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## **Balancing body and mind**

**PENELOPE CARR** USED TO LOVE TURNING CLAY INTO POTS. BUT TEACHING OTHERS TO OVERCOME ‘POOR USE OF SELF’ THROUGH THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE HAS GIVEN HER LIFE NEW MEANING.

I was a working potter in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, when I made the discovery that was to change my life. It was 1984 and the heavy labour of many years of lifting raw materials, chopping fuel and stacking kilns was beginning to take its toll. Throwing pots for a living is relentlessly physical. I knew that I could no longer ignore the pain that I was starting to experience and that it would have to be overcome if I was going to be able to continue, through my craft, to provide for my young daughter and myself.

It was then that I first heard about the Alexander Technique from an English friend who suggested that it might provide me with solutions to my problem. Why the technique should be better known in the United Kingdom than it is in Australia I would come to understand, as it wasn't long after my friend mentioned the technique that a week-long residential was to be held in Bowral for people interested in learning more.

During that week I met musicians, opera singers, miners, a fellow potter and a range of professionals leading more sedentary lives. Some of them, like me, were looking for help with specific ailments but all of us were keen to hear the story of the Australian who transformed his own life through his observations and subsequent development of a range of principles for naturally balancing body and mind.

### **From the stage to the classroom**

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born in Wynyard, in northern Tasmania, in 1869. His early ambition was to be an actor but he found his promising career on the stage to be threatened by problems he was having with his voice. None of the doctors he consulted at the time were able to cure him but, after setting up mirrors so that he could watch himself as he rehearsed, he eventually came to see that it was, in his words, “poor use of the self” that was the root of his problems.

Through this process of self-discovery, Alexander then developed the technique he described as “basically changing and controlling reaction” and he soon made a name for himself by teaching his technique, first in Melbourne and Sydney, and later in London, where he moved in 1904. His practice flourished there and his pupils included George Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley and many well-known actors and political figures of the time.

During his long career – he died in 1955 – he wrote a number of books about his discoveries and established a training course for Alexander teachers that led to the technique being taught in many countries around the world. In Australia the first training course for teachers of the technique was set up in 1984, just weeks after I

attended the Bowral residential. By then I had made up my mind and my days as a potter were over. Three years later, having moved to Sydney, I completed my training and set up my practice in Rozelle.

So how would I describe the Alexander Technique? It's about the unity of body and mind; the coordination of the entire being. It's about unlearning bad habits and relearning natural skills that promote poise, relieving pain and anxiety, and improving performance in all aspects of life. In 40-minute lessons with individual students, using gentle guidance with the hands and encouraging conscious thought about patterns of movement, the Alexander teacher helps students to develop a way to live more productively and energetically with the minimum of effort.

For the past 25 years I have worked with students of all ages and from all walks of life. I used to love turning clay into pots that were both beautiful and functional but I have gained my greatest satisfaction through helping others to transform their lives.

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A 2008 study published in the *British Medical Journal*

([www.bmj.com/content/337/bmj.a2656](http://www.bmj.com/content/337/bmj.a2656)) found that "one to one lessons in the Alexander Technique from registered teachers have long-term benefits for patients with chronic back pain. Six lessons followed by exercise prescription were nearly as effective as 24 lessons." Partly in response to this research, most Australian health funds now offer rebates for Alexander Technique lessons.

The Australian Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (AUSTAT) accredits its members (mAUSTAT) on the basis of three years of competency-based training at an approved school.