

“HORSEMANSHIP AND THE ALEXANDER EXPERIENCE”

F.M. Alexander Memorial Lecture 1980

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I began taking Alexander lessons about 12 years ago, because my back was in pain whenever I got on a horse, and because I was hoping to improve my riding position. The very first few lessons won me over completely. Everything was working well. The pain cleared, and I was changing shape quite dramatically. I was nearly ready to get bored with the whole thing when I began to realize the wider implications of the technique for me, as a professional, working with horses. I found a great resemblance between the ideals of good posture and locomotion, as applied to horses or to people. The concepts and the procedures involved in attaining these ideals were not dissimilar. This to me was of the utmost importance. It dawned on me that, by learning the technique, I might achieve some of the equestrian experience that was then to me unobtainable. By studying the technique, I was gaining a better view and understanding of horsemanship, and at the same time, my riding experience convinced me of the validity, and the soundness, of the technique.

A further step in my development occurred some months later, when, in the Autumn of '69, the Spanish Riding School of Vienna, came to England. The school has been in existence for over 400 years and is today regarded as a custodian of the art of horsemanship. The kind of riding practised in the school is called dressage. This can mean simply the basic schooling that every riding horse has to undergo, irrespective of what it's job in life is going to be, but at its advanced level dressage consists of high-school figures and movements, which, in equine locomotion, are the equivalent of human ballet.

I had not seen the school perform live before, and the impact on me was quite staggering. The equestrian standard of the display was, of course, very high, and very satisfying, but what struck me in particular, were the superb use and posture of the riders. Although I was already at the time, developing a new awareness and appreciation of good use, and even though I was by then a fairly experienced riding teacher, it was not until this meeting with the Spanish School that I realized to what extent one could develop one's own good use, through correct riding. The riders before me were carrying themselves and acting as if they had all undergone thorough training in the technique. It then became obvious to me, that in order to become a really top class rider, one would have to develop qualities that would be instantly recognised and appreciated by an Alexander teacher. Later on, when I got to know the riders in person, I discovered that their training influenced not only their behaviour in the saddle, but also their general use in everyday life, which, indeed, I found to be excellent.

Experience shows that those who have had some Alexander training make very apt riding pupils, and that their progress is unusually quick. They, of course, start with some very great advantages, such as correct posture, independent use of limbs, a highly developed sense of balance, and, very important, they pause to think before they act. On the other hand, riders who take up the technique always make a very significant improvement. For some, it may make all the difference as to whether they will ever become competent riders.

A good riding position offers the rider security and comfort in the saddle and enables him to guide, and control his horse with ease and efficiency. Equally important, a good riding position reduces to a minimum any discomfort that may be caused to the horse by the presence of weight on his back. An old definition of the rider's position describes it in the following words:

“The rider should sit as upright as possible, so that each part of his body rests on that which is immediately below it, and produces a direct vertical pressure, through the seat bones.”

We all know, of course, how difficult it is to produce this position even when sitting in an ordinary chair. The rider, however has to maintain this uprightness while sitting on a surface whose texture and movements vary from moment to moment, and which at times can be extremely uncomfortable. The horse's movement takes place, simultaneously, in both horizontal, and vertical directions. At times the horse may also move on a curve or even sideways. All this action has to be absorbed by the rider, while keeping upright, in a position that is always vertical to the ground. This calls for a very high degree of firm suppleness. The rider's body must acquire the properties of flexible steel, which can blend and absorb pressure, while retaining its resilience, and which can always recapture its original shape.

Of particular interest to the Alexander minded person is the rider's ability to influence and control the horse through the appropriate use of his own back. This action which riders describe as 'bracing the back', is brought about when the rider modifies the texture of his spine. He does so by altering the amount of stretch and tension that runs through the spine, and by giving the spine a particular direction. The bracing of the back is sometimes accompanied by a subtle displacement of the rider's centre of gravity. All these adjustments must take place within the outline of the position, and must not be seen from the outside. The influence of the rider's back on the horse is both very powerful, and very delicate. When it is synchronized with the legs and hands, it is capable of producing a countless number of directional combinations. When the rider braces his back, he is in fact using his spine as a working tool, as another limb, which can be activated or adjusted at will. This way of employing the spine is, I believe, unique to riders. While all physical activity requires the use of one's back, it is only in riding that the spine is brought into action in such a precise, and deliberate manner.

The training of the rider consists of a series of controlled sensory experiences, all calling on the rider to continually re-adjust himself in order to blend with the horse's movement, while maintaining a correct position. The instructor, by using

variations of gait, speed and direction, is constantly exposing his pupil to different situations in which his balance and suppleness are newly tested.

Ultimately, horse and rider reach a state of complete unity where their separate bodies seem to have merged together, and to be acting as one. This harmony between horse and rider can be so complete that just a thought on the part of the rider, is enough to trigger a response in the horse. This, of course, would make sense to an Alexander person. We have all experienced this kind of closeness, with a teacher, or with a pupil. Also, we know only too well how a thought, or its inhibition, can affect a body's reactions.

'Preventing the wrong' is an important teaching concept, which applies equally to the technique and to horsemanship. What it really tells us, is that a living body cannot be forced to act in a particular manner, at the most it can be coaxed into doing so. The main teaching of a subject that requires sensory appreciation is based on the prevention of wrong use and on the inhibition of undesirable responses. This is not to say that there is no room for positive, active teaching. Explanation, advice, a guiding touch, a stimulus are all of immense value. Yet none of these can substitute for the thing really matters, that is, the feel of what is correct. The teacher is inherently limited, in that he is unable to convey to the pupil what the 'correct' actually feels like; all he can do is guide the pupil there and point it out to him, when he, the pupil, has arrived. It is a primary quality in a teacher to be able to recognise immediately that his pupil is doing the right thing. The riding teacher must also be able to know from the look of things what they feel like, and from the feel of things, what they look like. In riding, the teacher tries, on the one hand to stop every bit of misuse at the merest hint of its appearance, and on the other to guide the rider in his search for fresh directions. Eventually the rider hits on just the right combination of balance, strength and flexibility that is required in the given situation. The first to acknowledge the rider's changed use and improved application will be the horse, who will then do, instantly, what was expected of him all the time, and for which the rider, until then, had to struggle. In riding, the best teachers are the horses because they instinctively know the good from the bad.

In schooling horses, much the same process takes place. While we cannot force the horse to act in a certain manner, we can make the existing pattern of it's behaviour, somewhat unattractive to it, and thereby encourage it to seek a better alternative. By combining the action of our back, leg and hands, or in other words, by applying our aids, we help the horse to channel it's energies in a better direction; when the horse finally gets it right, we instantly reward it. The kind of movement and carriage we ask the horse to adopt comes easily enough to it, when it is free, and out on its own. What is so difficult for the horse is to recapture it's natural style and ability under the weight of the rider. Once the horse discovers the means of achieving this, it starts doing so of its own accord, because, of course, it is so much more comfortable. Until the horse *chooses* to put itself in what we regard as the desired position, that is the framework which encourages efficiency and ease, and until the horse is doing so by giving itself correct muscular directions, while inhibiting the wrong ones, its training is not complete.

An Alexander person, observing a well schooled horse, will soon discern certain familiar attitudes in the way the animal moves and carries itself. The horse's head rotates forward and up at a point just behind the ears, while the lower jaw softens. Its neck, too, stretches forward and up, into a slight arch, as the back lengthens and widens. The horse's limb action appears to originate in its back, which indeed is the centre of motion. Breathing is regular, and the back is smoothly pulsating all the time, imparting grace and elasticity to the movement. The expression on the face of the horse is that of great contentment. When we see this sight which is truly unforgettable, let us pause and reflect. The horse has given us pleasure and service throughout the ages. Yet all the while it was bringing us an even greater gift: a gift of life; the lesson of good use. It was all there, right in front of us. All that was missing was a genius of the calibre of Mr. Alexander, to put two and two together.