, "I became aware that there is an ideal (most efficient) way of using our body, and correspondingly, a bad use of ourselves. Think of a finely engineered car engine. You're bound to notice when something's out of tune - harsh noises, jerky motions. My surgeon and physiotherapist may have patched me up to basic working condition again, but they couldn't teach me about the most efficient use of my machine."

My brief introduction to the Alexander Technique, has left me with a lot to think about. My body, long-subjected to misuse, has not grasp the lot of information thrown at it, but as I leave Gabe's apartment, I consciously walk a little straighter. And isn't that a start? ☺

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Go to www.alexandertechnique.com or www.gabeevens.com/alexander.html. You may contact Gabe Evens at 019-3887305