

The Alexander Technique—What It Is and How It Works

Work with Three Musicians

Eleanor Rosenthal, J.D.

Developed by a turn of the century “Shakespearean reciter” in the course of solving his vocal problems, the Alexander Technique has been a valued tool to performers of all kinds for nearly a hundred years. F. Matthias Alexander, the originator of the Technique, described it as a way of improving “the use of the self.” Deceptively simple, Alexander’s words were intended to convey a concept that was astonishingly broad in scope. When Alexander spoke of the “self” he meant the entire mind-body complex, which he saw as an interconnected, interdependent whole. And when he spoke about “use,” he meant what the self does—at all times, in all activities.

Alexander’s objective was to teach people a skill that would help them improve the way they executed *all* of the activities of their daily lives. Sitting in a chair, playing a viola, doing an arabesque, solving a mathematical problem—one “uses oneself” in everything one does, and the Technique is about learning to use oneself better. One writer has commented that the Technique is not a technique of doing a particular thing, but rather a “. . . pre-technique, a means of sorting out the whole mind-body complex . . .” that can be applied wherever and whenever we choose.¹

Such an ambitious program, naturally enough, engenders a certain amount of skepticism in the casual observer.² Can one person, the Alexander teacher, really teach you to do everything better, from “cooking” in a jazz band to cooking dinner? The question is deceptive, however, because its emphasis is misleading. Focusing on the principles underlying good self-use, rather than the diversity of the situations in which they apply, makes the role of the Alexander teacher considerably more plausible. To clarify: imagine a man in handcuffs. He tries to play a musical instrument and he tries to prepare an omelet—and certainly does neither very well. You remove his handcuffs and both his playing and his cooking improve, although you are neither chef nor master music teacher.

Eleanor Rosenthal was trained and certified to teach the Alexander Technique at the American Center for the Alexander Technique in New York and is a member of the North American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique. A past President and Director of the American Center for the Alexander Technique, Western Region, she has had a full time private practice in San Francisco since 1975. She also holds a JD degree, which she earned at Harvard and Columbia Law Schools. She practiced law for nearly ten years before becoming an Alexander teacher. Address correspondence to Ms. Rosenthal, 530 Presidio Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94115.

Can one person, the Alexander teacher, really teach you to do everything better, from “cooking” in a jazz band to cooking dinner?

Similarly, the Alexander teacher is not expected to be an expert in his students’ fields. Instead, he has a different expertise: he knows how people’s habits interfere with their functioning, and he knows how to help them overcome those habits.

Applications

The most visible results of work in the Technique are improvements in posture and body mechanics. Learning the Technique is a way of achieving good posture without strain, as well as easy, graceful and efficient movement. Voice and breathing respond to work in the Technique, as do many muscle spasms and problems such as chronic lower back, neck and shoulder pain when, as is often the case, they are the result of poor body mechanics.

In addition to physical changes, students often report improvements more easily classified as mental or emotional. (Since the Technique is an educational discipline, those who study it are referred to as “students” or “pupils” rather than “clients” or “patients.”) Although more than just a relaxation technique, the Technique can lead to such benefits as increased calm, confidence, ability to concentrate, resistance to stress, relief from insomnia, and a more “centered” and composed feeling. One student said:

I became less anxious when dealing with the everyday frustrations of life. I felt more relaxed in social situations . . . the changes occurred naturally as I participated in the daily act of living. Things flowed together more naturally; the body and mind felt more centered.³

Performers, whose minds and bodies are their instruments, find the Technique particularly valuable. From his arrival in London in 1904, Alexander worked extensively with actors; most of the leading actors of his day came to him for lessons at one time or another. The Technique has been a part of the program at the Theater Center of the Juilliard School since its opening in 1968 and it is taught in countless other theatre schools and companies throughout the United States and England. Singers and dancers

also study the Technique but, in my experience, the performers most often drawn to it by medical problems are the instrumental musicians. Three of my current students are musicians who came to me because of severe or disabling pain; after explaining the Technique in some detail, I will go on to discuss my work with them in the section entitled *Three Musicians*.

Origin and Method

In 1888, F. Matthias Alexander, then only 19, had embarked on a promising career as a Shakespearean “reciter” in Australia. Recurrent laryngitis threatened to silence him forever; his doctor prescribed rest, but that helped only temporarily. When even his well-rested voice gave out during a particularly important performance, Alexander decided to look beyond the medical profession for a solution to his problem.

Because his laryngitis was associated with performing, Alexander suspected that it was something he was doing on stage that was the cause of the problem. Observing himself in a mirror he could see that, when speaking, and even more dramatically when reciting, he had a tendency to pull his head back, depress his larynx and inhale noisily through his mouth. After some practice, he was able to stop pulling his head back; this “tended indirectly to check” the other habits and his voice began to improve. These observations and experiments were the beginning of a process of exploration and discovery that ethologist Nikolaas Tinbergen described, in his 1973 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, as “. . . one of the true epics of medical research and practice.”⁴ Philosopher John Dewey, also a great admirer of Alexander’s work, said of his empirical methodology that it “satisfies the most exacting demands of the scientific method.”⁵

After his first efforts, Alexander went on to observe that his characteristic tilt of the head did not function in isolation—rather, it seemed to be connected with other patterns of misuse, such as lifting his chest, arching his back and tensing his legs and feet. He also discovered that if he corrected the tilt of his head in such a way as to eliminate any downward pressure on his spine, his overall coordination improved.

This led him to hypothesize that there is, in each of us, an integrating mechanism that would produce better coordination and functioning if allowed to operate without interference. Most of us, he felt, interfere with it, as he had done by tilting his head and compressing his spine. He called the mechanism the “primary control” and described it as follows:

I discovered that a certain use of the head in relation to the neck, and of the head and neck in relation to the torso and other parts of the organism . . . constituted a primary control of the mechanisms *as a whole* . . . and that when I interfered with the employment of the primary control of my manner of use, this was always associated with a lowering of the standard of my general functioning.⁶ (Emphasis in the original.)

Attempts have been made to explain the primary control in neuromuscular terms; I don’t find them entirely satisfactory. Nonetheless, I do know that if I use Alexander’s model, and work on the hypothesis that there is a primary

control that can be activated by improving the relationship between the head, neck and torso, I will get results reassuringly similar to Alexander’s.

Thus, the essence of an Alexander teacher’s job now is very much what it was in 1894, when Alexander began to teach: to help the student activate his primary control and keep it operating while he goes about the business of his daily life.

The teacher’s method of accomplishing this is, in the beginning, to use his words and hands to give the student repeated experiences of using his primary control in activity. As time goes on, the student needs less and less help from the teacher; the experience no longer needs to be “given,” and the student can activate his primary control on his own.

Alexander’s practice of “giving” the experience was rooted, at least in part, in his dislike of trial and error learning. “Under the ordinary teaching methods,” he said, “the pupil gets nineteen wrong and one right experience. It ought to be the other way round.”⁷ He similarly rejected corrective physical exercises, stating that they would simply reinforce the poor use and problems of those for whom they are normally prescribed. His reasoning was very much like that of music teachers who urge their students to practice very slowly, or to begin by “studying” a passage rather than “practicing” it.⁸ Like Alexander, they believe in the importance of working through a correct solution to a problem rather than repeating and reinforcing one’s initial mistakes.

Unconscious Learning: The “Magic” of the Technique

One of the greatest strengths of the Technique is that it approaches the learning process on both a conscious and an unconscious level. The unconscious process begins with the teacher’s hands, which are quite distinctive in their ability to convey a new kinesthetic experience. This aspect of the work originated with Alexander’s discovery that if his own primary control was operating he could place his hands lightly on the student and somehow trigger *the student’s* primary control, causing a profound change in the student’s musculature and coordination. The student could be helped to release muscles that he thought he had lost touch with, and tone could be restored to others that were seemingly lifeless.

In order to teach the Technique, contemporary Alexander teachers must learn to communicate with their hands as Alexander did. The skill can be taught, but not quickly. As a result, accredited training programs last 1600 hours over three years; shorter programs would not currently be approved by the North American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (NASTAT), the American Center for the Alexander Technique (ACAT), the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT), in London, or the national societies of teachers in other countries.

An Alexander teacher’s touch, although distinctive, is very difficult to describe. It is extremely gentle, it uses neither massage nor manipulation, and its effects are profound. I particularly like the following descriptions of relatively localized shoulder releases from two of my beginning students: “It felt as if my shoulder knew what your hands wanted it to do” and “It felt as if my shoulder was widening and moving out, but from the inside.”

A popular misconception about the Technique is that it teaches you “how to hold your head;” however, it is a balance, not a fixed position, that is wanted.

The teacher's hands are also used in a less localized way to help the student activate his primary control. If the student's head is lightly balanced on his spine in such a way that his spine is allowed to lengthen, his primary control will start to operate and will guide him in movement. Please note, however, that I am talking about a *balance* of the head on the spine, not a fixed position. A popular misconception about the Technique is that it teaches you “how to hold your head;” however, it is a balance, not a fixed position, that is wanted.

One result of activating the student's primary control, as I explained earlier, is to effect an immediate improvement in overall coordination. A release of the cervical musculature may, for example, produce freer use of the hip joints.

In addition, activation of the primary control seems to trigger a part of the learning process that is virtually automatic; repeated experiences of using the primary control initiate a process of seemingly effortless change. Thus a student may find himself walking differently, standing differently, talking differently—although he has made no particular effort to do so. The more experience the student has with allowing his primary control to operate, the more it will do the job for him.

Conscious Learning

While much Alexander learning is unconscious, and many students make enormous progress without a great deal of effort, conscious learning is also an integral part of the Technique. Unconscious learning can lead to change, but it is the conscious part of the process that gives the student autonomy and the ability to work on himself after his lessons are over.

How does the conscious learning process work? Alexander broke it down into three steps: *awareness*, *inhibition* and *conscious control*.

Awareness is awareness of habit. Habits have a great deal of significance in the Technique; in fact, dealing with habits is probably the most important thing the Alexander Technique does. In Alexander's words:

You are not here to do exercises, or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and to learn to deal with it.⁹

In Alexander's case, the stimulus that always put him wrong was that decision to speak. As he waited on stage, it was that decision that triggered the complex neuromuscular pattern that both got the words out and threatened to ruin his vocal mechanism. What's more, he found that most of the time he simply *couldn't tell* what he was doing. Habit had distorted his kinesthetic sense, and the habitual felt “right” and the unfamiliar “wrong,” no matter how hard he tried to change it. In fact, his mirrors were a far

If You Were to Watch Me Teaching a Lesson, What Would You See?

Traditionally, the Technique has been taught one-to-one, because the teacher's touch is such an important part of the student's learning experience. While I sometimes work with groups, I more often work with students privately because I feel that the concentrated experience of the individual lesson, and particularly the concentrated experience of the teacher's hands, has a very special value for the student.

In the lesson you're observing, the student may be lying on a table. It's something like a massage table, but usually a little higher and wider. Lying there, the student no longer has to support himself against gravity, and can thus pay more careful attention to what is going on in his body. He can release overcontracted muscles, and he can be more sensitive to changes because he no longer has to deal with the distractions of gravity and complex movements.

As the student lies there, you will see me gently touching and moving him, and you will hear me talking to him. You will notice that while my work takes me to various parts of his body I keep returning to his head and neck, because it is the relationship of the head, neck and spine that governs his primary control (see article).

You will also see me working with the student off the table, in a variety of activities. Although the student can learn a great deal from the table work, I feel that it is the work off the table that insures that he can carry his new discoveries into his daily life.

The most traditional form of movement work is called “chair work,” and it actually does involve the use of a chair. As we work, you will see me using my hands and words to help the student to get into, sit in, and arise from a simple, straight-backed chair. I should point out, however, that there is no God-given virtue to chairs; working with a chair is simply a convenient way of giving the student an experience of using himself well in a complex action that we perform many times in the course of a day. It has much in common with many of our other daily activities—as I said, it is a convenient teaching device.

The way I help the student, particularly during his early lessons, will probably be to talk him through the movement while I guide him with my hands, often from the head and neck. In later lessons, I may simply talk the student through the movement, not using my hands and saying less and less as the student's use improves.

Getting into and out of a chair is, of course, only one of the many kinds of movement that can be used as teaching vehicles in the Technique. I try to work with activities that occupy a lot of our daily lives; for example, sitting, standing, walking, bending, lifting and reaching. I also try to work with activities and problems that are of special importance to each student—dance for the dancer, typing for the secretary, sports for the athlete and performing for the musician, for example. My choice of activities is limited only by space and practicality, and when necessary I can at least transcend the limits of space by, for example, going to a swimming pool to work on swimming or to the back yard to work on running or pruning the roses.

more reliable guide than his own sensations, and one of his chief objectives became the improvement of what he called his “defective sensory appreciation.”

Like Alexander, the rest of us have a variety of physical and mental habits that interfere with our performance and distort our kinesthetic sense. Often we are unaware of their existence. The first step in the conscious learning process, then, is to bring them to awareness.

Inhibition is the second step. When Alexander discovered that he was putting his head back and down in order to speak, his first thought was to do the opposite—put his head forward and up. He soon discovered that the habit was too well-established; he could not change it so easily. What he had to do, first, was simply teach himself to stop. He would have to accept the stimulus to speak and “inhibit” or turn off his automatic response. Only when he had successfully inhibited his response could he go on to use himself in a more satisfactory way.

Conscious control was Alexander’s term for replacing the old habit, now inhibited, with a new, more satisfactory manner of use. This requires knowing what good use is, figuring out what is needed, and then “directing” the self in the change.

The word “directing” is particularly important. When Alexander discovered that he was tilting his head back and down his first response, as I said earlier, was to try to *move* it forward and up. He soon discovered, however, that what was required was not the usual kind of muscular action, but rather an “order” or “direction” to the body part involved that would cause the desired action to happen, but in a somewhat different way. He described the act of directing as “merely framing and holding this desire in . . . mind” and said:

If, instead of merely framing and holding this desire in his mind, he attempts the physical performance of these acts, he will invariably stiffen the muscles of his neck and shorten his spine, since these are the movements habitually associated in his mind with lengthening his spine, and the muscles will contract in accordance with the old associations.¹⁰

Thus, in the Technique, if one wants to avoid tilting one’s head back and down on the spine, one inhibits that action and then *directs* the head to lead forward and up off the spine and *directs* the spine to lengthen. With repeated practice and the aid of the teacher’s hands, the student’s ability to direct becomes daily more powerful.

In recent years some Alexander teachers seem to be blurring the distinction between *doing* and *directing*, and one mass market paperbound book purportedly about the Technique omits the concept of directing entirely. However, as you can see, Alexander was very clear about the necessity of directing, and any teaching approach that eliminates that concept eliminates, as well, a good deal of the subtlety and power of the Technique.

Among the directions one can give, those already mentioned addressed to the head and spine are certainly useful and basic. Other typical directions include “let the neck be free,” “let the knees go forward and away,” and “let the shoulders widen.” More specific directions might include, for example, a pianist directing his fingers to lengthen onto the keyboard. In general, it is possible to get an astonishing variety of physical responses by this process of simply “framing and holding a desire” in one’s mind. However, please

Alexander’s solution to his basic problem was, of course, to find out what he was doing wrong and change it.

note that the preceding directions are not really meaningful without the kinesthetic experiences to which they correspond; it is not wise to attempt to use or evaluate them without the help of a teacher.

Thus, after the student has become aware of a harmful habit and inhibited it, he relies on direction (or “conscious control”) to substitute a better way of carrying out the action. In the next section I will tell you how this worked for three students of mine.

Three Musicians

Since the Technique can serve so many purposes, my student load is varied—among other things, it includes both performers and nonperformers, and both the well and the sick. However, three of my current students will be particularly interesting to readers of this journal because they are professional instrumental musicians who came to me with problems involving severe or disabling pain. All three are women of 23 or 24 years of age, and two came on the recommendation of the third, who had started lessons earlier.

The first to begin was a violist who was still performing but had decreased her practice time because her left shoulder “. . . kept locking, causing extreme pain, numbness in the hand, and inability to move my head and arm.” She came to me on the recommendation of her teacher, who was familiar with the Technique.

The second was a violinist who had been suffering from a disabling shoulder spasm and had been unable to play for more than a week. She said that although she had, over the years, come “. . . to believe that backaches, tension in my neck and shoulders, and sore arms were just part of the job. . . ,” increasing tension in her left shoulder over a period of months had finally led to the disabling spasm, with pain radiating into her neck and arm. Although she had been unable to play for more than a week, the enforced rest had not been particularly helpful.

The third was a pianist who had been suffering from increasingly severe pain in her left elbow and had been totally unable to play for a week and a half. Discouraged by a friend’s experience with a similar ailment (the friend had a reaction to a cortisone shot and is still unable to play after nearly a year) and her own experience with another ailment (she was directed to rest and take 15–20 aspirin a day), she described the Technique as her “last chance.” She felt that rest and aspirin were palliatives but not solutions to her basic problem.

Alexander’s solution to *his* basic problem was, of course, to find out what he was doing wrong and change it. He spoke about “misusing” himself and I, too, look for ways in which the student may be misusing himself.¹¹ In particular, in a first lesson with an injured musician I will help him to activate his primary control and also observe his playing. Hopefully, I will be able to identify a misuse contributing to his pain that I can help him begin to change.

I find that if I choose the focus of the early lessons well, there is a good chance that the student will make dramatic progress quickly.

For example the violist, like many string players, tended to support her instrument by bringing her left shoulder forward, creating unnecessary tension in her neck and shoulders. The violinist also had neck and shoulder tension, and a tendency to shift her entire body weight to the left while playing. The pianist played with excessive tension in her arms and a distinctive, habitual twist at the left elbow.

Fortunately, I was able to help all three understand the habits I had identified, release some of the excess tension associated with those habits, and experience playing their instruments with improved muscular balance. I was also able to give them enough information, both intellectual and kinesthetic, to enable them to continue working on their own.

As a result, although two lessons are just a bare beginning in Alexander terms, all three students were back playing normal schedules before the third lesson. The two fully disabled students were playing limited schedules after one lesson and full practice and performance schedules after two, with loads of as much as five continuous hours (the pianist) and seven hours in one day (the violinist) between the second and third lesson. The violist, who had reduced her practice time but never stopped playing, reported:

After my first lesson I noticed immediate improvement in the left shoulder area. The shoulder locked only once between the first lesson and the second, and it never locked again after the second lesson . . . and I have not cut down on playing hours; in fact, I have probably increased the number of hours I play.

Naturally, progress this fast can never be guaranteed. Nonetheless, I find that it is not uncommon for the Technique to provide pain relief fairly quickly, and that in itself makes the Technique an important approach for the injured musician.

This is even more true because, to a striking degree, the changes that lead to pain-free playing are the same changes as will improve the student's playing from a musical point of view. Although their pain is gone, all three of the above students have continued to work with me, because they find the Technique extremely helpful professionally.

For example, the violinist reports ". . . improved tone and improved facility in the left hand." Additional work has helped her to use her bow arm more freely. As her jaw became less tense, she noted improvements in her neck, shoulders and hands; musically this produced improvements in intonation, vibrato, shifting, tone and articulation. She comments that she can use the Technique to implement suggestions made by her teacher.

Often, if my violin teacher notices a physical flaw in my playing, I'll tell Eleanor about it and she can help me get rid of it. All my life I had been bowing 'from the shoulder,' which is not good because the bow is drawn at an angle across the string, producing inferior sound. Many violin teachers had tried unsuccessfully to break me of this habit . . . [Eleanor helped me in a lesson] and my bowstroke became much more natural.

The violist, too, reports compliments from her teacher and other respected professionals, including comments on

her "sudden" improvement. "The sound," she says, "has become larger and richer, as well as easier to produce."

Especially rewarding, she considers, was an episode in which she began to feel pain in her left elbow and used the Technique to work on the problem. When she showed me what she had done, I confirmed that she was on the right track and gave her further help. Not only did the pain subside, but her shifts became more accurate and her vibrato became easier to control. In her words:

The solution to this elbow problem was especially rewarding because it indicated to me that on my own I am learning to apply the Technique to my playing.

Her teacher, too, has commented on her work in the Technique:

When V. came to me . . . I could see that she had all the viola technique she needed, if she could just unlock herself . . . she was extremely tight and locked in when she played, and she complained about all kinds of problems, in her jaw, in her back and shoulders, in her hands and arms. I figured that I could do very little for her in a technical sense, so I recommended she see an Alexander teacher. . . . The difference in V. was dramatic. As her head came up, her viola stopped sagging, her aches improved, her tone improved, and her eyes lit up. With Eleanor working on her body, I was able to work on her musicality. I see V. now as an accomplished violist, and it has been a pleasure to see this progress.

References

1. Collins P: The Violinist's Guide to the Alexander Technique. The Strad, Oct 1978.
2. Knishkowsky B, Lederman RJ: Instrumental musicians with upper extremity disorders: A follow-up study. *Med Probl Perform Art* 1:89, 1986.
3. This passage, and others from and about my students, are from personal communications.
4. Tinbergen N: Ethology and Stress Diseases. *Science* 185:26, 1974.
5. Dewey J: Introduction to Alexander FM: Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual. London, Chaterson Ltd, 1923 (in 1946 ed., p. xxiv).
See also: Dewey J: Introduction to Alexander FM: The Use of the Self, London, Integral Press, 1946, p xvii. Professor Dewey states: "Those who do not identify science with a parade of technical vocabulary will find in this account the essentials of scientific method in any field of inquiry. They will find a record of long continued, patient, unwearied experimentation and observation in which every inference is extended, tested, corrected by further more searching experiments; they will find a series of such observations in which the mind is carried from observation of comparatively coarse, gross, superficial connections of causes and effect to those causal conditions which are fundamental and central in the use which we make of ourselves. . . . In consequence, Mr. Alexander created what may be truly called a physiology of the *living* organism." (Emphasis in the original.)
6. Alexander FM: The Universal Constant in Living. London, Chaterston Ltd (New York, Dutton), 1941, p. 10.
7. Maisel E (ed): Alexander, F.M.: The Alexander Technique: The Resurrection of the Body. (The Writings of F. Matthias Alexander selected and introduced by Edward Maisel). New York, University Books, 1969 (paperback edition 1974 by Dell Books), p. 5.
8. Wilson FR: Tone Deaf and All Thumbs? New York, Viking, 1986, p. 203.
9. Same as reference 7, p. 9.
10. Alexander FM: Man's Supreme Inheritance. London, Integral Press, 1910. Fourth ed. by Re-educational Publications Ltd., London, 1957, p. 122.
11. Although objections have been raised to the use of the word "misuse" in dealing with performers' injuries (see, e.g., Fry HJH: What's in a Name? *Med Probl Perform Art* 1:38, 1986), I think the accompanying article shows that the concept can be very valuable when used appropriately. It is, of course, virtually indispensable to the Technique.