Why Yoga and the Alexander Technique?

Written by David Moore

There are a couple of questions that I am frequently asked about the relationship between yoga and the Alexander Technique. The first by people, often teachers of the technique, is why on earth should you want to do yoga? Surely the Alexander Technique does not need to be mixed up with yoga and is a complete and satisfactory approach in itself. The second question by people who are not familiar with the technique is,"are the Alexander technique and yoga similar?" By yoga they normally mean the series of postures or asanas, although yoga covers a very wide field indeed.

The answer to the first question/objection is that I do not suggest that the Alexander technique needs additional input. This question often exposes an understanding of the technique as a particular way of working dependent on particular procedures, ways of a teacher using his hands etc. However the technique in its essence provides us with a way of working according to basic principles, not any particular way of working.

As such the technique is applied to a huge range of situations - singing, playing music, horse riding, dancing, playing sports, dealing with speech impediments, rehabilitation from accidents, martial arts and much more. Indeed as the famous educational philosopher, John Dewy declared of the Alexander technique: It bears the same relationship to education that education itself bears to all other human activities. (1) Because the technique is about dealing with the habits we take into every area of our waking and sleeping life, how could the technique not be applied to yoga practice, where people's harmful habits of use are just as likely to manifest as in any other activity of life.

The second question on the similarities between yoga and the Alexander technique is a more difficult question to answer. Firstly it all depends what you mean by yoga If a person if referring the to yoga postures or asana practice, then my answer is that the Alexander technique is not about doing any particular movements or exercises. The Alexander technique provides us with a set of principles and understanding which we can apply to any movements or exercises in a way that will make sure that the movements or exercises will be carried out in a useful and coordinated manner.

If we are talking about yoga on wider level as a whole approach to life, then there are a number of intriguing similarities of approach with the Alexander work. Both are extremely optimistic undertakings, which recognize that it is within the power of human being to alter their own karma or conditioning. Both claim that breaking the hold of habit is the key to fundamental change. Both recognize the necessity of awareness and a keen understanding of ourselves and our habits, as the basis of change. Both understand the basic unreliability of our very basic perceptions, and stress the necessity of working with ourselves in such a way that our understanding of ourselves and the world around us, becomes more accurate. Both emphasize the necessity of eliminating the tyranny of focusing on ends instead of means.

They are not however the same. The ultimate aim of yoga is self-transcendence. Whilst Alexander inquires into the use of the self, yogic approaches question our very understanding of what this self is. The Alexander technique is grounded in the practicalities of our everyday lives.

To a certain extent I am in sympathy with all workers in either "physical," "mental" or "spiritual spheres, for I believe that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy," but it has always seemed to me that the first duty of man was and is to understand and develop those potentialities which are well within the sphere of his activities here on earth (2)

However yoga developed out of an age-old religious tradition. As such many schools of yoga are stuck in tired and obsolete traditions, superstition and fixation on form rather than the spirit behind the forms and the problem is how to cut through the inessential and culturally conditioned to the essential heart of yoga. Of course the Alexander tradition also, although much more recent in origin, is, like every area of human growth and development susceptible to the error of confusing form with spirit.

"If leaders in the religious life and the Prophets had given due recognition to (the problem of faulty sensory perception) in assessing the nature & value of the experiences on which they believed religious & other beliefs should be based, their followers would not have been so frequently lead into error by mistaking illusion for reality. Instead they might have been lead to unknown experiences far beyond the present limit of human conception of experience, as they passed from instinctive to conscious in changing and improving the use and functioning of the self ."

F.M. Alexander in Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual p.xxiv

Footnotes:

(1) Use of the Self by F.M. Alexander Introduction by John Dewy p. xix

(2) Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual by F.M. Alexander p.xx