

The Alexander Technique
from a Teacher's Perspective
by
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What is the Alexander Technique? How does it work? Who studies and benefits from the technique? These are questions I am often asked as a teacher of the Alexander Technique. So I thought I would share a bit of what I've learned and experienced since 1985.

Simply put, the Alexander Technique is kinesthetic re-education. Our kinesthetic faculties are one of the six senses we are born with. Kinesthesia has to do with spatial & movement awareness. Innately our psychophysical selves are integrated. Meaning, . . . mind and body are one, and thinking and movement are one activity. But through educational and cultural influences we are taught to separate mind and body, and thinking and movement become two separate activities. Hence why some people feel they are uncoordinated. What I have found isn't a lack of physical coordination, but instead a lack of coordination *between* mind and body. The mind often races ahead trying to grasp a mental concept of what it wants the body to do, then it tries to superimpose this concept onto the body. Which can bring about unnecessary mental and physical tension and stress, and possible injuries and dis-ease.

Over 100 years ago, F. M. Alexander discovered that his loss of voice while performing as a Shakespearean orator had to do with his unconscious misuse of his innate kinesthetic organization. Alexander spent the next nine years working on himself, and discovered more about the relationship between mind and body. He found that two different processes brought about two distinctly different outcomes. One process he called "*endgaining*." This came about when he went for a particular *end* (goal), but going for this *end* caused him to interfere with his innate head to spine integrity. So he found he did gain that *end*, but lost his integrity. When he used another process called "*means whereby*" he found he was able to use his innate *means, whereby* he was able to achieve his goal with integrity. And the dynamic balance of his head to spine was free to function in a way that allowed him to accomplish his goal with ease, efficiency, and achieved a better quality of performance.

One can see young children and animals demonstrating this process of *means whereby*; there is a natural poise, ease, and grace to their movements. If you've ever been in a rush, and felt pressured to hurry and do something, or to get it "right," then you have had a most intimate experience with "*endgaining*." Most of us dislike this *rushed feeling*, we become overly tense, our breathing becomes shallow, and we are out of harmony with ourselves and life around us. This is when injuries can happen, in the midst of *endgaining*. And often we are left with a dissatisfaction with the quality of the outcome and performance.

So how do we learn to shift from *endgaining* to *means whereby*? By allowing ourselves to be re-educated. In essence we had it innately as children, then we learned to give it up and split our mind and body. So re-learning also means unlearning! With an Alexander Technique Teacher's gentle "hands on" assistance, a student begins to: 1) become Aware of their unconscious interference and habits of misuse as they are happening; then they learn to 2) use Positive Inhibition to stop or "*suspend*" the misuse; and then 3) use Alexander's Conscious Directions and Constructive Thinking to carry out their activity. This all happens while the student is engaged in any activity; be it walking, singing, playing a sport, performing, working at a computer, cooking, lifting, or any simple to complex movement. With *means whereby* come the qualities of lightness, ease, and grace of *mind and body*. With time and conscious application, students learn to apply these principles for themselves and change habits of a lifetime.

Personal stories often best demonstrate the amazing experiences and benefits individuals are having when they apply the principles of the Alexander Technique. Here are a few of the experiences some of my students have had over the years:

Carpenter & Construction - This student had a previous chronic history of injuring and re-injuring his back and being unable to work for several days and sometimes weeks after he lifted heavy items. After taking a number of lessons, he was able to lift heavier items without hurting his back and he used better discrimination in knowing what he could do or not do. And even the few times he did over do and strained his back while working, he was able to lay down and give himself a lesson and be able to get up a few minutes later and continue working. So he found he could do more, and was able to do a greater variety of jobs, giving him a better salary and income. Plus he was less fearful of injuring himself and losing income.

Professional Ballet Dancer - She found integrating the Alexander Technique with her dancing made a tremendous difference in her flexibility, balance, range of motion and “turn out.” In addition it also allowed her to explore and expand her repertoire and range of expressions and presence on stage. Some of the movements she had been having difficulty with became effortless which gave her a new poise and confidence. She found her vision, and awareness had more depth and 3-dimensionality to it, which brought about a new freshness, excitement, and vitality to her performances. This also continued for her off stage in other areas of her life.

Musician, Saxophonist & Clarinetist - He thought because he was older, in his 70’s, he was losing wind capacity with age. With time he discovered that his posture and kinesthetic misuse were actually interfering with his breathing & lung space. He regained the ability to sustain notes for longer duration, noticed a better quality of tone with less effort. With continued application and lessons he noticed his walking became lighter and buoyant and slumping and misuse became uncomfortable. Now he was more motivated to make changes, because he was no longer comfortable in his old habitual misuse.

Dressage Riders/Equestrians - Many riders notice an immediate and significant change in the quality of their horse’s use, because of their own use improving. They find their horse is more responsive to the “aids” (directions) they are giving them. Many of the problems that were arising seem to disappear when the rider’s mind/body integrity returns. Interesting Note: When I’ve put my hands on the student and help them re-organize their kinesthetic direction while they are mounted on their horse, I have a very clear sense of not only the rider’s kinesthetic use, but the horse’s as well. For me this is an exquisite moment to directly experience this very special rapport and oneness between the rider and their horse. As the student frees up and their head moves forward and up and their torso lengthens and widens, and their arms and legs release, I also feel the horse lengthen and widen and the horse’s breath deepens, and I can feel the whole connection from the horse’s head to its hooves. In addition, the horse’s mouth softens, which is a clear indication that they are much more present, and collected in an easy state of readiness.

Recovering from an accident - One of my students had fallen when coming out of a restaurant, breaking her ankle and the opposite wrist. She called and asked me to work with her, so she could learn better ways to use her crutches and get around while her bones were healing. Many years before she had broken her leg, and had experienced poor posture and discomfort from using crutches. We did a few lessons, and she found she was much more comfortable while using the crutches, and that the process of healing and rehabilitating went much smoother for her. She also noticed her posture & use were much better when she began walking again because she took better care of her use while she was using the crutches.

Chemotherapy & Radiation Therapy - While one student was going through a year of chemotherapy and radiation treatments she found her Alexander lessons to be very supportive; physically, mentally, and emotionally. The invasive drugs and chemicals were very draining and disorienting. One of her alternative health therapists mentioned to her the importance of helping the drugs circulate and flow freely through the body to be more effective on a cellular level. She found that the Alexander Technique helped her open up and release different areas of her body that were tight and segregated/isolated from misuse and the trauma of her surgery. I noticed that she would come into the lessons often angry and

upset and tired, and at the end of the lessons she was happier, more energetic, and more present with ease and integrity. She also seemed more open and less defensive and guarded.

Competitive Runner - One young high school track/cross country runner had a history of shin splints from running. After our first lesson they went away, and with further lessons she found a significant change in her running stride and rhythm, and found she could run with more ease. She found sitting in the classroom desks was very uncomfortable, so she found new ways to sit & be more upright, (rather than slumping) bringing about more comfort through out the day. Thus making it easier for her when running and racing, because she wasn't so tense from sitting all day.

Guitarist - One student who is an accomplished classical guitarist and lutist found with the Alexander lessons that he was finding new ways to organize his fingering for chords. We also worked on his playing more in the moment, bringing about a richer and fuller sound with more ease. He found raising the height of his chair while rehearsing and performing, and using a cushion to support his guitar while he played freed him up greatly. And by not pulling himself down and not resting his weight on his guitar this gave him more energy and freedom, plus more dynamic range of expression.

Performing Artist - Another of my students is a singer, actor, and dancer; she said many of her acting, vocal, and dancing teachers/coaches were constantly encouraging her to do less efforting. They found she was doing way too much and it was interfering with her natural talents in each of these areas. She expressed she had a deep fear that if she did less she would be less dynamic and wouldn't be chosen at auditions and wouldn't get the parts. She began to find, even with some resistance along the way, that with her Alexander lessons most activities were becoming much easier than she was used to. And she began to trust that doing less might be more in her case. Her auditions went much better and she seemed less self-critical and more content.

Stage Fright & Performance Anxiety - One student, a very accomplished pianist, often experienced anxiety before and during a performance. The Alexander lessons taught her new ways to stay present with herself, and integrate her mind and body. With time, she became less anxious and obsessive, and eventually came to enjoy and look forward to performing.

Kinesthetic Flashbacks - This is a term I use to describe an interesting phenomena that occasionally happens when a kinesthetic shift is happening. I have had this experience several times, and it usually happens when I'm moving out of my habitual use and experiencing a new sense of innateness. There is a quick kinesthetic memory of when that misuse pattern came about. One of my experiences had to do with releasing the tension and the narrowing in my lower rib cage. As an Alexander Teacher was helping me release tension in my lower rib cages, I was aware of a subtle resistance and not wanting to open up to the new direction. Then I remembered when I was growing up, I wore my older sisters' hand me downs. Because I have a very long torso, and the waist of the dresses would often come to the bottom of my rib cage, well above my waist, I developed the habit of narrowing and holding my rib cages in, so the dresses would fit. One of my students had an insight during our lesson that she had developed a habit of walking on the balls of her feet, because her mother was a nurse on the night shift, so when she came home from school her mother would be sleeping, and she would tip toe around trying to walk softly and quietly.

Faulty Sensory Perception - This is a phenomena that comes about when one has a distorted sense of "rightness & uprightness" based on one's habitual misuse. When we misuse ourselves for long periods of time, we begin to perceive that our habit is the correct yardstick of use, and our perception becomes faulty relative to our innate. One student had come in for a lesson and it had been a long time since she had had a lesson, and she was experiencing some discomfort. At the end of the lesson, after working horizontal on the teaching table, when she became vertical again, she felt she was way off kilter. I took her to a mirror so she could get a visual reality check. With most students as soon as they see that they are indeed aligned over themselves, this shifts their faulty sensory perception. But for her it didn't. She said even though she could see that she was upright and aligned over herself, she still didn't believe it on a

sensory level. It felt really wrong to her. Alexander said, “You can’t know something right, by an instrument that is wrong.” With a series of lessons our old faulty sensor perceptions become re-educated and then our sensory perception becomes reliable again.

Balance & Coordination - One student noticed after having several lessons that two things had shifted in her life: 1) for the first time in her life she was able to ride her bicycle and balance with no hands; and 2) that when she threw wastepaper in the wastebasket she was making her shots on a regular basis. I noticed that I became much more dexterous with both hands, even able to use my left hand to eat with chopsticks. And often when I drop something I catch it so quickly I’m amazed. Twice while out running in parklands, I tripped and was launched into a fall head first; both times, in mid-flight, time slowed down and I realized I had a choice, I could tighten up and try to pull myself back upright, or I could free up and use my kinesthetic directions. Both times I chose to free up, trusted my innate and went into a roll and popped back up and kept on running.

Mood Enhancement - Most students at some point come to one of their Alexander lessons in a grumpy mood, or stressed out over some life event, or feel really scattered and disconnected with themselves. It is a joy to watch the emotional-mental-physical discord start to shift while the lesson progresses. I observe as they become more integrated, the student calms down, becomes more present, more energetic in a balanced and useful way. This shift of balance integrates on all levels into a wholesomeness. To me this is one of the extra benefits of studying the Alexander Technique.

Spontaneity & Creative Flow - My very first student was a guitarist and song writer. He came to the Alexander Technique to learn how to consciously bring about those “spontaneous magic moments” when everything comes together and flows. I was impressed that he recognized that the Alexander Technique had the tools to help him consciously access this quality all performing artist want (and most of the rest of us as well). To me this is clearly an example when mind and body are one and truly living in the present moment. It is that childlike quality of wonderment where everything is new and fresh. In Zen, they refer to this as the “Beginner’s Mind.”

This “beginner’s mind/body set” is where Alexander students gain the most, when they are willing to let go of their old ways of doing things, which are often unconscious, mechanical, and premeditated. And instead are willing to “not know” so they can discover and learn new innate ways in the richness of the moment. The Alexander Technique has much depth and breadth to its work and application. Many of us continue to study the technique because it continues to unfold and enhance our lives in ways we had not expected. Bringing much joy and wonderment and gratitude.

I invite you to explore the Alexander Technique for yourself and experience a quality of life and a lightness, ease, and grace of mind and body it may offer you!

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