

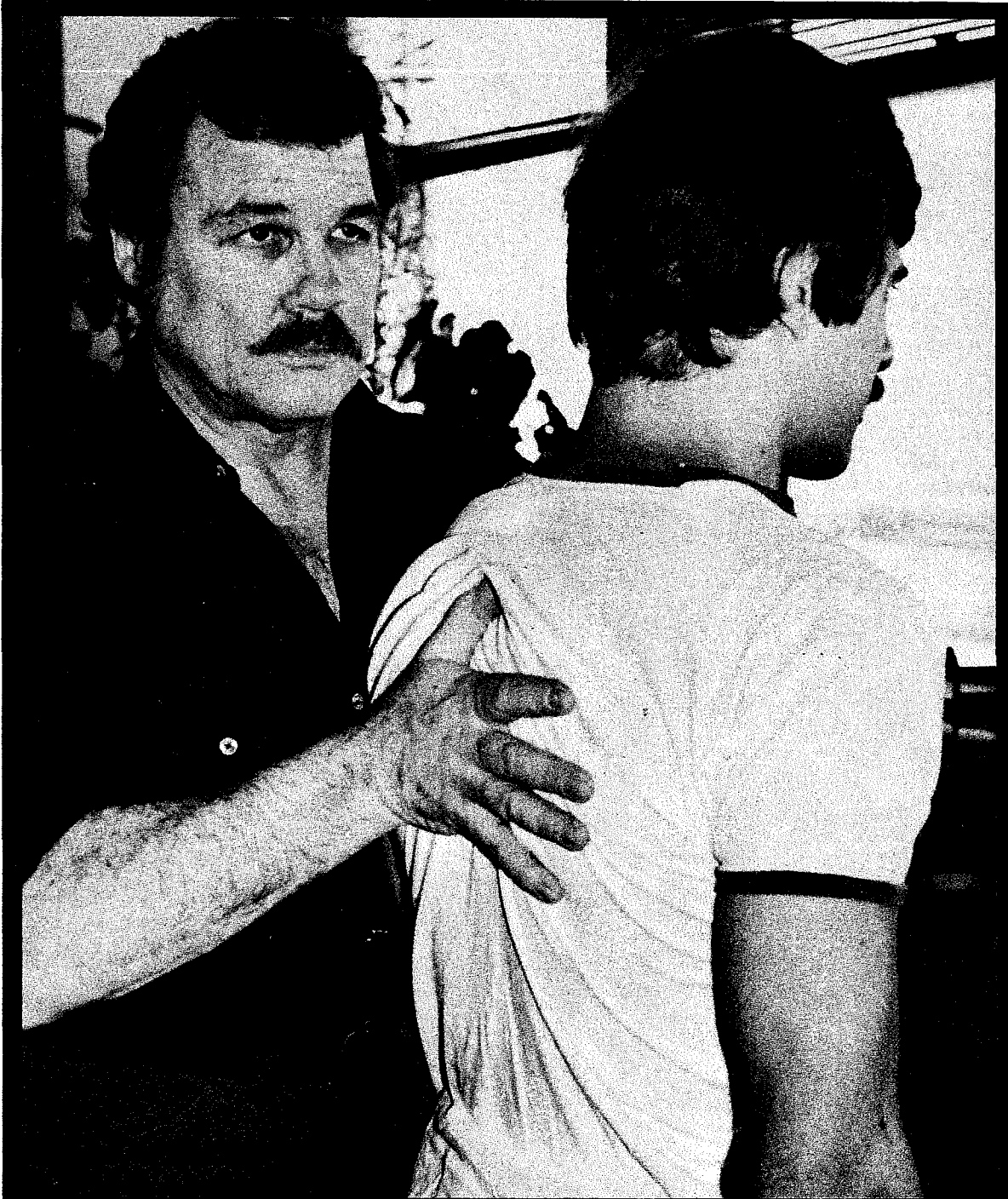
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Into
Electricity

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The Alexander Technique

Learn to Use Your Self As Nature Intended

by Susan Jean McCrone

Take a deep breath . . . go ahead, take a deep breath. Where are you breathing from? Your chest? Your stomach? Your chest *and* your stomach? All are wrong.

The function of breathing is relegated to your lungs(!), remember? And they are not found in your stomach nor your chest. They are found in your back, protected by your rib cage — a rib cage that was meant to act like a bellows, expanding and contracting with each breath.

We are taught many things as we grow up, but we are not brought up to be aware of ourselves, to use ourselves to our best advantage, to our best psychophysical advantage.

I remember as a child learning to play the flute, I was told girls could never play as well as boys because they breathe through their chests (a shallow breath); whereas boys breathe properly, with their stomachs. It never occurred to me to challenge such "knowledge" until I became acquainted with the ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE where I learned a lot of basic information about myself . . . information I never even suspected was missing!

Goddard Binkley, founder and director of the Chicago Center for the Alexander Technique, stresses that it is a re-education in the proper use of the self. It teaches us how to use ourselves naturally and efficiently to our best psychophysical advantage with conscious direction, coordination and control.

When properly used, the Technique is not therapy; however, it does have therapeutic value.

The Alexander teacher manually and verbally directs and guides his students while sitting, standing, lying down, walking, speaking and performing (if actor, dancer, singer, musician, etc.). The Technique changes the manner of reaction, brings about an expanding self, improved psychophysical health, greater ease and precision in performance, clearer thinking and direction in one's life.

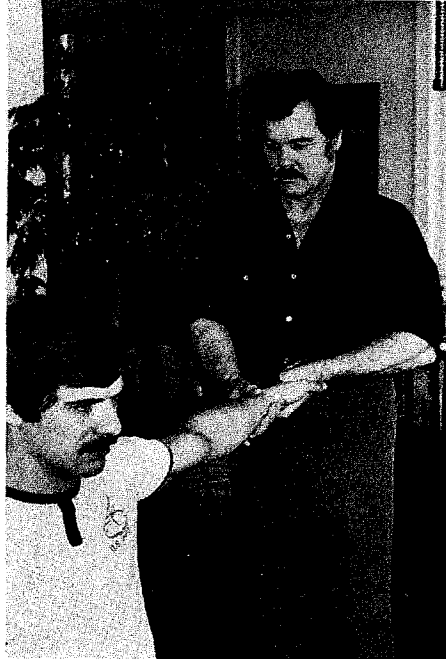
The Alexander Technique is something so basic to all of our lives, to our health, that it should be taught to us in schools.

Right now nearly all of us (unless already using the Alexander Technique) are literally unconscious of what we do with ourselves as we go about our daily activities . . . creating numerous problems unsolvable by nutrition, exercise, etc. Many of the physical characteristics common to man as he ages (such as shortened height, dowager's hump, double chin) are only logical conclusions to a lifetime of this ignorance of self awareness.

Exercise is not a viable solution to these seemingly physical problems because, Alexander points out, "in choosing 'physical exercises' as a remedy for his deterioration, man did not take into consideration the fact that his body was a very delicate and highly co-ordinated piece of machinery, so that there might be many contributing causes other than muscular weakness to account for his deteriorated condition . . . deterioration must be merely the *symptom* of some failure in the working of the machinery, and that the whole machine would need to be readjusted before it could work co-ordinately once more."

Learning the importance of expanding this awareness of ourself and of learning the right use of our selves is equally valuable to every one of us.

Breathing certainly is basic to all of us and is a good example of this misuse of ourselves — we are brought up with all kinds of misconceptions about it. "Most people's rib cage becomes like a brick wall," Goddard Binkley explains, "with the result



Goddard Binkley, founder and director of the Chicago Center for the Alexander Technique, is an excellent example of what he teaches. He is currently writing a book of his private lessons with F. Matthias Alexander.

that the lungs can't expand properly. Breathing is really a muscular action of the rib cage expanding which lowers the air pressure inside, enabling air to come in automatically to fill the lungs — there's no need to suck air in or gasp for breath.

"You just think of breathing to your back, with your back, and you will create a widening in the back which will automatically take the pressure of the rib cage off the lungs, allowing your breathing to be naturally deep. It also permits the anti-gravity muscles in your back to take you right up, giving you buoyancy and lightness on your feet.

"Of course we all have to breathe, in part, with the diaphragm. But I think a lot of that emphasis is overdone; even a lot of singers don't get the expansion in the rib cage that they should get."

Just take a look at the military posture: chest out . . . shoulders back . . . neck in. This creates many harmful effects on the body. Raising the chest to breathe (and women in general are also guilty of this) actually creates a hollow in the lumbar region of the spine, along with other numerous defects that are inseparable from this unnatural posture.

"When you're breathing properly," Goddard continues, "you'll breathe considerably fewer times per minute than what the textbooks tell you is 'normal' because they're working with the 'average' person — and that average person is a shallow breather! If you're breathing the way *nature* intended, you'll be breathing *deeply* and much slower . . ."

Through the Alexander Technique you will learn new and proper ways to breathe, as well as to move, relax, use, sense and feel your entire body. You will increase your body awareness and create new patterns of movement which are free of unnecessary tension and effort. Good posture will come naturally, as a by product of your new awareness.

This new field of knowledge was discovered by F. Matthias Alexander in the late 1800's. His vocation was reciting poetry, Shakespeare, etc., but he was plagued with chronic loss of voice. The only solution his doctors gave him was to "stop talking," which of course he could not do because he would lose the only livelihood he knew. So Alexander decided he would have to find out for himself what was wrong — if perhaps he was doing something different with himself on stage that he was not doing in normal conversation.

Alexander had no idea what to look for; there were no precedents for him to follow; but with the aid of mirrors, he observed himself for many months. Finally he detected a pattern, three things he had been doing unconsciously different on stage: he depressed his larynx, he audibly gasped for breath through his mouth as he spoke, and he pulled his head back.

He found the more he stopped himself from pulling his head back, the more he succeeded in stopping the pressing down on his larynx, and the audible gasping for breath (which was also drying his throat). This was the first indication that *the relationship of the head to the neck acts as a controlling influence on the functioning of the body.*

He further discovered that

- (1) the neck wants to be free,
- (2) the head naturally wants to go forward and up,
- (3) the torso wants to be lengthening, the back widening to take pressure of the rib cage off the lungs, allowing breathing to be naturally deep, not shallow.

By changing his habits, Alexander not only got his voice back, he revitalized his whole being physically and psychologically. He realized that *everything we do is interconnected with how we use the rest of our bodies*, and that *it's impossible to separate the mental from the physical processes*. He observed in himself this concept of the body as a whole . . . that correcting isolated parts of ourselves is futile and only continues to rebuild tension through repeated, incorrect use of other parts of the body.

Alexander began teaching others to benefit from this new awareness in 1904 in London and actually began a formal training course for teachers in 1932; so the Technique has been around for a while, spreading slowly, mostly by word of mouth.

There are four institutes in London alone. In the United States there are now five institutes; you can contact the one nearest you for further information in: New York City, Philadelphia, Champaign-Urbana (Illinois), San Francisco, and Goddard Binkley's in Chicago —

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312/782-4422

Other countries sharing the growth of this re-education include Holland, Switzerland, France, Australia, South Africa, and Israel (these are some of the same progressive countries, by the way, that have readily accepted the revolutionary new Photozone water purification process described in the April 1978 issue of THE EXCHANGE).

Goddard Binkley has his own success story to tell: After a lifetime of back pain suffering from severe lordosis, he began private lessons with Alexander. And "after about six months of lessons I suddenly was able to experience the fact that I had a back for the first time in my life. It was right after a lesson; I got up off the table, walked across

the room (in NYC) and I suddenly felt my back bone . . . just like a rod going straight up and down. I had never had that feeling before in my life!"

Goddard is physical proof that the Technique can change and transform the whole body. He has had absolutely no back pain since 1953. "The new use of the self becomes a habit," he says, "but the difference between the new habit and the old habit is that you're a slave to the old habit. With the new habit you can say 'yes' or 'no' . . . I can let myself



A 15 minute break each day in this position is a great way to reinforce awareness of yourself, from the top of your head to your toes.

collapse if I want to, but I find it very uncomfortable. It's fatiguing to stand or sit slouched or slumped or however you like; it drains the body of energy; it takes tone from the muscles."

He became so impressed with the results of his own lessons that he completed the 3-year training course to learn the Technique and has been teaching since 1957.

Goddard's feelings about the results of his training are shared by his students: *It adds new dimension and color to one's life and makes living far more interesting. It changes your whole appearance, your whole body sense of self. It also changes your perception of people and your manner of reacting to people and events.*

The Alexander Technique is taught from teacher to pupil on a one-to-one teaching and learning situation. It is important for the teacher to correctly diagnose the pupil's bad habits — most of the teaching is actually getting the student to *stop* doing something.

In order to understand the Technique you really must experience it yourself. Only then can you appreciate its importance and the feeling of your neck being perfectly free . . . your head going forward and up, up off your throat. "Our own sensory appreciation is unreliable — we really don't know what we are doing to ourselves or with ourselves as we go about our daily activities."

If you try to learn the Alexander Technique without the guidance of an experienced teacher, the only guide you would have to rely on to tell you whether you are doing it properly or not would be yourself and your old habits . . . both have proven themselves unreliable!

Alexander explains why what one feels is as likely as not to be a delusion: "Take the person who says he 'feels better' after exercises that increase his

chest measurements. Of what avail is it for the pupil to 'feel better,' if he is still left with a defective sensory appreciation to guide him in all direct activities during his waking moments as well as his sleeping hours? It is only a matter of time before the unfortunate pupil will be awakened from his dream by discovering that he has developed certain other serious conditions . . . for to the expert observer it is obvious that the habit of sucking in air, the depression of the larynx, and all the accompanying defective use of the organism associated with the practice of the exercises must, sooner or later, cause serious nose, ear, eye, and throat troubles." In

"Most people literally do not know what they are doing with their bodies," Goddard emphasizes. "Time is needed to re-educate the sense of feeling. As your use improves, so does your sensory appreciation."

The easiest and fastest way to master the Alexander Technique is for the student to work from the inside, both mentally and physically, accompanied by the guiding hands and instructions of a qualified teacher directing awareness. The student's goal is full consciousness and proper use of self with every movement.

The Alexander Replacing wrong body habits with right Technique ones; Using right body movements that may at first feel wrong.

other words, the goal of the proponents of these breathing exercises see only the "end," and remain oblivious to the harmfulness of the "means whereby" they are attempting to achieve that "end," and to the many wrong uses of the body they are cultivating in the process.

The body does need exercise, strenuous exercise included; but you don't want to do exercises if they cause you to interfere with Alexander's primary relationships of the head, the head-to-the-neck, and the head-and-neck-to-the-back.

"Alexander," Goddard relates, "was against asking people to do exercises until they had learned good direction for the proper use of themselves — once that was accomplished, they could do anything they liked."

Otherwise, if a person misuses himself regularly (which is most of the population of the world!) and then adds exercises, during which time he will obviously continue with the wrong uses, he will exaggerate the problems his lack of awareness has been creating.

The resulting aches and pains will continue to grow. Goddard tells any of his students who complain to him about such pains to turn them into assets by letting them be a reminder to improve their directions.

"We are upright human beings, upright organisms," Goddard stresses, "and being upright means that you want to be *fully* upright. *Lengthening of the spine wants to be the true and primary movement of every act.*"

"The direction of the body in relation to the head is an influence on the function of the organism. The relationship of the head to the neck and the head and neck to the torso are vital in good use of the self."

"All the directions taught tend to bring about an *expanding self* so that your body is literally occupying more space, not less. The shoulders want to move out; all the limbs, the arms, legs, want to be lengthening, parts moving away from parts so that you bring about a diverging of parts from parts. The whole self expands."

"Most people are doing the opposite thing with themselves, i.e., contracting, fixing, holding on, as though they want to make themselves smaller, as though they want to occupy less space — constant slumping and sinking down, shortening their whole body so that the spine tends to shorten, compressing all the vital organs inside the torso, tensing the muscles."



"The neck wants to be free...the head forward and up...the spine tending to lengthen... lengthening and expanding the back..."

"Our normal habit seems to be to tense our muscles, but common sense tells you you don't want to do that to yourself . . . how can your heart, digestive tract, etc., possibly function properly?! . . . they simply don't have enough room!"

Observe how the people around you move when they speak. You will most likely see that "as soon as their mouth, back goes the head, pulling their head right back, tensing the neck muscles. The same thing happens when they eat: they bring the food up, open the mouth, and the head goes right back. This is totally unnecessary and interferes with breathing, circulation, and with the distribution of muscle tone to the skeletal muscle, to name the more obvious problems.

The neck wants and needs to be free, as we have already discussed, or the head will not be able to turn easily. And *you look and feel much better when you leave your neck alone and let the head go forward and up the way nature intended.*

Don't forget to pay attention to what happens to your *own* head and neck next time you begin to talk, sit down, stand up, read, eat, drive, . . . even sleep! Your vital organs do *not* sleep and still need enough room to function.

Pushing the head back into the neck not only can be the cause of your headaches, it also tends to change the quality of the voice. Most people's voices are probably pitched a bit too high because of the throat not being open and because of the tension in the throat and neck.

The Alexander Technique can also demonstrate to every stutterer that he "stutters" with many other different parts of his body besides just his tongue and lips. "Usually these other defects remain unobserved and ignored," Alexander explained, "until they reach the point where the wrong functioning manifests itself in some form of so-called 'physical' or 'mental' disorder.

"Stuttering can be a blessing in disguise if it makes the stutterer aware, before too late, of the other more serious defects which would tend, as time goes on, to become more and more exaggerated."

After learning the Alexander Technique, the stutterer will learn to make better use of his whole body and his stuttering will tend to disappear as a by-product.

There are three don'ts Goddard teaches all his students:

- (1) Don't Relax . . . "I think a great deal of harm has been brought about by overuse of that word. When people try to relax, they collapse. Is that good? I think it's terrible. Animals don't collapse. The body wants to be like a well-tuned violin. You don't want to relax; you want to learn to leave yourself alone . . . to *stop* doing unnecessary things with your arms, legs, hands, neck, etc."
- (2) Don't Concentrate . . . Don't limit your awareness. We are all brought up to concentrate. And while you don't want your mind wandering all over the place, you don't want to focus attention on a task and forget about everything else including yourself. *Expand your awareness to include self.*
- (3) Don't Try To Be Right . . . We're trained to always try to be right, with the result that we concentrate, get tense, get anxious. Instead of trying to be right, prevent yourself from doing the wrong thing. It changes your whole attitude and approach.

"A great thing about this work is that you don't have to think about what you're doing with every muscle in your body," Goddard explains. "All you

have to do is to pay attention to your neck — don't tense the neck; don't pull your head back — instead, let the head go forward in relation to the neck and up; and let your torso lengthen so that you're literally coming up, up out of your pelvis and at the same time, letting the back move back to widen as well as lengthen. You take care of that and everything else follows. Alexander called this certain use of the head, neck, and back relationship the Primary Control. We all have it . . . we are born with it, but we grow up interfering with it."

"You will find, however, that as your use of self improves, so everything you do will improve. Your performance will improve, your health will improve, your feelings of well-being will improve, etc. It's just common sense, really."

There is no age barrier for learning the Alexander Technique. Goddard Binkley taught sophomores and juniors at Brewster High School in New York for several years before coming to Chicago and feels that is an ideal age to learn.

Very young children have the advantage of being more pliable and don't have so much to unlearn, but at the same time don't possess the maturity to appreciate what's happening, the significance of the changes, etc.

Those who do have the maturity to fully benefit from and use this re-education of self have some real advantages to look forward to: in addition to clearing up some nagging problems of seemingly unknown origin, they will find themselves growing taller with age instead of shorter!

This constant and greater awareness of the self by the mind is bound to encourage other boundaries imposed on the mind, by the mind, to loosen up. Proper use of self as directed through the Alexander Technique holds the potential of truly opening up new dimensions of awareness.

Health's Crowning Touch Alexander Body Awareness

The principles of the Alexander Technique are important to each of us — sick or well. Without it you and your body will not have an opportunity to reach your true full potential . . . a potential that cannot otherwise be experienced, *even if all the laws of proper nutrition and observance of all other elements of natural hygiene are followed.*

Alexander's Technique is a necessary ingredient in the health of all of us that has been *overlooked by our well-known health figures*, both in the present and the past.

How many of them lived anywhere *near* the projected 120 years humans should live (6 times the age of maturity which is far less than the normal life span of other mammals on our earth). Yet these health figures profess to eat right, exercise, get plenty of sunshine, etc.

From looking at pictures of them and seeing them in person, I do not see these people following the proper directions of their bodies as nature requires, and as Alexander teaches. They are missing/ignoring an important and basic element necessary to their longevity. And as long as they continue bypassing Alexander's discoveries, they will not find what they are looking for . . . or, in some cases, believe they have already found.

I have already become much more aware of myself and other people around me since I began practicing Alexander's Technique.

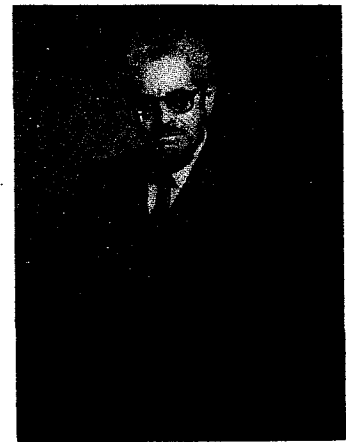
Sure it takes more effort in the beginning to train yourself to be more aware of and in control of everything you do, but the rewards I have already

gained are well worth that effort. I can actually "feel" myself growing in awareness.

The first pitfall I fell into after my first session was in trying too hard to keep the proper "posture" I had experienced during class . . . I ended up with a very sore back. This, of course, was wrong — posture is *not* what the Alexander Technique is all about. Had I been following the three primary *directions* Goddard Binkley had stressed and not going for what I *thought* was the "end result," that pain probably would not have happened. Now that I am extending myself in those three proper directions, as I am supposed to, I have no pain . . . in place of that I feel more alert and have much more energy.

My current kind of awareness has already helped me past an unexpected crisis: one day last week I had to dig a car out from under a heavy blanket of snow here in Chicago. The next day I woke up miserable, aching all over. I quickly found, however, that if I observed the primary directions I had learned plus breathing through my lungs, widening my back, my pains completely disappeared! The instant I let up and slumped, the pains returned. Such a constant and "vociferous" reminder encouraged me to be an excellent student that day; and the pains completely (and unbelievably!) disappeared by nightfall.

Goddard Binkley, however, was not surprised like I was that my body responded so rapidly. He explained that by following Alexander's directions I was putting my back in the best relationship to the rest of myself — my "discovery" was entirely predictable!



J. I. Rodale is a good example of a nutrition expert who ignored the knowledge F. M. Alexander gave to the world. You can see how his head sinks down into his chest, his shoulders are slumped forward and downward. It's obvious his heart and other internal organs did not have enough room to function in an optimal manner regardless what they were fed.

Perhaps the most exciting thing for me about Alexander's Technique is that I am in control of my own progress. Yes, of course I still need teacher guidance like everyone else for perhaps 20-30 lessons . . . or until I get it perfectly right! But in between these sessions I, the student, continue to improve. My growth is not limited to that time spent with my teacher.

Rewards for me started immediately: my energy level rose, my body felt lighter and more buoyant — and it's a great feeling to be in control . . . real control . . . of myself.