

A Brief Summary of the Principles of the Alexander Technique

Andrea Matthews

Voice Instructor, Wellesley College, and

Teaching Member, Alexander Technique International

The many and varied approaches to communicating the implications of the Alexander Technique lead back to a few simple principles that F.M. Alexander discovered empirically in the process of recovering his own voice over a century ago. My metaphors, demonstrations, and analogies are intended to help you suspend your habitual thinking and to allow you to experience these underlying ideas as a functional reality. The study of the Technique tends to be a spiral deeper and deeper into the meaning of these principles, revisiting the same concepts on different levels of experience. You can find more information on these ideas at **www.ati-net.com** and **www.alexandertechnique.com**.

Among the central principles are:

I. The Unity of the Whole Person (“Psychophysical Unity”)

A person is not a mind in a body, but a psychophysical unity. We cannot have a perception or thought without movement, or movement without a thought or perception. What and how we think will determine the outcome of our actions. How we use ourselves will determine how we feel and think about ourselves and the world. A person’s poise (or lack of it) manifests their emotional or mental state of balance, and directly reinforces it at the same time. If we change our physical balance, we change our mood. If we change our thinking, our physicality responds. In brief, our “attitude” *is* our “attitude.”

II. Use Is a Constant Influence on Functioning (“The Universal Constant”)

A rather obvious idea, but more honored in the breach than in practice. How we use ourselves determines the quality of our functioning, and the results we achieve in our actions. If we use ourselves excessively tensely, we will tend to become more tense and experience more discomfort and inefficiency in our being and moving. We will appear—and feel—dis-integrated. If we use ourselves in a balanced, flexible, responsive way, we will tend to increase all of those qualities in our being and moving, improve the products of our actions, and appear—and feel—more integrated. We tend however to put our ease and balance a distant second to the result we wish to achieve (and the time we feel we have to achieve it), if they are a consideration at all.

A distinction can be made here between the intention to do something and an exclusive focus on a “result” (in particular, the latter generally includes a demand that the outcome have specific characteristics, and the expectation of a certain familiar feeling—usually effort—in gaining it.) A metaphor for this distinction is the difference between the monarch who remains calmly on the throne giving orders, in full expectation of them being carried out, and one who gives the order, but then feels compelled to scramble down from the throne to “help” in carrying them out, but only gets in the way.

III. Primary Control

Alexander discovered that the easy poise of the head on the top of the spine, in relation to the rest of the body, is the primary physical factor in determining the balance and responsiveness of a person's being. Subsequent researchers have confirmed that this is true of vertebrates in general. Our ability to respond freely, flexibly, and efficiently is directly proportional to the availability of our heads to accommodate to the most subtle changes in our balance. Fixation of the head atop the spine, characteristic of an interfering tension pattern recognized as "startle," reinforces in the nervous system a feeling of threat and vulnerability. When excess tension starts in the body, it generally starts from the head and radiates down the trunk and out to the limbs in rapid succession, as a version of the well-known startle pattern. To the extent that the *availability* of the head to move is compromised, compensatory tensions to support the head and the rest of the body will come into play.

Over time, we acclimate to such tensions; they go "under the radar" of our awareness, becoming integrated to some degree in every action. The greater the emotional "ante" of the situation in which we find ourselves (importance, time pressure, uncertainty, and so forth), the more exaggerated the pattern will become. The more energy is applied, the more the tension pattern is amplified. A major aim of the Alexander Technique is to teach students how to *suspend* these interfering tensions, allowing the underlying primary control of coordination, the freedom of the head in relation to the body, to fully reassert itself. Then energy that is applied goes directly and efficiently into the activity and not into intensifying an interfering tension pattern.

IV. Unreliable Sensory Appreciation

This tendency of tensions to "go under the radar"—to become familiar and fade from conscious awareness—has a number of major implications for use and functioning. First of all, we cease to be aware of tensions that may be interfering with our functioning. We feel perfectly normal. We may be dissatisfied with the results we are achieving, or we may be starting to feel some discomfort or even pain, but since everything seems "perfectly normal," we rarely question how we're going about things. We don't see how we've been gradually using up our margin for error; we think something completely new has suddenly "happened to us."

Not only do we feel perfectly normal, what is familiar feels "right." And since we all—first and foremost—want to feel *right*, it would never occur to us to try another way, or do without those extra tensions. That would feel "wrong"! In order to benefit from the insights of the Alexander Technique, we must be willing to be wrong, to feel strange, to not go by our faulty sensory appreciation.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this familiar, yet unperceived pattern of tension is that we come to identify ourselves by that familiar feeling: "This is me *being me*." (Reflect for a moment: How do you know who *you* are?) Sometimes we only recognize that for the first time in an Alexander lesson, when that tension pattern is lessened and we feel odd, disoriented, not "ourselves." As we accommodate to such patterns of excess tension in being and activity, it is as if we have put on a strait-jacket, and have gotten so used to it that we would feel endangered or

“not ourselves” without it. Even in the simplest of activities, that may be the greatest obstacle to freedom of being and moving—our sense of identification with our interfering tensions. As noted in the discussion of the “Primary Control,” tensions that remain constant tend not to register. In nature (were we not acclimating to unnecessary tensions), this is a useful and necessary filtering system, without which we would be simply overwhelmed with incoming information of sameness, drowning out novel input. We are wired to attend to the new, to contrasts. But when we do have ongoing interfering tensions, and we then *identify* with our interfering tension pattern—in other words, feeling that tension is how we know who we are and that we are doing a particular activity in our usual way—we actually have to *increase* the level of tension and interference in order to continue to “know” we’re doing things the right way and even “being ourselves.” That means that there is no “steady state” with habitual tension—over months and years it will increase, just so we can continue to feel “normal.” That’s why we often feel surprised when an injury seems to happen out of nowhere; we feel as if we have done nothing unusual. In actuality, we have steadily used up our margin of error and inevitably our regular activities will lead to injury, or the slightest of extra demands will tip the balance even sooner.

It is important to note that it is generally not our sensory *perception* that is skewed, but our *interpretation* of that information. Our expectations and assumptions create a filter for incoming information, and in some cases completely replace actual current information. It can be as if we were insistently trying to navigate Boston with a map of New York; occasionally something may seem to match up to our version of reality, but on the whole, it only leads us to confusion and frustration.

V. Inhibition

Inhibition in the Alexandrian sense is not the “suppression” of a feeling or action, but, as in biology, the suspension or neutralization of an impulse to act immediately (and partially), in favor of another, more integrated and complete way of responding to conditions. This is done in Alexander Technique through conscious awareness of one’s thoughts and impulses when presented with a stimulus, which opens the possibility of *choice* rather than immediate, compulsive, habitual *reaction*. It allows you to consciously put a gap between stimulus and response. For example, you decide to get up from a chair: notice the first thing you feel you *must* do to get up, and you probably will begin to notice you feel a necessity to tense something—your neck, your lower back, your legs—and/or narrow your field of awareness. If you suspend (“inhibit”) acting on that feeling, allow your head to be freely poised on your spine (i.e., allow the Primary Control to operate freely), remain present in relation to your surroundings, and get up anyway, your system will be free to find a more integrated, organic way to get you out of the chair.

VI. Direction

Direction is a form of “constructive thinking,” in contrast to the interfering or distracted sorts of thinking we often engage in. If you suspend your habitual local exertion, you will need to supply sufficient energy globally to your system to carry out the activity. In Alexander Technique, this is referred to as “direction,” i.e., the directing of energy into dynamic

suspensory support and thus into the activity itself, rather than into intensifying the habitual, interfering pattern of tension. This can also be supported consciously by a short series of verbal or kinesthetic “preventive orders” developed by F.M. Alexander, which both interrupt habitual interference and supply energy to the uprighting responses: “neck to be free, so that the head can release forward and up, so that the whole torso can lengthen and widen.”

The effect of inhibition applied in combination with direction is a quality of effortless power in being and doing. (Consider the effortless poise and flexibility of Fred Astaire or the acrobats of Cirque de Soleil.) A great deal of work may be happening, but there is no sensation—or appearance—of effort. Such activity is experienced as “allowing” or “non-doing,” in contrast to the more familiar “doing” or “trying.” As one Alexander teacher (David Gorman) has remarked: Effort is the sensation of working against yourself.

Athletes and performers sometimes refer to this effortless, balanced, yet dynamic state as “flow,” and it is an experience of complete psychophysical integration and effectiveness. Martial artists refer to the ability to harness such energy as the direction of *chi*, in which the energy itself is felt to do the work, and the person to be merely a conduit for the energy. In fact, the elusive, even paradoxical quality of the experience of inhibition and direction is well-captured in books such as *Zen in the Art of Archery* by Eugen Herrigel. Consciousness is best used to formulate intentions and give permission to their being carried out—not to micro-manage the tissues and bony bits that carry out those intentions. This gives “reflex-facilitated” movement its quality of “non-doing” or “allowing,” in contrast to what we usually think of as “control”: making something happen and *feeling* ourselves doing it.

In the initial stages, this “non-doing” is felt by many students as a disturbing loss of “control.” This is because we have learned to identify the feeling of effort as that of “being in control.” However, genuine control (which Alexander termed “Conscious Constructive Control”) relies on the activation of reflexes that we can only influence indirectly, if we are not to interfere with their efficient functioning.

When one inhibits habitual interferences, energy can be directed into the activity; when one responds effortfully and habitually, energy is directed into the pattern of interference, and only secondarily into the activity. The greater the effort, the greater the interference. That explains the problem of performers who feel they are working harder and harder for intensity of expression, but are simply becoming more tense and less expressive.

VII. Ends and Means (“End-gaining” and the “Means-Whereby”)

The difficulty of suspending our habits and letting another more flexible, inclusive response emerge stems not from mere willfulness, but from our habit of attending more to the results we think we should get than to the process that will guarantee a desired outcome. Alexander referred to this as the habit of “end-gaining” (doing anything to gain one’s end), as opposed to seeking the “means whereby” that end might be gained, and he found it is endemic in our culture. It can take considerable courage, patience, and clarity of thinking to tolerate the disturbing feelings that arise when we even *consider* acting without focusing on the result, while attending instead to our ease of use in process. The intensity of these feelings can be quite a surprise to students, but they are hardly unusual in Alexander lessons. They can include:

disorientation, anxiety, euphoria, a feeling of wrongness (even in a moral sense, as in “that was *too easy*”), a sense of not actually doing what one intended (although one is clearly doing it), a shift in the flow of time, and even a shift in one’s sense of identity. *At the same time*, students report feeling lighter, taller, bigger, more grounded, calmer, more integrated.

VIII. “Conscious Constructive Control of the Individual”

The implications of this new way of working were very clear to Alexander over 100 years ago, and each student of the Technique discovers them anew. If we are creating the interference that impedes us, we have the ability to choose to respond differently. We may not be responsible for what life throws at us—but we are responsible for our reactions. Just as we encounter a new experience of “control” in the Technique, we can experience a new quality of personal responsibility, one that is not about “blame” or being “right” or “wrong,” but about free will and choice. Studying the Technique puts us back in the center of our lives, making the choices that will determine the quality of our experience, no matter what difficulties we encounter in life. The question of why some individuals rise to a challenge while others are overwhelmed is less perplexing when viewed from the perspective of the Technique. Resilience is developed through experience and relationships in life; where it is not acquired in the natural course of events, it can be learned. Even the “naturally” resilient can learn to enhance their gift through conscious awareness of their responses to stress, gaining an even greater level of “conscious constructive control.”

What You Think Is What You Get

There are several levels on which the Alexander Technique speaks to the whole person. On the physical level, it addresses interference with the Primary Control, with the aim of interrupting patterns of excess tension. On the intellectual level, it can correct faulty information (such as faulty sensory appreciation or incorrect concepts of body mechanics) and challenge the assumptions on which we operate. We function in accordance with our ideas about ourselves and the world; if those are inaccurate, we will create friction in our bodies and minds. On the emotional level, it can help us to free ourselves from unconstructive assumptions and knee-jerk responses to stressful situations, increasing our resilience, while allowing us to experience our genuine emotions, even very powerful ones.

Increasing attention in the Alexander world is being given, however, to the centrality of awareness and attention in the functioning of the Primary Control, and thus in overall coordination. After all, what is the unifying property of personhood, but the sense of an embodied awareness that observes and makes choices? Clearly not every function in a person rises to the level of awareness all the time, but a skill can be developed to bring to awareness those less-conscious functions so they may be evaluated for their effectiveness and accuracy. We can learn to be more “present” and “in support” more of the time, and thus to have more of a choice about how to respond to the conditions in which we find ourselves *here and now*, rather than those of the remembered past or anticipated future. When we do so, and are able to make use of the principles outlined above, we can reduce stress for ourselves and others, perform with more grace and expression, move with more ease, and face life with more directness and equanimity.