

Nirvana in Your Neck

I was chatting with some friends over dinner, attempting to explain the basic principles of the Alexander Technique. I spoke a little about the importance Alexander teachers attach to having a free neck so that the head can easily balance on top of the spine. If a person's neck is tense, it tends to upset that head balance, causing harmful repercussions throughout the entire body. Releasing that tension is basic to releasing those harmful effects. "Nirvana in your neck!" said Nancy, one of my friends. I'd never heard it put that way before, but it nicely captures an important aspect of the Alexander Technique. F. Matthias Alexander, the developer of what today is called the Alexander Technique, was certainly not the first person to talk about the importance of the neck. The Bible is full of references to stiff-necks: Exodus 32, verses 9, 10: The Lord said to Moses, "I see this is a stiff-necked people. Now let Me be, that my anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them..." Deuteronomy 9: verses 13 and 14 "I see that this is a stiff-necked people. Let me alone and I will destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven..." Jeremiah 7, verse 26: "They stiffened their necks, they acted worse than their fathers." There is even an explicit reference to the postural effect of being stiff-necked in Micah 2, verse 3: The Lord says, "I am planning such a misfortune against this clan that you will not be able to free your necks from it. You will not be able to walk erect." A stiff neck does indeed make it impossible to have a natural upright posture. It also creates a situation in which the work of supporting the whole body is wrongly distributed. Important functions such as breathing, blood circulation and digestion are placed under enormous strain, reducing their efficiency. In some translations, "stiff-necked" is translated as "stubborn" which is accurate as far as it goes, but unfortunately takes us away from the physical quality inherent in the original Hebrew: *kashe-oref* - *kashe*: hard; *oref*: scruff of the neck. There are also many examples in our everyday language that suggest an intimate connection between bodily attitudes and inner states of mind. We speak of a "spineless creature", "having no backbone", "losing our heads" and being "level-headed". The word "attitude" itself can refer to both our outlook on life and to the physical orientation of our body. Alexander discovered the importance of the state of his neck quite independently of all this. Working entirely on his own in late 19th century Australia, he set out to solve a voice problem he was experiencing. He set up several mirrors that allowed him to view himself from various angles as he spoke. It didn't take him long to notice a tendency to tighten his neck when speaking - indeed, to tighten his neck when he just thought about speaking. He also noticed some other patterns that came into play - pulling his head back and down on his neck, restricting his breathing, gripping the floor with his feet - but it turned out that the neck pattern was primary. He discovered that if he could prevent his neck from tightening, the other dysfunctional patterns dissolved. This proved to be an extremely important discovery on his part, and not just for its beneficial effects on his voice. Any activity he performed - standing up from a chair, walking, whatever - was done more efficiently when he remembered to free his neck. It was useful to let his attention go to other parts of his body too, but the condition of his neck turned out to be the most important single factor in bringing about a change for the better. Teachers of the Alexander Technique today continue to emphasize the head-neck-upper torso relationship and students often are amazed at what a difference it makes when they learn how to prevent harmful tension from forming in their neck. Students often report feeling much lighter and freer and are able to move through life with fewer physical restrictions. Getting in touch with this "nirvana in your neck" can change your life for the better in all sorts of unexpected ways.

About the Author

Digestion actually begins in the mouth, as the enzymes in saliva begin to break. The small intestine is the principal site of digestion.

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