

EXPLORATIONS IN THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE A WORK IN PROCESS

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Dedication

to my teachers

Forewords

Wisdom comes from directly observing the truth of our experience. . . . Wisdom grows out of our clear seeing in each moment. . . . It arises through our gentle and careful inquiry into the workings of the body and mind and through an open inquiry into how this body and mind relate to the whole world around us. For insight to develop, this spirit of observation and deep questioning must be kept in the forefront. (pp. 11-12)

All this is best accomplished with a sense of lightness and willingness, from a place of interest in discovering what is true. If we try to practice from a feeling of obligation and duty, then the mind often becomes rebellious and grim. Mindfulness does not mean grimness. (p. 23)

Goldstein & Kornfield, *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*

When an investigation comes to be made, it will be found that every single thing we are doing is exactly what is being done in Nature where the conditions are right, the difference being that we are learning to do it consciously.

F. M. Alexander, from "Notes of Instruction" in
Edward Maisel, ed., *The Alexander Technique: The
Essential Writings of F. Matthias Alexander*, p. 7

The essence of the Alexander Technique is to make ourselves more susceptible to grace.

Michael Gelb, *Body Learning: An Introduction to
the Alexander Technique*, p. 90

Preface

These Explorations are offered not as an exhaustive introduction to the Alexander Technique, nor as a substitute for lessons with a teacher (for which there is no substitute), but as ways to increase your *experiential* understanding of the psychophysical reality reflected in the principles of the Technique. They aim, in the short run, at heightening your kinesthetic awareness and, in the long run, at engaging your interest in how your thinking determines the quality of your movement. They also offer insight into the process underlying self-directed and self-empowering inquiry, by which you can go on to design your own protocols for research, as scientists say. This attention to process is the heart of the Alexander Technique, and is why all such Explorations are in fact “works in process.”

Exploration Zero

Primary Control

There is a primary control of the use of the self, which governs the working of all the mechanisms and so renders the control of the complex human organism comparatively simple. . . . This primary control. . . depends upon a certain use of the head and neck in relation to the use of the rest of the body. . . .

F. Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, p. 32

*the poise of a person's head
in its dynamic relationship with his or her body
in movement
is the key to freedom
and ease of motion*

Donald Weed, *What You Think Is What You Get*, p. 15

True or false? You can test this central principle of the Alexander Technique for yourself.

1. Make a simple, familiar movement such as lifting your hand into the air, or lifting an object. Do this a few times and notice how it feels (overall physical ease or effort, as well as any emotional content).
2. Allow your head to float gently up and perhaps a bit back relative to your shoulders, like a balloon gently tethered, neither pushing nor pulling. As you continue this “allowing” (rather than “doing”), repeat step 1. Write down what you notice.
3. Pull your head down onto your neck and forward of your shoulders. (But don't hurt yourself!) Continuing this squashing, repeat step 1. Write down what you notice.
4. Compare steps 1, 2, and 3 a few times, making a note of anything you observe, then
5. Rest. There's nothing to be gained by pushing yourself. You can always come back to the exploration later, and in the meantime your nervous system can assimilate the experience you've given yourself.

If you haven't noticed any particular difference, try an activity requiring more effort. When you begin to notice something, you can return to the more subtle activity. If not, don't worry about it. Kinesthetic awareness develops as you call on it; come back to this exploration from time to time and see what you notice.

Exploration One

The Nature of Perception

1. Just looking.

Close your eyes, turn and open them. What do you see the instant you open your eyes, before you begin to think and organize your perception? This is “just looking” or noticing: direct perception. How does your experience change if you think of what you see simply coming to you, rather than your eyes reaching out to grab what they see? (In fact, all such sensory information comes *to* us, and is translated by our sense organs into impulses that relay the information to the brain.) Do this several times so that the distinction between receiving a perception and organizing/labeling/thinking becomes quite clear to you. For example, if you start to consider what you are perceiving, are you still available to receive new information? Where does your attention go? Write down your observations.

You can also explore this with other senses: hearing, touch, smell, taste, kinesthesia/proprioception.

Zen Buddhists call this direct perception “beginner’s mind” and cultivate it through such disciplines as meditation and the martial arts as the fundamental state of mind for learning and for life. Beginner’s mind is open, available, and empty of judgment or expectation. (For further study, see Eugen Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*, and Shunryu Suzuki’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*.) Both Zen and the Alexander Technique regard such a state of availability to be our original endowment, with which we habitually interfere, creating psychophysical tension and imbalance. As students, our task is not to make beginner’s mind happen, but rather to learn consciously how to wean ourselves of the habit of interfering with it.

2. Noticing the ease.

“Just look” in your mind’s eye at the spot or area where your head and neck meet. In case you’re not sure, it’s roughly at the level of your eyes, between your ears. If this surprises you, spend some time experiencing it (does it change the balance of your head on your neck?), and be sure to add it to Exploration Three when you come to it! Don’t try to feel anything in particular or to do anything about what you find there. Just notice. If it seems to open up or get easier, just notice that. In this way, you see the instantaneous “looking” of step 1 can become a more ongoing state of mind, although it tends to come and go, especially at first. Don’t try to hold onto the looking or the ease; trying creates tension. Just notice, now and now and now. . . . Do you find that intending (rather than trying) to notice the ease of your head and neck indeed produces ease there? It might well be said that awareness is the primary control of your primary control (and, to give proper credit, it has been, by David Gorman).

3. Noticing the ease in activity.

a. Stand with your arms at your sides. Notice the ease of your head and neck, and in the moment (not before, but as soon as) you notice the area (again, just looking, rather than looking for any particular

feeling), lift your wrists to chest height. Notice again and in that moment, let your hands come up, palms facing away. Notice again, and in that moment let your hands drop back to your sides. Repeat this simple procedure a few times. What is your experience? Does the activity seem to tend to interfere with ease at the head and neck, or even with your ability to just notice?

Follow the directions as simply as you can. There's no magic in the movements; they're just a simple way of taking your "just looking" into an activity, and an opportunity to observe how our habits in activity tend to interfere with both our ability to "just look" and the ease of the head and neck.

b. Notice the ease of your head on your neck in a simple, but familiar activity of your own choice. Does it help if you notice before you think about and again before you initiate the activity? Is it more challenging to notice, when the activity is more "important" or complex? Write down your observations; this helps you to clarify and assimilate what you've experienced and to see how your experience varies over time, depending on your current psychophysical state of being and on the development of your ability to sense subtle changes in it. Do you find yourself caught up in trying, judging yourself, or looking for a feeling? If so, come back to step 1 ("just looking") or 2 ("noticing the ease"), or just take a break. There's no goal to reach, just experience to observe. Welcome to basic research.

credit: Mio Morales, NYC.

Exploration Two

360° Awareness

1. While sitting, notice your contact with seat and floor, allowing your weight to rest on that support (don't forget your arms, hands, head, etc.).
2. Gradually expand that awareness to include the following: Space in front of you. Space beside you (left and right). Space behind you. Space above you. Space below you.
3. Take time to simply exist in this 360° awareness, which includes all of you as well. This is your “unified field of awareness,” which can gradually become the background and support for all activities (no matter how “static” or “active”).

For further investigation,

4. Notice where the boundaries of your awareness usually tend to be, by noticing how expanded they seem when you do this exploration. Do some ideas seem to have a stronger (or weaker) effect than others?
5. Notice where the boundaries of your awareness tend to be when you do this exploration. Are you including just the immediate space around you? The entire room? The whole house or building? Across the street? Down through the planet? Behind you to Alpha Centauri? How does your experience change as you vary your thinking?
 - a. Are certain degrees of expansion more (or less) comfortable than others? If you hang out on the edge of your “comfort zone” for a while, is there any shift or change in what you experience?
 - b. Does your comfort zone depend on the context you imagine yourself in? The context of the exploration so far has been relatively neutral and can serve as a benchmark. What do you notice happens when you imagine yourself in different settings? Pick one scenario, and take your time, keeping it simple and clear. (For example, imagine yourself in exactly the same setting, but with people around.) What happens now if you find the edge of your comfort zone and just hang out there, continuing to receive the support from the ground and as much space around you as is comfortable, as well as clearly and completely including the new “variables” you've decided on?

If experiencing your comfort zone is too elusive, simply notice how easy or difficult it is to continue to allow your 360° awareness to function as you bring in the new context or stimuli. What do you notice about your reaction in terms of *emotion* and *physical sensation*? (Rather than drifting into the past or racing into expectations of the future by intellectualizing or interpreting, simply report your direct experience in the moment, such as fear, anxiety, tightness, interest, energy, narrowing, expansion, joy, etc.)

6. There is often a strong emotional response that arises during this exploration. As long as you are interested and comfortable with it, it can be very illuminating and productive to “hang out” with these

reactions and responses, just as we hang out with their more physical-seeming counterparts, and see how they also are affected and transformed by 360° awareness.

This approach to being with oneself and one's experience is analogous to those described by Eugene Gendlin in his book, *Focusing*, by meditation teachers (for example, *vipassana* teachers Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfield and Buddhist teachers such as D.T. Suzuki, Pema Chödrön, Charlotte Joko Beck, Chögyam Trungpa, among many others), and by Eastern-influenced psychotherapists such as Mark Epstein (*Thoughts Without a Thinker*) and Karen Kassel Wegela (*How to Be a Help Instead of a Nuisance*, which I highly recommend). What the Alexandrian approach has to add to these, I believe, is an emphasis on the experiential knowledge that information from contact with the environment (including the stimulus of, and our own response to, gravity) is part of how we “right” and orient ourselves psychologically as well as physically, and that a lively consciousness of our total psychophysical being-in-context is our best hope for sanity and growth.

It is also important to note that the presence and contact of an experienced person, such as a teacher, can help in processing emotions and sensations that might otherwise seem overwhelming, and that forcing and end-gaining (abandoning process for results) are just as counter-productive in this sphere as in any other in life.

Exploration Three

“Mapping”

1. Draw your best representation of your skeleton (or section of skeleton that you are interested in, e.g., head-neck, shoulder, pelvis, etc.).
2. Compare it with a detailed anatomical drawing. Do you notice anything you might have left out or represented incorrectly or unclearly?
3. With this new information in mind, sense in yourself how this may change how you feel and move your whole body or the area you’ve been looking at. If you’ve been working on one area, how does the new information change the relationship of the part to the whole? (It’s not necessary to be exhaustive; repeating the exercise will always yield new insights.)

This Exploration involves turning intellectual information about anatomy into experiential knowledge, that will gradually replace older, inaccurate concepts (whether consciously or unconsciously held) that interfere with smooth, easy, and efficient movement. It is also an exploration in how thinking controls our use of ourselves, and thus how changing our thinking changes how we use and experience ourselves.

It takes time and repetition to replace old concepts we have lived by; come back to this exercise from time to time, and allow yourself to be open to some new bit of information about what you’re seeing and feeling. Take your time and play around.

For further exploration, look at the muscle and connective tissue systems, and beyond that, “tensegrity,” in which the bones are seen less as weight-bearing posts and more as spacers for the elastic, force-transmitting, structurally suspending “guy-wires” of the muscles and fasciae (connective tissue). Always check in with how these new ideas register in your body, adding to your kinesthetic awareness.

Some Resources for Anatomy: *Gray’s Anatomy*, *The Anatomy Coloring Book*, *Albinus on Anatomy* (Dover Books), *Illustrated Essentials of Musculoskeletal Anatomy* (Sieg and Adams), *The Anatomy of Movement* (B. Calais-Germain), *The Endless Web* (Schultz and Feitis; fascial anatomy), *How to Learn the Alexander Technique* (Conable & Conable; “mapping”), *The Body Moveable* (David Gorman; 3 vols.), *BodyStories* (Andrea Olsen with Caryn McHose; experiential anatomy), *Color Atlas and Textbook of Human Anatomy* (Kahle, Leonhardt, & Platzer; Georg Thieme, Publ.; esp. Vol. 1: Locomotor System, by W. Platzer).

Exploration Four

Positive Kinesthetic Empathy

Make it a point to observe small children you see, however brief the encounter. Note their ease of posture, the energy of their eyes and expressions. Notice the natural upward poise in their sitting, often despite their strollers.

Then allow that use with its poise, ease, availability, and alertness to register in you kinesthetically, by receiving and sensing it in your own body. Take the time to let those sensations percolate throughout your psychophysical being. Let what you see go through your eyes into your body without loitering in the brain. This is not an Intellectual Exercise.

Afterward, write down what you noticed, as briefly or fully as you like.

Variation: Make your observations in the context of your 360° awareness.

Exploration Five

360° Awareness in Relationship

For this exploration, you'll need a partner.

1. Make contact with your support from the ground and environment, as in Exploration Two.
2. Include yourself and your partner in that direct, global awareness.
3. Continuing steps 1 and 2, put your hands on your partner, allowing your hands to soften to receive him or her. (Start somewhere neutral, like a shoulder.)

a. Receive your awareness of your partner as part of receiving your environment, without judgment or expectation of any kind. What do you notice? What does your partner notice? How does that change for you over time? Do you drift off or narrow your attention into your partner? What does your partner notice when that happens? Is there an emotional movement as well? As in Exploration Two, your global awareness provides support for you and your partner (to the extent that you are able to continually revivify that awareness, your contact actually augments your partner's sense of space and support) to process the emotions that arise, but there is no need to become overwhelmed. It is important that both of you feel free to take care of yourselves.

Share observations with your partner, preferably staying with direct experience while you're still engaged in the exploration. Save your critiques and analyses for afterwards, if they're really necessary; they seduce you away from experiencing what you're experiencing, into the apparent safety of your head. (If you really can't resist, at least notice the effect that analyzing has on your ability to maintain your 360° awareness, as well as the effect of that awareness on your analyzing.)

b. Invite your partner to include you and your contact in his or her awareness, as you did yourself and your partner (and continue to do) in step 3a. What do you both notice now?

4. As your energy allows, switch roles and repeat steps 1-3.

For further exploration:

5. Include in your awareness the experiential knowledge of primary control you gained from Exploration Zero. You needn't do anything about it, just let the experience live in you. What does each of you notice now?
6. Repeat steps 1 and 2, and then have your partner engage in a simple activity. Now include steps 3a and b, putting your hands on your partner. Include the activity and your partner's involvement in it in your awareness. Do you or your partner notice a difference? Continue this for a while, then stop and compare what you noticed (remembering to stay with direct experience, as suggested in step 3a).
7. Repeat the Exploration as in step 5 with an attitude of "unconditional positive regard" for your partner — a warm, total, and *nonjudgmental* acceptance. What do you and your partner notice?

Exploration Six

360° Awareness for Musicians (and Audience Members, too)

1. Record a piece.*
2. Play the tape and move/dance in response to what you hear, as freely and totally as possible. As much as possible include in your movement the space around you (360°), contact with floor, and your whole self (including shifting of weight), all as one unified field of awareness. This is an exploration not in thinking, but rather in letting yourself be moved. Check your critical faculties at the door, please.
3. Immediately re-record the piece (saving the first version for later reference, if you like), inviting it into the swing and freedom you gained from step 2. (Remember your 360° awareness.) Don't think, dance your playing!

Now, jot down your observations for future reference, and take a break. Then if you feel energetic, go on to the next step. Don't push yourself!!! This is not about Getting Something. Take the time to experience whatever you're experiencing.

4. Repeat steps 2 and 3, once or a few times, allowing yourself to respond more and more totally, spontaneously, and playfully; be as far out as you comfortably can. Take advantage of your privacy!
5. Begin to add in singing along with the tape (continuing to move); sing any line (try switching around), or even improvise with it, as you prefer. Remember the space around you and contact with the floor as you do this.
6. Record the piece one more time. You can just listen to it, or compare it with the first version you recorded. What do you notice? Write down your observations; even few words or sentences will help to clarify what you've experienced. (Be aware when a comment is an observation or a judgment; either is okay, but it's important to recognize which is which.) Note not just what you hear, but also how you felt at each stage of the exploration physically or emotionally and how you feel now, things you noticed about the space around you, and even how you look (check a mirror), or anything else that occurs to you. Write down your observations, including any new insights you may have about the music.

Then,

7. In performance, allow the playfulness and freedom you explored to be the space you perform in, both mentally and physically. Even standing still or sitting to perform is lively, when your thinking is lively.

For further insights into becoming more comfortable, available, and present in your music-making, see Madeline Bruser's excellent (and highly practical) book, *The Art of Practicing: A Guide to Making Music From the Heart*. She discusses the gamut of a performer's concerns, such as mental attitude, body mechanics in general as well as for specific instruments, rhythm and the body, lively and organic phrasing, memorization, and warmth and generosity in performance.

Exploration Seven

“Semi-Supine” or the “Balanced Resting State”

1. Lie on the floor on your back, knees up. Put books under your head so that your head doesn't strain your neck by tilting back; depending on the curve of your neck (and without pinching your chin into your neck), you may need up to three inches of books. Find what's comfortable for you.

2. **Allow** yourself to sink into the support of the floor, bringing your attention gradually from your feet, allowing space in your joints, all the way up to your head. As you begin to settle and lengthen, you may need to make more room for yourself (fewer books, resettling the contact of your torso and the floor, etc.).

Take your time. Then allow your attention to follow the movement of your breath for a minute or two, in and out, but without needing to do anything about it. Notice where and how your breathing affects your contact with the floor.

3. Think (just think, say, or wish — but don't **do**) the following “directions”:

My whole neck to be free, (pause)

so that my whole head can move forward and out,* (pause)

so that my whole back can lengthen and widen.

4. Do this for at least 5 minutes, preferably longer. (Twenty minutes a day is the usual suggestion, but decide for yourself.)

When you decide to get up, take your time, and allow the ease and lengthening you've gained to guide you and your whole head (not just your face) to lead your spine.

5. Walk around a bit and make a note of anything you observe.

Variation:

6. Add to the directions:

My knees to move away from my hips (toward the ceiling)

My shoulders to release out (to the side, away from my head and spine)

Any other direction you'd like to experiment with

7. Think the directions with your whole body (not just your head, where we tend to think and feel all our thinking is happening). Take your time. What do you notice?

You may find it helpful to record this exploration on tape, and play it back so that you don't need to stop and read it.

- *“Forward and up” is an important idea in the Alexander Technique, but it can be a bit confusing at first. It is simply the opposite of tilting your head back and pulling it down onto your neck (“back and down”), as in Exploration Zero. Allowing your head to gently release “forward and up” in relation to the spine permits your primary control to function without interference. (You may find that you notice more of a release of your whole head “back and up” in relation to your neck and shoulders, while your head tilts incidentally forward over the top of the spine. One of the effects of this Exploration is to encourage the head and neck to return to their natural alignment over the shoulder, which is in fact “back” and “up” in space relative to where we usually hold our heads. So, feel free to experiment with substituting “back” for “forward” in your directions.) Because you’re lying down for this Exploration, we substitute “out” for “up,” to describe the release of your head out from the top of the spine along the floor.*

Exploration Eight

Receiving a Stimulus

Considering an activity (having the intention to do something) is a stimulus, just much as having something thrown at you (an “external” stimulus). Any new information is in fact a stimulus to our nervous system, so by considering an activity we present ourselves with a stimulus, creating a kind of laboratory for observing ourselves and our reactions and responses. We tend to react to stimuli by contracting. What happens if we don’t?

1. While you are sitting comfortably, **consider** doing (but do not do it yet) a simple movement, such as lifting something (such as your arm or a book). Notice anything? Then go ahead and make the movement. Repeat this mindfully a few times, so you have a benchmark for the next step.
2. Intending to do something equals receiving the stimulus. This time, consider doing the activity and notice whether anything changes in your body, in particular in the area of your head and neck, or in your field of awareness. Let go of the stimulus (the idea of doing something) and come back to “neutral,” then repeat this step a few times. What do you notice?
3. Remember Exploration Two (360° Awareness)? Spend at least a minute or two connecting with the space around you and the support from your contact with the floor and the chair. Then, allowing that awareness to be ongoing, repeat step 2. Let 360° awareness to become your “neutral.” What do you notice this time?
4. Is it becoming possible for you to receive the stimulus with less (or no) disturbance of the ease of your head and neck and of the unified field of awareness? Explore the possibility of receiving the stimulus without reacting (but without holding yourself back in some way, which is also a contraction!). Cultivate a calm neutrality and openness in receiving stimuli (this works just as well for emotional/social stimuli as for “physical” stimuli, by the way). Can you just barely begin the activity, without disturbing your awareness and/or ease at the head and neck? How about moment by moment as you carry out the activity?

Be patient with yourself, and come back to this Exploration from time to time. Cultivating this ability to remain consciously undisturbed in receiving and responding to a stimulus is a way of life rather than something you “get” in a few tries. Before you react to that stimulus, pause a moment (in other words, “inhibit” your reaction, which I’ll explain shortly) and consider that you manage to keep breathing and eating day in and day out. Exercising your consciousness is that kind of basic quality-of-life stuff.

Explorations such as this one help us to become aware that we actually do have more or less unconscious habitual reactions (inasmuch as we don’t realize we’re choosing them) and what those reactions are, and simultaneously that there is a field of other possible responses available to us if we can put even the tiniest gap between a stimulus and our reaction or response to it.

You’ll notice I make a distinction between the words reaction and response. It may seem a bit hair-splitting, but I think it’s useful for our purposes here and also is reflected in the origins of the words

themselves. “Re + agere” (toward, again + to act) form the root of reaction and imply both limitation of response (as in “equal and opposite reaction,” or “knee-jerk reaction” — habit so ingrained that it becomes a reflex) and repetitiveness (to act again and again in this manner when presented with this stimulus). “Re + spondere” (toward, again + (solemnly) answer) is more open-ended in nature, and also reveals the interrelationship of response with responsiveness and responsibility. (Its ties to the word “spouse” underscore the serious commitment one makes to oneself and others in endeavoring to respond rather than react.) In a very real sense (and one you can begin to experience in this Exploration), only a person who is truly free to respond can be truly and fully responsible.

5. Explore the steps above with a stimulus in mind of a more “emotional” nature (such as a difficult personal situation, the excitement/stress of performing, giving a speech, etc.). Choose something clearcut and compelling to you personally. Can you stay aware and not lose yourself and the environment? What do you notice about your thinking? Can you sense when you’re reacting and when you’re responding? Write down any observations.

6. Take a break. Or a nap.

Sometimes habit is so strong or so invisible to us that in the beginning we can best work with it by cultivating its opposite. This can be done by giving the standard Alexandrian directions we met in Exploration Seven (“my neck to be free,” etc.), or in other ways. Any stimulus energizes our nervous system (in other words, a stimulus causes stimulation), which we have learned to react to by contracting and withdrawing ourselves from the support of our environment before we do anything else. This is not a necessary relationship. In steps 3 and 4, you were exploring putting a tiny gap between stimulus and response; this is called in Alexandrian terms practicing “inhibition.” This is not a repression of anything (in the Freudian sense), but simply not reacting to the stimulus, remaining in “neutral” for an instant or longer, in order to have a choice of response. (Otherwise, habit becomes our default reaction, and we have no real choice.) This time you can choose to regard any stimulus as first of all a stimulus to expansion, whatever the rest of your response will be.

7. Consider doing the activity, as you did above, allowing that information to awaken your whole “psychophysical” being into *expansion* (of 360° awareness, your “tensegrity,” your bones away from each other, extra space in your joints, space between the molecules in your body, or however you wish to think of it). This kind of expansion has innumerable such aspects on which to rest your attention; see what works best for you today. (The lights are not off in the rest of the room as you do this, so to speak, they’re just brightest where you’re looking.) Without “doing” anything to make expansion happen, your attention and intention will allow change to happen. What kinds of things do you notice as you continue to explore? Keep your intention to carry out the activity lively and renewed. That will continue to register in your nervous system as new information, as new energy for expansion to percolate through you.

8. Now, add to the process the actual carrying out of your intention. Repeat this without judgment a few times, as you get a flow going with the process. What do you notice? Where does your attention seem to rest, on the activity or on your process and ongoing state of being? Does this seem unusual to you?

What is the quality of the activity now as compared with the earlier steps of the Exploration? Write down your observations.

9. Try steps 3 and 4 again (that is, without actively thinking about the idea of expansion). Are they a little easier now? Are you able to notice more about what you feel you “need to do” to accomplish the activity? Are you a little more able to make the experiment of doing the activity from the “unprepared” neutrality of your 360° awareness, letting go of what you think you need to do, the need to know, the need to feel “right?”

Exploration Nine

Patterns of Reaction

So what are these patterns of reaction, and where do they come from? For this Exploration, you'll need a partner, the more unsuspecting, the better.

1. Approach your partner unawares and yell, "Boo!"
2. Notice your partner's reaction.

Odds are that just before your partner turned to punch you, he or she reacted with a contractive pattern of movement you could call flinching or being startled. Write down any characteristics of this pattern that you notice. Recreate it in your own body. How do you feel, physically and emotionally? What happens at your head and neck? In light of Exploration Zero, what do you think are the implications for easy and efficient coordination under the influence of such a "startle pattern?"

This startle pattern is at the root of the more personalized versions we engage in when we meet a stimulus that is sufficiently sudden or stressful. The thing is that "sufficiently" can be a far more subtle quantity than we imagine. Just thinking of raising an arm can call that pattern into action, because of the familiar feeling it imparts to doing anything. Familiarity of sensation is a major reinforcer of habit, and it takes conscious inhibition to resist its siren song and retain freedom of response. Recreate the pattern again in yourself. Anything familiar about that? Do it a little more softly. How about now? Drop it completely and allow yourself to expand as in Exploration Eight. How do you feel now?

You can look back at Exploration Eight and your notes on that experiment. (**You have been making notes, haven't you?**) Look at your reaction to the stimulus I just gave you, in light of the startle pattern and Exploration Eight. This time, do write down what you observe, please.

3. If you missed your partner's reaction, you can repeat the experiment. Stop when your partner ceases to respond, or when he or she threatens to beat you up.

The intensity of your partner's reaction depends on, as you may have observed, the element of surprise. What may be less obvious is that, along with the intensity of the stimulus, your partner's existing level of tension determines just how surprising the stimulus is and the intensity of his or her reaction to it. This pre-existing tension or holding may be caused by and manifested as (think about that chicken-and-egg scenario for a bit) a simple narrowing of attention away from the general environment into whatever activity he or she is engaged in, or a more overt condition of agitation or anxiety. Simply consider the last horror movie you saw, and you'll see that a skillful director can persuade you to tighten yourself up like spring to the point where there's nowhere for you to go but up. (That's what getting "jumpy" is.) Why do we choose to live as if life were a horror movie, winding ourselves tighter and tighter? Perhaps it's because we don't know we have a choice.

On an evolutionary level, one can see the benefits of having a startle response: Some new and unexpected stimulus enters your awareness. You momentarily freeze in a contracted posture, protecting

your soft body parts, making yourself a little less obvious as a target, and buying time to take in information and consider fight or flight. As an animal in the wild, you either come out of that contraction pretty quickly with an appropriate response, or you're lunch. As an infant tree-climbing primate, such a reaction to falling from your mother, quickly followed up by tension-releasing, attention-getting yowling, just might save your life. As civilized human beings, however, we just have heart attacks, indigestion, and back pain — and an ever-increasing addiction to the startle pattern, which feels so familiar and right.

“How the hell did that happen?” you may well ask. Up to a certain point, ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. We emerge from the sea at birth and through painstaking experiments in listening to gravity, we evolve a delicate and dynamic response of suspension, poise, and balance that allows us to lift our head, to stand, and then to walk and run. (Remember Exploration Four?) But at the same time our nature as social creatures and, most of all, the wild card of consciousness, in combining to make us adaptable to new circumstances, also make us vulnerable to less than positive influences. These may include our parents' own less than ideal use; their reactivity, inconsistent support, or unrealistic expectations; the focus of school and society on decorum and achievement of ends as opposed to development of appropriate means; hours spent in dimly unsupportive furniture; and the tendency of “civilized” life to take us away from the natural environment that our psychophysical being evolved to encounter and from which it can draw its best support. In fact, in order to demonstrate our conscientiousness, concern, and concentration, we actually learn to “perform” the startle pattern, first for others and (having come to identify the feeling of the startle pattern with those desirable qualities) for ourselves.

But there's more to this question than just the bad influences we've encountered. Beyond simply shedding habits acquired through conscious education and unconscious imitation, we also stand in need of something which has rarely, if ever, been introduced in human education, at least in the West, a pedagogy of conscious and total psychophysical awareness in being and activity. Rather than going through life with the one substitute set of reflexes we acquired in growing up, like so many well-educated dinosaurs, if we have the courage to challenge what “feels right” — to actually allow ourselves to feel “not right,” even “not to know,” in our commitment to conscious process — we give ourselves the chance to respond creatively and appropriately in the moment to the situation we encounter at the moment.

Having evolved to the point of consciousness, we can no longer simply revert to the wild animal's state of unmediated attentiveness. Having acquired the ability (and habit) of interfering in our response to our environment, we now must consciously choose to be aware. In order to do that, we must learn *how* we can allow ourselves a conscious choice.

Now, would you kindly go back to Exploration Eight and do your bit for the evolution of the species?

Exploration Ten

Just Being

1. Go out and sit under a tree. Don't talk to it. Don't think. Just listen with your whole self, and let it teach you about just being.
2. Yes, I'm serious. Do it. Do it now.

Exploration Eleven

Bouncing Back

1. Allow a ball (such a tennis ball) to drop from your hand to the floor. When it bounces back, catch it. As much as you can, kinesthetically register its rebounding elasticity in yourself.

When a ball falls to the floor, the floor prevents any further downward movement. The force of gravity acting upon it then deflects the ball in the opposite direction, and because of its elastic nature, the ball is propelled rather efficiently back upward.

2. Sitting comfortably upright in a chair (preferably a straight-bottomed, not too cushiony one), sense your contact with the floor and the seat of your chair. Notice how your sense of weight is created by the interplay of the downward force of gravity and your own verticality. Still remaining upright, allow your weight to settle (in an internal kind of way) onto the chair and the floor.

This is the ongoing “dropping of the ball” aspect of your relationship to gravity.

3. Sense the bouncing back of the force of gravity up through you from your contact with the floor at your feet and the chair seat under you, up through your spine, radiating out through your shoulders and arms and up to suspend and support your head on the top of your spine.

This is a kind of “eternal return” aspect of the force of gravity on your structure as it lands on the planet (and lands and lands...) being redirected up through the elasticity of your structure (remember the suspensory “tensegrity” of your bones as spacers and your muscles and connective tissue as guy wires) by reflex responses you acquired as an infant and toddler. These reflexes, in their ongoing communication with and reinforcement by gravity, are constantly renewing a delicate and efficient suspensory balance of the body. They are able to do this more or less well, depending on the interference we introduce into the system by reacting to our own thought that we must hold ourselves in some way, including “up.” Holding ourselves up in this way is in actuality a holding of ourselves up off the earth and off our real psychophysical support mechanisms. In this Exploration, you are experimenting with letting go of your impulse to interfere, and with letting yourself rest on and trust in your own more expansive, responsive underlying support system.

Like any efficient movement of the body, this reflexive and sensitive response to gravity, this balance and suspension, occurs without a sensation of effort, in fact, without any particular sensation at all, a “little nothing,” as Marjorie Barstow used to say. Just like the primary control itself, which is the first among equals of these suspensory reflexes. (Yes, have a glance back at Exploration Zero.)

In our culture we are constantly encouraged to think it is important to feel ourselves “work”; this can be seen as an outgrowth of “performing” the startle pattern for ourselves and others to demonstrate our diligence. This sensation of work, however, can only be created by a set of extraneous contractions. In creating a sense of effort for ourselves, we create an imbalance in our coordination which must be compensated for and which makes movement less efficient. By contrast, any efficient movement (no matter the level of work being done and energy expended) is inherently effortless, smooth, graceful, and pleasurable to experience and to watch. (Remember Exploration Four, Positive Kines-

thetic Empathy? Have that in mind as you watch one of Fred Astaire's films, a clip of a great basketball or tennis player, or any National Geographic show on animals in the wild.)

4. Repeat this Exploration standing, then walking, allowing your feet to soften into and receive the floor.

credit: Robert Lada, Cambridge, MA.

Exploration Twelve

Another Look at Perception

1. Look at your hand.
2. Let your hand look at you.

Everything we perceive actually comes *to* us, via our senses, yet we tend to create a feedback of effort in order to *feel* ourselves perceiving. We strain to see, to listen, to feel, and in fact strain out information we could be receiving. This Exploration of letting go of reaching out and grabbing the world with your eyes (and other senses) can be applied and explored in any context, such as:

- in reading, let the book look at you.
- in writing, let the paper look at you, and let the writing flow from the contact of the pen on the paper up your arm into the rest of you. At the computer, let the screen look at you and the keys come to meet your fingertips.
- in working with your hands on something or someone, let it or the person, as well as your hands, look at you. Think of them expanding to meet your hands as you bring your hands to them.
- in playing music, let the music look at you, and let the notes come to your eyes. This is actually what happens, as the light waves reflect off the page and arrive at your retina.
- in repeating the variations above, do you notice a difference if what you are working with looks at you *and* the whole space behind you?
- as you sit, stand, or move around, *allow yourself to be seen*, by your 360° environment, by the world and people around you.

Sometimes people find this idea curiously liberating or exhilarating, or even somewhat distressing. If you should find this emotionally difficult for any reason, reconnect with your support from the ground and 360° awareness, continuing to breathe freely and easily. This exploration can be very revealing of and helpful in processing tensions over one's vulnerability and sense of adequacy or need to present a "good face" to the world; in order to work productively with the experience, however, it is important to be grounded and present—and patient. Here again, the emotional and hands-on support of someone experienced is very helpful.

- in conversation, allow what you're hearing to come to you and allow yourself to receive it fully. Then, allow your reply to come to you, too, rather than grabbing for it as soon as your partner begins to speak.

Continue to find new contexts for this Exploration (including using your other senses), and make a note of your discoveries.

credit: Mio Morales, NYC.

Exploration Thirteen

Finding Balance

As you stand comfortably (preferably in bare feet or socks) on the floor (i.e., an even, hard surface), consider the following: In each of your feet there is a tripod of contact with, and support from, the ground. Each tripod is formed by the balls of your feet below the big and little toe, and your heel. Your weight is transmitted down through both legs, via each ankle to the middle of each foot, and evenly via the longitudinal and lateral arches out to the three points of the tripod. Your toes are free and in easy contact with the floor; they are not weight-bearing, but rather are properly used for navigation. If you find they are stiff or working hard, try shifting your weight slightly, probably back toward your heels. When your toes are free, you will probably find that your weight is more evenly distributed within the tripod as well.

2. Allowing your feet to soften into the floor, and your neck to be free, so that the balance of your head on your neck is easy and responsive to any shifting of your weight (and continuing that allowing throughout this Exploration), first shift your weight *very slowly* to the right. (By very slowly, I mean absolutely as slowly as you can manage without holding or tension, all the while “listening” attentively — kinesthetically — with all of you, not just head and feet.) Pause there a moment. Then shift *very slowly* to the left. Pause there a moment. Repeat this a few times as slowly and attentively as you can, allowing your ankles, knees, hip joints, vertebrae, and all your joints as much space as possible. Notice where you feel the least amount of work being done to hold you up, the “zero point,” so to speak, and gradually come to a poise on that point. Pausing there, ask yourself where you could be doing less, allowing your floating balance to respond to any changes that may bring about. Then let go of that questioning and simply exist there in your 360° awareness and let your weight sink into the ground through the tripods of your feet, suspending you upward into your space in a dynamic stillness.

3. Repeat step 2, but this time rocking forward and back.

4. Repeat step 2, but moving in a circle that becomes a spiral, as you center down on your zero point. Repeat this in the opposite direction. Remember, the slower the better; we learn much more from small bits of information, than from a big wash of general sensation.

5. Now take a walk on those tripods of support, allowing them to soften and contact the ground fully. What do you notice?

It is important to realize that the balance you find today, in this moment, is not a “right” position or posture to be recaptured tomorrow or for all time. It is an expression of your current state, both within yourself and in relation to your environment, and is just as relative and transient as that state. What is of lasting value is your experience of and trust in the attentiveness, both to process and to your own being, which leads you to appropriate balance in this moment, and the next, and the next.

Exploration Fourteen

The Lure of the Familiar

1. Clasp your hands. Notice carefully how that feels.

Most likely you did this as you usually do, and it feels pretty familiar — and right. Now,

2. Clasp them the other way (with the other thumb on top). Notice how that feels. Then, let your hands stay like this for a few minutes, while you read on or think about other things.

Just getting your fingers arranged in this new order can seem oddly and surprisingly confusing. Do you begin to see how strongly we correlate a feeling of familiarity with being correct, even in something so simple and innocuous? This is part of what we are up against when we try to change a habit, and why the willingness to suspend our need to feel right, to tolerate feeling unfamiliar and even wrong, is so crucial to being able to change.

3. Leave your hands apart for a moment, and then clasp them in your familiar way.

4. Clasp them the other way, and notice what you feel, relative to the usual way and to your first encounter with this arrangement.

5. Go back and forth a few times, attentively.

Do you find the longer you leave your hands in the unfamiliar position, the less unfamiliar it becomes? That is another important aspect of letting go of habit — it takes time and patience. When we rush, we actually strengthen the impulse to habit as part of our reaction, as you saw in Explorations Eight and Nine; in taking our time, we create space for new, more flexible responses to emerge and become familiar through attentive repetition.

credit: Tully Hall, Lee, MA.

Exploration Fifteen

A Change in Thinking Is a Change in Being

You'll need your partner again for this Exploration.

1. Standing with your partner facing you, concentrate your thinking and attention on the top of your head. While you do this, ask your partner to try to push you (hands on your shoulders, or gently shoving you, as you wish), as you try to remain upright.
2. Now concentrate your thinking and attention on a point in your body an inch or two below your navel and somewhat back toward your spine (essentially your center of gravity, and what martial artists call the *hara* or *tan t'ien*), while your partner again tries to push you. What does each of you notice?
3. Switch roles and repeat the Exploration. Share your experience with each other.

Variation:

4. Repeat the Exploration imagining yourself rooted in the ground, then again while imagining yourself extended quite far down into the planet. Notice any differences?

What does this Exploration suggest to you about the power of your thinking to affect your being (as in physical strength) and how does that change in being in turn affect your thinking and emotional state (as in, perhaps, greater equanimity)? Many expressions we commonly, but rather unthinkingly, use bespeak the indissoluble unity of our apparently physical state and our apparently mental state; in this case, for example, feeling and being “grounded” or “up in the air.” Our very language has much to tell us about ourselves, if only we can learn to listen with more than our disembodied heads.

For further investigation:

Numerous students and teachers of the Alexander Technique have found martial arts such as *t'ai chi* and *aikido* to be an excellent complement to their study. For example, in his book on the Technique, ***Body Learning***, Michael Gelb discusses his own involvement with aikido, and Bruce Fertman's teacher training at The Alexander Foundation in Philadelphia, PA, includes *t'ai chi* as a part of its course of study. Step 2 of this Exploration is, in fact, analogous to what is called “sinking” in *t'ai chi*. There are many fine books on the subject; you will find a handful listed in the bibliography, including two that explore the larger psychological and social ramifications of martial arts principles in action.

Exploration Seventeen

Your Expanding Self

1. Think of a life-size, three-dimensional skeleton.
2. Think of that skeleton stuffed inside you (as it is, in fact).
3. Think of your muscles and other tissues, as an elastic “suit.”
4. Think of your skeleton expanding (and continuing to expand) everywhere into that elastic suit.
5. As you’re thinking that, mentally (kinesthetically) scan yourself for any holding, tension, or blank spots and invite them along in the expansion. Don’t try to make anything happen; just wait and see what those spots will do.

Keep this up for a while and see where it leads you.

Then,

6. Use this expansion as your inhibitive standard. In other words, consider an activity and see whether your skeleton is still releasing and opening into that suit, or whether there are little pulls or holdings. When you can consider the activity without forsaking expansion and release, go ahead and carry out the activity – remember, without forsaking the expansion into the elastic suit. Feel free to pause (right where you are without starting over!) and re-commit to expansion whenever you feel you **have** to **do** something or you feel tension creeping in.
7. Repeat and refine the process.

credit: David Gorman

Exploration Eighteen

A Pressure Gauge

If you have a partner:

1. Stand facing each other, with your weight evenly distributed on your feet.
2. Have your partner hold a hand vertically with the palm open. Bring your hands together, palms facing each other, on either side of your partner's hand, like a sandwich on its edge.
3. Sensing the pressure of your feet in contact with the ground, match that pressure with your hands on your partner's hand. (You needn't take a lot of time with this.)
4. Switch.
5. Compare experiences. How much pressure did you apply? Consider that this is the pressure of your whole body resting on the ground. Does that thought surprise you? (Think about it.) This is what your tensegrity does for you, using gravity to suspend you upward, so that all you sense is yourself resting quite lightly on the ground.
6. Take a walk around with this in mind.

(If you don't have a partner to work with, try matching the pressure with just your palms against each other.)

Did you notice the little bonus of this Exploration? In listening to your contact with the ground and your hands on your partner's (or on each other), what do you notice about your sense of yourself as a whole? To explore this wholeness further, repeat Exploration Seventeen with this one as your "activity," and notice what you experience.

credit: David Gorman

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For Further Reading on the Alexander Technique

Many of these, plus pamphlets, articles, audio- and videotapes, and other materials not listed here, are available from:

AmSAT Books		STAT Books
P.O. Box 517		20 London House
Urbana, IL 61801 USA	or	266 Fulham Road
(800) 473-0620 or		London SW10 9EL
(217) 367-6956		(071) 352-0666

Frank Pierce Jones, *Body Awareness in Action* (Schocken) (recently reprinted as *Freedom to Change*, with some new material)

Ron Brown, *Authorized Summaries of F.M. Alexander's Four Books*

Donald Weed, *The Basic Principles Workbook* (study guide based on Jones and Maisel, available from STAT or from author (see above); other study guides to FMA's books are planned)

Books under the title *The Alexander Technique*, by:

Richard Brennan (plus *Workbook* (Element), and *Manual* (Journey Editions))
Judith Leibowitz & William Connington (HarperCollins)
Chris Stevens (Tuttle)
Wilfred Barlow (Healing Arts Press)
John Gray (St. Martin's Press)
John Nicholls (in conversation with Sean Carey)
Glynn MacDonald (Hodder & Stoughton Headway Lifeguides)
Patrick MacDonald (*The Alexander Technique As I See It*, Rahula Books)
Richard Craze (Teach Yourself Books)

Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud* (Mornum Time Press)
—, *Explaining the Alexander Technique* (Sheildrake Press)

Jerry Sontag, ed., *Curiosity Recaptured: Exploring Ways We Think and Move* (essays by Alexander teachers) (Mornum Time Press)

Sherry Berjeron-Oliver and Bruce Oliver, *Working Without Pain* (PIAT Books, available at (916) 894-7166 or (800) 860-1200)

Goddard Binkley, *The Expanding Self* (STAT Books)

Jonathan Drake, *Body Know-How* (Thorsons)

Deborah Caplan, *Back Trouble* (Triad)

Robert Rickover, *Fitness Without Stress* (Metamorphous Press)

Glen Park, *The Art of Changing* (Ashgrove Press)

Ilana Machover, *The Alexander Technique Birth Book* (Sterling)

B. Forsstrom and M. Hampson, *The Alexander Technique for Pregnancy* (Gollancz)

Catherine Kettrick, “*What a Piece of Work...*” (study guide to F.M. Alexander’s books, available through AmSAT)

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Lulie Westfeldt, *F. Matthias Alexander: The Man and His Work*

Judith Stransky, *The Alexander Technique: Joy in the Life of Your Body* (Beaufort)

Jack (J. V.) Fenton, *Choice of Habit (or Practical Movement Control)* (MacDonald & Evans)

Louise Morgan, *Inside Yourself* (Hutchinson)

Marie B. Byles, *Stand Straight Without Strain* (L.N. Fowler & Co.)

G.C. Bowden, *F.M. Alexander and the Creative Advance of the Individual* (L.N. Fowler & Co.)

Liz Hodgkinson, *The Alexander Technique and How It Can Help You* (Judy Piatkis Ltd.)

[Please note that the information in this article was current as of Summer 1997]