

Horse and rider together can be as poetry expressed in motion. 'Dressage' is the name we give to the foundational training designed to achieve this worthy end. Anyone who appreciates **the art of dressage** will have observed how the quality of the horse's movement is greatly influenced by the quality of the rider's movement; in this regard one could say that a horse 'mirrors' its rider. For example, the tense rider encourages tension in her/his horse, the rider tipping forward in the saddle encourages her horse to tip forward onto its forehand, and the rider who sits with poise, balance and grace tends to elicit those same qualities in her horse.

The difficult thing is for the rider to be truly aware of what he/she is doing with her body, in other words to be truly aware of what messages (i.e. aids) she is giving to her horse. A rider may believe she is giving one particular aid but is in fact giving another. That this is a very common problem will be evident to anyone who has watched a few riding lessons; what the rider believes she is doing and what the instructor sees that the rider is actually doing are often two very different things. Therefore, before we could expect better performance of the horse, surely we would need better body awareness from the rider, in other words what is needed first is some **dressage for people**.

There is a method devoted entirely to teaching people how to become more body aware, how to perceive more accurately what one is actually doing with one's body, how to use one's body in the best way possible, with relaxation, poise, balance and grace. This method is called the F.M. Alexander Technique. 'Alexander' lessons are taken by people from all walks of life wishing to reduce suffering from stress and tension, back and neck and shoulder pain, stiff sore joints, eye and jaw problems, anxiety and depression. Alexander lessons are taken also by performing artists in all disciplines wishing to improve their capacity to perform well - musicians, singers, actors, dancers, and horse riders participating in all manner of equestrian pursuits.

Something important but often forgotten is that improved body awareness requires an improved **quality of Mind**. The word 'mind' here is being used in the wholistic sense, pointing to that core of one's being wherein resides one's overall understanding arising from all thoughts, sensations, and feelings. Before there can be improvement in how one's body moves, there must first be improvement in what one's mind apprehends and comprehends. Such improved understanding leads to better instructions (in the form of electro-chemical signals) emanating from one's mind to one's body. This in turn permits improved signaling from one's body to one's horse. In other words, improved rider-to-horse communication must be initiated in the rider's mind. Then, improved messages will be transmitted from the rider's mind to the rider's body, and only then can they be transmitted to the rider's horse. Alexander Technique is so effective precisely because it takes this mind/body dynamic into account. In this sense, Alexander work is not so much 'body work', as is often suggested, but rather it is primarily mind work, training one's mind. One's body benefits from improvement in one's mind; one's horse benefits from improvement in one's body. Finally it must be

said that such improvements as are being discussed here require of the rider improved mindfulness, and the willingness to give attention to the process of improvement

Alexander Technique is Dressage for people Dressage is Alexander Technique for horses

Humans and horses have remarkably similar bio-mechanics. This is not so very surprising when one considers that whereas life has been evolving on this planet Earth for almost four billion years, human beings and modern horses (equus) have arrived on the scene relatively recently, five to seven million years ago. It would appear that humans and horses are both a part of Nature's same 'experiment' with advanced four limbed land mammals built around a spine housing a central nervous system, at the end of which is a large and disproportionately heavy head. Given the location and the weight of this head, the manner in which the neck supports the head is critical for the functioning of the entire organism, human or horse. For both creatures, correct support of the head by the neck musculature elicits proper lengthening of the spine with consequent lengthening and widening of the back musculature. Then, with the back in such an ideal condition, all four limbs can radiate freely from the torso resulting in a happy and altogether healthier creature, be that creature human or equine.

As a certified teacher of the Alexander Technique and a rider who has enjoyed good fortune in finding wonderful teachers of Dressage, I offer instruction in both Alexander and Equitation. Often when teaching a rider I commence with five or ten minutes of traditional Alexander work, watching how the student performs everyday movements such as sitting, standing, walking and speaking. Then, I make suggestions for improvement, employing explanation, demonstration, and hands-on guidance. Next, when the student is mounted on her horse, we work together to apply to the movements involved in riding the lessons learned earlier. From time to time with the horse at halt I will include further hands-on guidance.

Habits that drive the simple everyday movements (sitting, standing, walking, etc.) seen in the first part of the lesson are very much the same habits of movement that manifest in the more complex activity of riding. The advantage of starting first with working to improve everyday movements is that these simpler slower movements are easier for the student to perceive than the more complex and faster ones involved in riding. Moreover, I can easily use hand-on guidance when showing improvements to the simpler slower movements, something that for obvious reasons cannot so easily be done when the student is mounted upon a moving horse.

For more concrete examples of how I might give instruction in both Alexander and Equitation I offer the following: having numerous times during the course of a lesson requested of the rider that she desist from craning her neck forward at the 8th vertebra

(the hump) thereby taking her head too far forward, thus encouraging her horse to shift its weight onto its fore hand, I notice that while un-tacking her horse the student again is craning her neck forward. My Alexander response might be to say something, pointing out the re-emergence of the old harmful habit. Alternatively, I might say nothing but instead choose to place gently my hand onto the back of the student's neck and then move my hand minutely in the direction the student would need to release the neck toward improved poise. Another option would be for me to mimic for the student what she is doing with her spine, and then go on to demonstrate what good poise of the neck and head upon the spine looks like.

Whichever mode(s) of communication I might choose to employ (auditory, kinesthetic, or visual), my job would remain the same, i.e. to perceive and then communicate to the student those habits regarding posture and style of movement that just don't work and can lead only to pain, tension, and poor performance. Moreover, whichever mode(s) of communication an Alexander teacher might choose to employ, one factor would remain of paramount importance, namely that **the Alexander teacher exemplifies the Alexander Technique**, i.e. is a good example of good use of the body/mind. It is primarily for this reason that Alexander teacher training is full time for three years.

This pedagogical approach combining principles of both Alexander and Equitation enables students and their horses to make steady improvement in equitation and, in addition, to feel much better in the many movements employed in everyday activities. Students and their horses suffer less from stress, tension, pain and anxiety. They enjoy more ease, grace, balance and poise.

I recall with gratitude and deep respect all of my several teachers with whom I worked while living in England from 1971 to 1993. My root teachers and spiritual guides, Dr. and Mrs. Juer, with whom I had the privilege to work for twenty years, used often to say, "**Whatever you do in life, endeavor to be an artist**". Any modest success I have enjoyed began with and was supported by these two exceptional beings.

My first teacher of the Alexander Technique was Walter Carrington from whom over a period of six years I received approximately 150 Alexander lessons. Walter had learned his craft directly from the legendary founder of the Alexander Technique, Frederick Mathias Alexander. In 1987, I was accepted into an Alexander teacher training school where, under the tutelage of Adam and Rosemary Nott, I completed the mandatory three year full time course that trained me to teach the Alexander Technique to others.

As for my teachers of Equitation, I must give special mention to Alison Midwinter, British Horse Society Instructor (BHSI). Alison had been recommended to me by the

aforementioned Walter Carrington, himself a keen amateur rider; Walter maintained that Alison was “the best teacher of equitation in all of England”. In time, Alison introduced me to her teachers, Daniel Pevsner and Charles Harris, both of whom were Fellows of the British Horse Society (FBHS) and former riders with the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, Austria. Encouraged and guided by these aficionados of classical equitation, I became an ardent observer at several events featuring the Spanish riding School and in addition, at international level dressage competitions on the FEI’s European circuit (la Federation Equestre Internationale). Finally, I enjoyed a number of memorable weekend riding clinics held at the Lusitano Stud in Suffolk, England, the sixteenth century family seat of Lord Henry and Lady Sylvia Loch, students of Nuno Oliveira.

All of my teachers of equitation would freely acknowledge their great debt to the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, the undisputed world center of Equestrian Art. It is fitting therefore to recall here the Spanish School’s classic statement of purpose: to foster the Art of Equitation, in which horse and rider together as One, becomes able to execute all paces and movements with the same grace and ease that can be observed in horses in the wild. We could not ask for more. We need not accept less.

Alexander Technique is the art of getting out of your own way
Dressage is the art of getting out of your horse’s way

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**Alexander Technique lessons are insurance covered
by extended health care insurance, under the Naturopath category**
