

# Reflections of the Alexander Technique

## From Learning, Teaching, Training Teachers, Living, and Thinking

Joe Armstrong

**Abstract:** *Reflections of the Alexander Technique* contains Armstrong's memoirs and thoughts on fifty years of living with and teaching the Alexander Technique. Armstrong describes his first lessons in 1965 and 1966, and how he put the Technique into practice during his US Army physical training. He relates his teacher training with Walter Carrington 1969–72, and presents his views of the distinction between conditions and manner of use. He details how he teaches a new pupil in the first three lessons. Following on from this, Armstrong explains the importance of working on yourself, and discusses the distinction he makes between “directing” and “ordering.” A separate chapter is dedicated to the practice of inhibition, and the importance of distinguishing between “stopping” and “pausing.” A chapter describes how he teaches walking to his students. A chapter covers working on breathing in relation to vocal production and wind-instrument playing. This includes examples of reading texts (such as poetry), the whispered “ah”, and working with other vowels. He reports on his experiences of training teachers, especially the use of the hands in teaching, and presents detailed instructions for hands on the back of the chair. He also proposes a new way of exchanging hands-on work with other teachers which consists essentially of not trying to teach during the exchange. As Armstrong is a flutist, there are throughout accounts of how the Technique influenced his playing and how the Technique generally helps musicians. In addition, a chapter discusses the use of the Technique for dealing with stress and enhancing expressiveness in performing. It includes a transcript of Armstrong teaching a cellist. In “Scientific Research” Armstrong presents twelve Alexander hypotheses, or claims, that he argues would need to be investigated for a more accurate understanding of the Alexander Technique. In the last chapter he reflects on how the Technique makes him question many of our culturally conditioned beliefs about identity and expression of affection.



# **Reflections of the Alexander Technique**

**From Learning, Teaching,  
Training Teachers, Living, and Thinking**

**Joe Armstrong**



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## Preface

Most of the many books, articles, and visual presentations on the Alexander Technique that I've read and seen over the last fifty years or so – including the four books by F. Matthias Alexander himself (1869–1955)<sup>1</sup> – focus on the first of the two interdependent methods that Alexander refined over many years and passed on to several dozen teachers he trained who carried on his work. For those who aren't familiar with the Technique, I can best describe the first method as learning how to manage, integrate, and improve the way we use the whole of ourselves in relation to all life's stimuli – including gravity's pull on us from moment to moment both in stillness and in motion. The second method – which Alexander began to develop after the first one and worked on refining for the rest of his life – draws upon this enhanced overall support as the main source of a highly skilled and very subtle manual skill to correspondingly improve others' use of themselves at all times. It's also important to add that this particular way of using the hands is quite opposite to other forms of manual contact that are based on the view that we consist of separate mental and physical components – a “mind” and a “body.” In fact, both methods composing the Technique are based on the opposite concept: that we function as unified psychophysical beings who think, feel, move, rest, lift, imagine, fear, love, dream, talk, sing, and engage in a multitude of other activities often closely combined with each other.

Since Alexander's second method is as ingenious as the first, and because too few people outside the actual teacher-training process seem to realize that this particular way of using the hands is an extraordinarily subtle skill that takes a long time to learn, I hope this account of my fifty-some years of experience will help to create a fuller appreciation of its nature and value. For it's clear that, together, both methods can play a crucial role in helping us improve and maintain our overall health and general state of being from moment to moment – just as they can also provide greater sensitivity and perceptiveness for discovering ever more authentic, humane, and compassionate ways to relate to each other and to our environment. Likewise, both methods also give us a way to reckon with the psychophysical effects our fixed prejudices and pre-conceived ideas have had on us as we've subconsciously learned to adapt to our culture's conventions – such as professional and gender roles and other social constructs that may keep us from living together as equals.

Considering that the Technique has gained increasingly wide recognition among performing artists for whom superlative self-control is essential, I also want to emphasize here that Alexander developed his two methods in conjunction with his own early career as a professional actor and Shakespearean reciter. It's clear that, even though he eventually realized that some of his training as an actor was misguided and ultimately detrimental to his voice, I believe his skill as a performer contributed more to developing both of his methods than most people realize. I think this is because, as he was working out their basic components, he had already developed a keen use of his imagination to imbue each character he portrayed with fullest emotional expression, conveying not only through his voice but also through his gestures and overall presence an entire life-attitude and range of feelings to the eyes, ears, and hearts of his audiences. With this high degree of artistic skill in mind, it's also important to remember that the essence of any great performance lies in the act of *projecting* through ourselves as a whole to an audience a character's emotions and actions in a drama, the feeling in phrases of music, and the expression in the movements of dance.

It follows then, that for developing the two methods involved in the Technique, Alexander's disciplined use of his imaginative powers would have provided him with a good deal of the essential ability he drew upon that he described as "directing" or "the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms."<sup>2</sup> Since this projective process was the source for managing his fullest lengthening in stature, it likewise became the source for using his hands in such a highly specialized way to help others improve what he called our "reaction to the stimulus of living"<sup>3</sup> from moment to moment.

For supporting my understandings of the two facets of the Technique, I'll be drawing on what I experienced and learned during my four years of initial lessons with several first- and second-generation teachers, and on my three years of teacher training in both of Alexander's methods with a number of the teachers he himself had trained. Then I'll go into my use of both methods while giving private lessons for nearly fifty years, my ten years of training others to teach, my long-term collaborations with fellow teachers, and classes I've given for recently trained teachers. I'll also include updated material from some of my previously published writings that I hope will amplify my experience and perspective. Lastly, I should add that these accounts and thoughts spring mainly from my own life, so they're also colored by many of my parallel interests – particularly music (which has long been my primary focus), the other arts, psychology, and



philosophy. I hope, then, that these “Alexander tales” may add something interesting and useful to other descriptions of the two methods that, combined, make up the Alexander Technique.

*Joe Armstrong  
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# Introduction

## F. M. ALEXANDER AND HUMANITY

Although I never met Alexander, I did have extensive hands-on experience with six teachers who trained directly with him, and from them I gained a vivid impression of how skilled he was with his hands at conveying to people an integration of their use of themselves as a whole. But even though these six teachers and others I've met whom Alexander trained had a great respect for him that often seemed to border on awe, I sometimes think I would've found it difficult to learn from him because of my reluctance to submit to anyone else's authority.

However, I still want to offer my praise and deep gratitude for Alexander's main discoveries and for his far-reaching thoughts about their importance to humanity's progress toward a more intelligent, effective, and compassionate way of living. But I should also add that my praise and gratitude don't mean that I automatically agree with all that he has written or is reputed to have said with regard to his theoretical claims. Some writers seem to imply that if anyone ascribes to the Alexander Technique in any way then this would automatically mean that they accept *all* of Alexander's viewpoints, so I think it's important for me to state too that I hope nothing I've written here about the Technique and my experience of it will be taken as an endorsement of those positions that have ultimately been shown to be misguided or mistaken.<sup>4</sup> Long before I learned anything about Alexander as a person and before I read any of his writings, my initial experience of lessons in the Technique was all I needed for being convinced that the skills of inhibiting our habitual responses and directing an integrated use of ourselves as a whole – as it's conveyed on an individual basis by a remarkable manual means – could have a profound value to civilization's growth and development that needed no additional explanation or proof. Nevertheless, much in Alexander's (and others') writings that I later came to study *did* help to confirm my certainty that the essence of what I realized during my early lessons was valid.

I think it's also important to point out that on certain now-controversial subjects Alexander thought similarly to many Anglo-Saxons of his generation and that his views were often reflections of that race's attitude of "white superiority" and its corresponding nationalisms. Even so, I feel it's impossible to dismiss Alexander's attempts to "stand back" and take

a broad view of life as it's "moving through the centuries"<sup>5</sup> or to ignore his expressions of deep concern for the general plight of humanity in relation to war and the many other social challenges that may potentially be addressed through acquiring a *constructive* conscious control of our individual selves. I often wonder what he would think and write today as we grow increasingly distracted by technological advances that draw our attention ever farther away from the use of ourselves as a whole into the virtual worlds of the screens on our desks or in our hands.

THOUGHTS ABOUT ALEXANDER RECEIVING HANDS-ON WORK FROM OTHERS  
Since I never had hands-on work from Alexander himself, I can only guess what that sensory experience might have been like or what he might have said to help me have a better understanding of managing my use of myself as a whole in reaction to the stimulus of living.<sup>6</sup> However, after meeting at least fourteen of the teachers who trained with him, and after having some degree of hands-on work from most of them, this experience has given me a general impression of how effective he must have been with his hands at facilitating an improvement in the working of a person's supportive mechanisms from moment to moment. His great skill is also apparent in the silent film made in his later years of him working on two people – that is, if you know how to look beyond the elements of carriage and movement to his continual enhancement of each person's overall integration.<sup>7</sup> However, nowhere in his writings do we find a description of what is involved in the process of using one's hands to teach the Technique.

Also, from speaking with those who knew him and from reading a good deal about him and his work, one main point has stood out for me in recent years regarding their experience of training with him. That point centers around the fact that no-one I knew who trained with him ever mentioned that he allowed anyone else to direct him with their hands so that he could help them better understand the essence of their use of their hands mainly as extensions of their use of themselves as a whole when teaching others. For the most part, as far as I've been able to gather, these teachers also considered Alexander to have been so accomplished in the use of himself that they felt no other person could ever have anything beneficial to offer him through manual contacts, so it seems that no one ever thought of suggesting that they put their hands on him even if only for their own benefit in training<sup>8</sup> – as my own training course director did and as I regularly have done with those I've trained to become teachers.

Whatever the case may be concerning Alexander having work from other teachers' hands, I've often wondered if he fully appreciated how

valuable in its own right his discovery about using the hands for teaching was for humanity – along with what he initially discovered about learning how to manage our general use of ourselves as a whole in all matters of living. I’ve thought a great deal about this issue because in all of Alexander’s writings and in most of what’s been written by other Alexander teachers, there almost seems to be a deliberate avoidance of acknowledging the importance and value of the *method* of using manual contacts to improve another person’s manner and conditions of use – a process that in and of itself can have an astounding effect on our overall functioning and state of being no matter how accomplished we may become in the skills of inhibiting and directing ourselves on our own. What’s more, nowhere is there to be found in Alexander’s writings any description of exactly what is required from a teacher to elicit the most integrated use of another person’s musculature and other supportive tissue structures from moment to moment in reaction to the stimulus of living. It almost seems as though Alexander wanted to keep it a secret – considering how much he wrote about his method otherwise. It’s only in his fourth and last book that he mentions “the means I used for making structural and other changes”<sup>9</sup> when he describes the lessons he gave to a man who had a severe case of osteo-arthritis. He doesn’t even say that he used his hands at all for eliciting any of these changes.

From my own experience of having of hands-on work given to me by second-generation teachers with differing training backgrounds, it’s been quite clear that there can be a wide variation in understanding of and skill in the use of the hands for bringing about an improvement in another person’s manner and conditions of use – whether it’s an improvement during a single session of Alexander work, in a series of sessions, or in the intensive three-year teacher training experience. But it’s also been obvious that all these versions – at least the best examples of them – contain an element not to be found in any other method involving manual contact that claims to enhance our health or state of being.<sup>10</sup>

These thoughts about the importance and effectiveness of the use of the hands in teaching the Technique played a major part in motivating me to bring together this collection of reflections, and I want to emphasize that I think there may be a need at this time in the growth and development of the Technique to more consciously acknowledge the point I highlight in the preface: that Alexander actually made *two* main discoveries, even though most of the time the Technique has been presented – including by Alexander himself – as if he only made a single discovery that incidentally also happens to rely upon the use of manual contacts as part of the general

approach to teaching. After all, Alexander worked out his way of improving his use of himself without help from another skilled person's hands, so it's conceivable that he may have thought that his later development of the method of using manual contact was quite a minor achievement that simply helped to reduce the time it would take him to impart to others what he'd discovered about inhibiting his own habitual response patterns and directing an improved integration of the use of himself as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

With these points in mind, I feel it's important to emphasize at this stage in the development of the Technique that these two discoveries may be of at least equal importance – and even to allow for the possibility that the development of the particular use of manual contact, in its own right, may actually be the more ingenious and important of the two. Then, as I bring out in the final chapter, we may also be better able to see that this extraordinary way of using the hands as an extension of the use of ourselves as a whole can have a far-reaching impact on enhancing human communication beyond the Alexander teaching format.

#### GRAVITY, THE SPINE, AND THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Since all of us – so far, anyway – are born into earth's gravitational field and all our functioning and learning take place within the influence of this force, I think we tend to be so used to it that we don't realize we may need to take our relationship to it more consciously and seriously into account every waking moment than most of us usually do. Even though Alexander doesn't point this out specifically in his writings when he discusses his findings about lengthening and shortening his "stature"<sup>12</sup> while reciting, it's clear that our structure and physiology are designed for living within this perpetual pull and that this factor needs to be recognized in our attempts at improving and managing the use of ourselves from moment to moment. It's even worth pointing out that although the sensation of weightlessness we can have in an orbiting spacecraft may make us more aware of the gravitational influence we've been reckoning with all our lives up to that time, it's hard to imagine how that experience would help us discover much about managing ourselves better from moment to moment when we return to earth.

Even if there is something we may be able to learn from space travel though, the essential fact we still must reckon with as earthlings is that we're primarily functioning in relation to *surfaces*, objects, or other beings that are also mainly subject to this same ongoing downward pull toward the center of the earth. This means that how we stand, sit, walk, run, lift, touch each other, think, throw things, sing, talk, eat, digest, rest, love,

write, breathe, maintain a harmonious functioning of our various parts – all of these and others surely need to be based on a conscious reckoning with this ever-present influence so that they can be carried out in the most effective and healthy way. This reckoning is, of course, the main thing the Alexander Technique helps us to do from moment to moment as a background for dealing with our “reaction to the stimulus of living.”<sup>13</sup>

#### THE ROLE OF THE VERTEBRAL COLUMN

Along with efficient breathing, circulation, digestion, and elimination, all the proponents of the Alexander Technique I have known would agree that the most critical element for excellent functioning of these processes is the way we maintain an equalized and unencumbered relation of our head and all our vertebrae to each other – insofar as this equalization is possible at any given moment. Therefore, since all incoming stimuli and information (via interoception, which includes proprioception and kinesthesia<sup>14</sup>) from skin, muscles, ligaments, tendons, joints, and organs, as well as all the outgoing “messages” of control to these parts, must pass to and from the spinal cord through the openings between the vertebrae (inter-vertebral foramen), it’s clear that these spaces need to be kept as free as possible at all times from constriction or compression. It follows then that an equalized lengthening of the entire head-spine relation is really basic to superior functioning – even when we may sometimes do things that require us to bend, twist, or otherwise compress ourselves in ways that temporarily diverge from the most harmonious relationship of all our vertebrae to each other and to our head.

This equalized lengthening of the spine is the central element that the Alexander Technique attempts to bring into fine-tuned operation through the subtle hands-on facilitation and accompanying instruction that a skilled teacher can give. Improving and consciously maintaining this lengthening at all times depends particularly upon our managing the muscular dynamics between the base of our skull and all the vertebrae of our spine as well as the surrounding musculature of our entire torso and limbs, whatever spatial orientation we may be in. If these dynamics aren’t maintained so that they influence our whole spine to lengthen in the most balanced way possible at any given moment, it’s likely that we won’t be managing our actions and influencing our organic functioning positively in all we do. Of course, “balanced lengthening” doesn’t mean maintaining a “straight spine,” a “straight back,” or even a “stretched-out spine,” as some perspectives and disciplines recommend.

Most experienced Alexander teachers I have known also contend that our responses to stimuli – particularly our too quick and unthinking ones – to use Alexander’s phrase<sup>15</sup> – often involve an initial, critical contraction between the base of our skull and our top, atlas vertebra that has a cascading effect throughout the rest of our spine, torso, and limbs. This sequence of tightening, or shortening, is particularly evident in high-speed photography and slow-motion film studies of the startle pattern that demonstrate the response sequence made when people reacted to the sudden, unexpected sounds of a gunshot, a door being slammed, or a book dropped on the floor. Sometimes, if the stimulus was mild enough – like the dropping of a pencil – the reaction was detected on an electromyograph only in the region between the base of the skull and upper spine and nowhere else.<sup>16</sup>

We can also see a similar pattern of distortion in many other reactions and responses – particularly in the way some people manage their head-spine coordination as they speak and even when they merely listen to each other in conversation. Even so, I was told by one researcher that more recent studies of the nature of reactions in general seem to point away from likening all reactions to the startle pattern’s sequence; nevertheless, it’s conceivable that maintaining a continually directed control of our head-spine-limb dynamic would still serve us well for managing our reactions and responses in most situations.

For example, I recall early on in my teaching experience when an Alexander colleague demonstrated to me a highly effective method she was studying for enhancing the use and functioning of our supportive musculature by beginning with extremely slow and subtle movements of our toes and feet that ultimately elicited a lengthening of our entire stature.<sup>17</sup> I managed to use myself fairly effectively for a while in daily life according to this approach of governing the use of myself from my feet first, but I soon found that I uncharacteristically began to get irritated and lose my temper while dealing with other drivers’ aggressive and rude behavior in city traffic. I eventually realized that I was making these interfering responses because I’d stopped governing my use of myself as a whole from my head-spine relation first. But as soon as I changed back to the essential Alexander head-spine primacy approach, I stopped responding so negatively to such perturbing stimuli. Of course, I may have become so accustomed to the primacy of the Alexander approach because of my earlier years of lessons and intensive three-year teacher training that maintaining this head-spine priority is what worked well for me at that stage of my life. Nevertheless, this sequence of control continues to work

best for me in all situations some fifty years later, so I would still vote in favor of it as a general principle to govern all my responses by.

I should also point out here that Alexander's own wording for referring to our head-torso-limb coordination included "neck"<sup>18</sup> in place of "upper spine." (His wording for the primary directions was: "Lengthening the Spine; Relax the Neck; Head Forward and Up; and Widen the Back."<sup>19</sup>) However, most subsequent teaching and writing by other teachers that I'm familiar with has used the wording "neck to be free," "free the neck," or "let the neck be free," but the more I've thought about these expressions it's seemed to me that "upper spine" is more accurate and appropriate and that "neck" is a misguided word to use for eliciting the fuller integration that the Technique is seeking. Even though we do have musculature in that uppermost region of the spine that's governed by its own nerve supply, our *perception* of that general region is impossible to distinguish from our upper thoracic region just below because of the fact that there are sets of muscles (trapezii, sterno-cleido-mastoids, scalenes, levator scapulae, rhomboids, etc.) that "overlap" these cervical vertebrae and their more delicate musculature connections. These larger, more surface muscles connect the head with the lower skeletal structures, and they are also the muscles that a teacher's hands come in contact with when directing a person's head-torso-limb integration from that head and upper spine region.

Since Alexander considered the totality of our head-torso-limb coordination to be basic to how we govern ourselves as a whole from moment to moment, he ultimately used the term "primary control" to refer to the pre-eminence of this sequence of coordination, and even though I have changed the wording somewhat of the process of self-direction for improving and maintaining it positively, I still consider that all of what I'll be describing in this book is consistent with his understanding and is distinctly different from approaches that promote concepts of "good posture" or "correct alignment."<sup>20</sup>

I mentioned in the preface that the actual source for managing and improving this overall "lengthening of the stature"<sup>21</sup> – which is quite different from how most people usually understand the act or experience of "stretching" or "stretching out" – lies in our capacity for "projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms," to use Alexander's own words for the ability.<sup>22</sup> This particular form of lengthening, can result in a remarkable sense of an overall, equalized flow of energy and a balanced support that can bring with it a profound calm and positive attitude to life. It's also worth emphasizing again here too that this process involves



using our imagination (or intention) *alone* to influence or alter the quality of our muscular-tendinous-ligamental tonus, and I hope this source of self-control and unified power will become ever clearer as I describe some of my most memorable experiences of learning, teaching, and living with the Technique.

#### HIGH SENSITIVITY AND CORTISOL LEVELS

Another factor that's become a background reference point while writing these reflections centers around the idea that there can be a broad range among people when it comes to their ability to use the Technique for dealing with whatever difficulties befall them in life – particularly with regard to how they deal with their “reaction to the stimulus of living.”<sup>23</sup> This possible variability from person to person came more fully to my attention several years ago when a long-time colleague insisted that I read a book on the seemingly innate tendency for some people to produce debilitating high cortisol levels when dealing with stressful emotional situations or perturbing stimuli.<sup>24</sup> Correspondingly, the author-researcher explains that it may take those who have this tendency, or condition, a much longer time than others to return to a normal level of cortisol functioning before they can resume regular activities in a balanced and effective way. From an Alexander perspective, though, it's easy to think that along with these individual differences there could also be a variability from person to person (or even within the same person from one occasion to another) in terms of how their cortisol levels reflect changes in their use of themselves as a whole. But I think it may also be true that the more extreme instances of this tendency to produce excessive cortisol under stress may be related to the phenomena that Alexander called “unduly excited fear reflexes” and “uncontrolled emotions”<sup>25</sup> as they are manifested in the supportive function of a person's musculature. It would seem then that because of a possible connection of cortisol functioning with a person's manner and conditions of use, there may be a fluctuation of cortisol levels within the same person from time to time in proportion to how well or how poorly they're managing their use of themselves as a whole during a particularly stressful time – regardless of how powerful the stressful or overly-exciting stimulus may be. If “highly sensitive persons” – as the author describes them – have had lessons in the Alexander Technique they may also be more adept at *indirectly* preventing (inhibiting) their cortisol from rising to a debilitating level – especially when we keep in mind Alexander's fundamental theory about the “influence of use upon functioning.”<sup>26</sup>

I also think that experience in inhibiting and directing through the Technique may play its part in determining *how long* it may take a particular stressed-out person to return to a more balanced use of themselves that corresponds with – or influences – the return of their cortisol to a more normal level so that they can resume a balanced functioning and responding in whatever they need to do. In fact, the author of the book on high sensitivity gives suggestions for providing a quiet time and perhaps using some form of meditation in order to aid the return to a normal cortisol level; so I would think that gaining experience in bringing about a more balanced condition of our use of ourselves as a whole (particularly through the processes of directing or ordering that I describe in the chapter on working on yourself) can provide a similar opportunity for cortisol levels to return to normal functioning by bringing our entire neuromuscular system into a better balance.

It's also easy to think that an improved use of the self as a whole – which includes an increase in our power to inhibit unwanted and undesirable responses to stimuli just at the “critical moment”<sup>27</sup> before they begin to take us over completely – should go a long way toward empowering us to ward off the effects of situations and experiences that would otherwise cause our cortisol levels to rise inordinately. Of course, my own experiences with becoming better able to deal with stress in musical performance through having Alexander lessons for four years and then training for three years to become a teacher – as well as my experience in gaining control over my phobia of certain kinds of birds and the effects of other stressful or disturbing experiences – surely encompass this element of indirect cortisol level control too. (Readers will find my detailed descriptions of these experiences at various points in these reflections.)<sup>28</sup>

From reading about the details of this chemical and stress connection, it's helped me to understand a good deal more about the nature and development of my own use of myself in reaction to the stimulus of living – especially because I made the decision about ten years ago not to have any further hands-on Alexander work from other teachers. I find now, at seventy-eight, that it takes me longer than when I was younger to bring myself back into a better psychophysical balance after I undergo an emotionally trying or demanding experience. But it's obvious to me too that if I hadn't developed the Alexander skills of inhibiting, directing, and ordering to improve on my own (and, by doing so, possibly indirectly alter my excessive cortisol levels too) I would probably be much worse off at this time in my life – if even alive at all. I hope readers will keep in mind

this possible neurophysiological reason for a difference from person to person in sensitivity and susceptibility to stress as they read on.

#### FIRST TALE AND REFLECTIONS

One instance from my early teaching experience illustrates well another aspect of the psychophysical concept exemplified by the Technique with regard to stressful distractions or preoccupations. It happened when I was giving lessons to an actor who was accustomed to experiencing and observing her reactions and insights in an open and honest way as a basis for her creative work.

She seldom spoke of any issues having to do directly with her professional life, but one day at the end of her lesson as she was getting ready to leave she remarked to me with a certain amount of astonishment, “You know, Joe, it’s quite amazing that I came here today preoccupied and worried about something that happened at a rehearsal this morning, but now I feel so *reasonable* about it – and we haven’t even discussed the subject at all!” She didn’t say that the lesson had actually resolved that particular issue, but it seemed clear that she felt she had come to a more balanced perspective about it that might help her more readily do whatever might be needed in order to address it further.

I thought that was a good example of how an improvement in our manner and conditions of use can help us become more in touch with our reasoning as Alexander himself claimed the Technique can do if we allow enough time for it to happen in relation to directing our fullest lengthening and widening while we inhibit – or at least temporarily delay – our focus on resolving an issue or accomplishing a particular challenge at hand. We see then that “being reasonable” isn’t *only* a “mental” phenomenon; its neuromuscular component demonstrates that it’s a total psychophysical activity.

Even though this student didn’t discuss her particular professional concern with me, we *did* address (non-verbally) how its neuromuscular elements may have been affecting her as part of her response to the issue when she came for the lesson. Actually, since she was a very receptive and perceptive person, we accomplished a good deal of neuro-muscular change together in a fairly short amount of time, whereas I can imagine that it may have taken her somewhat longer on her own to find her way through to a more balanced perspective on dealing with the difficulty. (It would’ve been interesting – in light of what I wrote above about cortisol levels – to have tested her cortisol level before and after that particular lesson too.)

Of course, many incidents similar to this one have happened over the years with students who would come to their lessons with varying degrees of stress, worry, or trauma, and when they had their Alexander lesson it would almost invariably help them to reckon better with their situation – even if we didn’t address the troubling issue directly. Sometimes though, pupils would ask me how a certain problem could be dealt with or how an important decision could best be made through the use of the principles of the Technique. But without my telling them what I might personally think about a possible solution, if I simply allowed them the chance to describe the issue while I was giving them hands-on work, it often gave them the confidence to face the problem more fully when they went away to reckon with it on their own. It would sometimes seem as if a cloud had lifted from their entire being just from having stated the problem or concern within the safety of the lesson’s positive hands-on contact that was constantly fostering their fullest balance and equanimity. I think it’s also conceivable that speaking about a problem while an Alexander teacher is working on you with positive, balanced, and integrating hand contacts adds a level of “security” and “receptiveness” that we may not experience so fully if we’re only speaking of our problem or issue to someone who isn’t actually touching us. The listener may *seem* visibly to be registering our words positively and uncritically, but inside themselves they may feel or think otherwise in ways that we might be able to sense through their hand contacts if they were actually touching us.<sup>29</sup> (This factor also figures into what I write about touch in general in the last chapter.)

It’s also important to mention here that I’ve never approached teaching the Technique with any intention whatsoever of inviting students or trainees to discuss their personal emotional problems or life histories. However, if they ever felt a need to do so within the lesson context in case they thought it might help them in some way, I haven’t refused to give them the opportunity. Even then, though, I’ve still adhered to my main role of continuing to foster the most positive integration of their use of themselves from moment to moment as I took in all they had to say. Often this “listening while continuing to direct them as a whole with my hands” in and of itself helped them to gain more clarity on an issue that otherwise may have remained more of a “blur” for them because they’d never actually stated it in words before. Even so, I’ve never attempted to give someone advice as to what they might do about a problem, nor have I ever tried to “interpret” a problem for them according to some psychological theory or according to my own experiences and understandings of life. If there was any aspect of the Alexander Technique that might apply to how

a student could approach thinking about an issue though, I would try to state that option as clearly as possible and leave them to ponder it on their own. Even then what I would say usually centered around Alexander's encouragement to cease our muddled examination of the problems just in front of us and step back and view them from the perspective of life passing down through the centuries.<sup>30</sup> One particular instance stands out in this regard, even though the student and I were mainly discussing basic Alexander concepts in terms of how our use of ourselves comes into play when dealing with our reactions and convictions about life by giving ourselves more of a chance – *and more time* – to consider the possible effect of our actions on others and on the world in general. After I'd presented this possibility fairly fully to her, she suddenly exclaimed, "This is better than church!"



# 1 First Alexander Lessons – Summer, 1965

In all beginnings dwells a magic force  
For guarding us and helping us to live.  
Hermann Hesse, *Magister Ludi*

My introduction to the Alexander Technique in 1965 was somewhat unusual because I was *invited* by my summer flute teacher, Alexander Murray,<sup>31</sup> to have free lessons with his wife, Joan Murray,<sup>32</sup> a former ballet dancer who had trained to teach the Technique. I was only twenty years old and had never heard of the Alexander Technique or any other methods of self-improvement. However, Alexander Murray held a first-chair position in a world-class orchestra and had been working for several years to incorporate Alexander experience into his playing, so it was easy to accept his recommendation that the Technique could benefit all flutists. As I started to have lessons and began to experience the many dimensions the Technique encompassed, it seemed all the more remarkable that it came into my life so unexpectedly – especially because I soon realized that while it was giving me new understandings of a more balanced way of functioning and playing my instrument it was also rescuing me from the effects of some extremely troubling and stressful experiences I’d recently been through.

This first series of nearly daily lessons were at an eight-week summer music festival where I was working between my last two years of college. During the previous year and a half I had developed what psychotherapists would probably call a mild case of anxiety and depression. I didn’t realize at the time, though, how much the condition was hampering nearly everything I did – especially my ability to perform with the full musicality I had access to most of the time in earlier years. Even if I had understood the nature of the trouble I was in then, I don’t believe that I would’ve sought any kind of help to reckon with it. In those days in the mid-western U.S. where I lived psychotherapy was mainly thought of as being for those with severe emotional problems while meditation and other self-help approaches were still far on the horizon as solutions for dealing with stress and distraction. Along with this troubled state – and maybe because

of it – I had recently suffered an undiagnosed and extremely painful abdominal attack that added to my concern that my pursuit of a career in music might be threatened. With this background of troubled uncertainty my first Alexander lessons seemed all the more valuable and exciting as I began to realize that they were providing me with a clear pathway out of that distressed state.

I don't remember very much about the specifics of what happened during those first lessons – except that my teacher gave them in the traditional format of standing-to-sitting-to-standing “chair work” and lying-down “table work”<sup>33</sup> in which she used the remarkable and subtle hands-on method to balance out the supportive function of our muscles, ligaments, tendons, and other related tissues both in motion and in stillness. It was immediately clear, though, that this hands-on discipline has nothing to do with what's usually thought of as relaxation or methods that teach people to maintain an improved posture. Something much more fundamental was being elicited and developed in me, and the general impression that I still remember vividly is that each time I left a lesson and walked along the wooded path back to my cabin I felt remarkably freer and lighter, as if every step I took was infinitely more effortless than ever before. This proprioceptive lightness and kinesthetic fluidity, of course, also seemed to be the source of an ever-increasing release from the emotional burdens I'd been so troubled by during the previous few years – even though I never brought up *any* of those issues in the Alexander lessons. It became ever clearer that expressions like “having a heavy heart” or “being deeply troubled” definitely involve an overall neuromuscular component – as do the opposites like “maintaining a positive outlook on life” or “being on top of the world.” Of course, along with this proprioceptive change came what I would call an “opening” of all my outward senses – especially in response to all the natural surroundings, which were so inviting and enchanting in that northern region's lakes, pine forests, and clear air.

#### EMOTION AND THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

One vivid experience, though, that I do remember from that first series of lessons brought me the quite unexpected realization that the Alexander Technique holds a far wider range of possibilities for dealing with our self-perception and moment-to-moment reactions than I could ever have imagined. It happened for me right near the end of a lesson when, as far as I could tell at that point, I was “going up” fairly well (“lengthening of the stature” as Alexander referred to a main goal of the Technique<sup>34</sup>). Just then the next student, whom I knew, arrived for her lesson and knocked



on the cottage door directly opposite to where I was sitting as Joan was still directing me with her hands. While she left me for a few moments to show the young woman into the next room to wait until my lesson was over, this student and I greeted each other as she passed by me, but I didn't think then that our exchange was of much consequence because it happened so quickly. As fate would have it, though, I'd developed a secret and unlikely-to-be-requited crush on her that, until that day, I didn't believe could ever be obvious to her or anyone else. However, when Joan returned to resume reinforcing with her hands the improvement in the supportive action of my overall musculature that we'd been steadily building up during the previous half hour, I was shocked to suddenly realize how drastically I'd "shortened" and "narrowed" in comparison to the lengthening and widening upward flow of energy that we'd built up just before the young woman arrived. It was astounding to discover that my instantaneous and largely subconscious response had been far more severe than I would ever have imagined it could be in terms of so much excessive muscular tension that brought about such a gross downward distortion of my entire being.

When Joan began directing me again with her hands she didn't remark in any way on this change in me though, but it seemed obvious that she would be able to feel it quite distinctly with her hands because it was so dramatically different from the balanced condition we'd gradually been building up during the previous half hour. I also couldn't help thinking that she surely must somehow have been able to "read my thoughts" – or "emotions" – through her hands! Whatever she may have sensed or thought to herself though, she proceeded to guide me immediately back into a more balanced, upward lengthening state, and this almost immediate change was in itself quite remarkable – especially because it occurred nearly as quickly as my sudden pulling down had happened a few moments earlier. This return to fuller lengthening and widening also stayed with me as I left the lesson and went on my way, and it was also quite clear to me then that if we had stopped the lesson as soon as the young woman came into the room, I would have subconsciously carried around with me that over-tensed, downward response for the rest of the day until it either "wore off" or was displaced by some other stimulus.

This brief but also quite dramatic experience puzzled me deeply because up to that day I'd been thinking of Alexander lessons essentially as a method for improving our "physical" self, and, as I mentioned before, we had done nothing specific in the lessons to address my "life problems" or "emotions." As you might expect, when I came for my next lesson, I could hardly wait to say to my teacher, "This isn't just a physical technique,

is it? It's sort of physical *and* psycho . . ." Nodding her head knowingly, Joan instantly supplied me with the word "psychophysical" – one I'd never heard anyone use before. But the term is, of course, paramount in Alexander's writings to signify exactly what I was referring to because of my own very vivid experience in that previous lesson. This revelation about the fuller nature and potential of the Technique to affect *all* of life at every moment was enormously exciting to me, and from that day on it was as if each lesson opened up an ever broader world of thinking, learning, and understanding about myself and the general way that most of us function in the world: that it's a method for improving our "reaction to the stimulus of living" as Alexander described it in his last published statement about his work.<sup>35</sup>

As for any other important points we may have covered during those first lessons, I don't recall many more – except that my teacher emphasized that we're often trying so hard "to be right" and "to succeed" in our efforts that we're actually getting in the way of accomplishing our goals effectively through the integrated working of our musculature as our basis for action. Alexander's expression "endgaining" certainly came up a lot in that regard, because this tendency is illustrated so clearly and immediately in lessons by using as a paradigm the everyday act of getting out of a chair when the teacher asks us to allow her or him to move us into standing without any "help" on our part. It quickly became clear that our approach to much of what we do and think in life can be revealed, studied, and improved within that single action of "standing up" or "sitting down."

Another important thing that I remember is that right after a lesson one day when we were taking a few minutes to have a glass of juice and chat, Joan remarked to me in response to something I brought up about difficulties I sometimes had in dealing with people, "I think that's probably because you're too kind-hearted, Joe." We didn't discuss the subject any further, but I instantly knew what she meant. Just her saying that to me certainly gave me a lot to consider in terms of how that trait might affect my overall use of myself in most social encounters and personal relationships. Those words still resound within me to this day as something I may need to go on taking into account when I'm considering how to make the best of all possible responses to many situations.

#### THE FALL FROM GRACE – AUTUMN, 1965

By the end of that first summer of lessons I felt like a completely renewed person chiefly due to the Alexander lessons, and I returned for my last year of college with a new-found confidence for facing all the demands

that otherwise only would've added to the anxious and stressful condition of the previous academic year. But after a few even-keel months of classes and lessons with my college flute teacher, I had an experience that upset all I thought I'd accomplished over the summer in managing the use of myself. At the beginning of the semester, my flute teacher had even remarked at how much he thought my playing had improved since he had last heard me play in the spring, also adding that he guessed that I must have practiced a great deal over the summer to have made so much progress. Ironically, I'd actually practiced *less* than usual. The improvement he noted was merely the result of the change in my use of myself *as a whole* that came from having the Alexander lessons, and this overall improvement allowed me to play more consistently at my best all the time as long as external conditions weren't too stressful – as they usually had been in my lessons with that particular flute teacher until I'd finally been able to present to him my best playing that fall term. When he remarked on the difference, I tried to explain to him what the Alexander Technique was, but I think my description only made it seem like some kind of relaxation method; nevertheless, I'm pretty sure he sensed that something had changed in me for the better as a whole person – at least until I suddenly lost it all one particular evening.

This confounding incident happened a couple of months into the semester while I was making a recording with a pianist in the main concert hall for including with my applications to graduate schools. There was a definite moment when I realized that the *feeling* of a balanced upward flow and confident freedom and control completely left me, and I was shocked to find that I'd reverted “back to my old tense self” that I used to experience under stress before I had Alexander lessons. But there didn't seem to be anything I could think or do on the spot to retrieve the integrated quality that had been making everything I did so much easier and more enjoyable. I thought I'd learned that this upward flow was mainly the result of “thinking” of my head “going” forward and up so that it could lead a lengthening of my spine and a widening of my torso that would maintain my entire musculature in its best and most balanced condition. But no matter what I tried to “think of,” or even “do,” in those parts of myself, nothing happened within me to bring about the freedom and ease of control that the hands-on work in the lessons had given me and that I also believed I'd been maintaining on my own from the end of the summer until that moment. This experience led me to accept the fact that I didn't really know *how* to recreate or regain the upward flow of the supportive function of my musculature *by myself*.

Looking back on that recording session now that I've spent many more years incorporating my Alexander training into my flute playing and into life in general – particularly for dealing with the stressful aspects of the two – I think there were two possible elements that triggered off this loss of my improved conditions that had carried over from the summer's lessons into those first few months of that fall term. (Later, I'll go into more detail about the distinction between Alexander's terms "conditions of use" and "manner of use" of the self, as well as the activities Alexander teachers call "directing" and "working on yourself," all of which may further clarify this early experience.) The first stimulus underlying this startling reversion was the basic demand for achieving a high standard of playing in the recording situation, and this performance demand was so strong that it probably caused me to create more of the stress on my musculature that flute playing can so easily evoke because of the way the instrument needs to be held out to the right. This "occupational hazard" easily leads to a lopsided condition in most flutists that detracts from the supportive lengthening of the whole spine and the widening of the whole torso needed for maintaining an equalized flow of support in our entire musculature. Such distorting can also make breath control more labored and shallow, and both of these aspects tend to get exaggerated as a result of the attitude I mentioned earlier of "trying too hard to be right," which was probably in overdrive for me at this time.

A second and more powerful stimulus caused me to tense up a great deal more (or, in Alexander jargon, we would probably say "caused me to pull down a great deal more"). It came from my becoming quite annoyed when a classmate suddenly entered the auditorium with a friend I didn't know and came down to the foot of the stage to introduce her friend and ask why I was playing there. They seemed to have missed the signs posted on the doors that a recording session was in progress, so she didn't realize that it was important not to interrupt us. Even though I managed to let her know as calmly as I could that I didn't have time to talk and that I needed them to leave right away, I still couldn't keep from being extremely annoyed by the distraction at such a critical time. It seems likely then that the two stresses combined to bring back more of my pre-Alexander-lesson (habitual) manner and conditions of use. Even though I managed to complete the recording session well enough, I felt I hadn't achieved the most expressive and refined results that I was capable of because I'd reverted to the more forced and unbalanced source of control in all aspects of my playing. (In retrospect it's not too surprising to me that this regression happened. It was also the first time in my life that I'd tried to record a full

recital performance, and there was the added pressure that the concert hall and recording technician were only available for a limited time.)

For the rest of that academic year, I did my best to be more aware of myself as a whole and maintain a good mechanical advantage while sitting, standing, bending, and walking, and I would rest on my back in the traditional Alexander semi-supine position whenever I could. I think I managed to do those activities a lot better than I would've done them before I had Alexander lessons, but they really did nothing to bring back the dynamic, lengthening, overall flow that had made life so different and so much more fulfilling from moment to moment as a result of the hands-on work from my teacher in the lessons. As I might have expected, my college flute teacher also noted that my playing for him in my flute lessons seemed to be getting worse. He also half-jokingly suggested that maybe I should have some more Alexander lessons to remedy the deterioration – even though he still had no idea what the Alexander Technique was. In those days, the general attitude about achieving a high standard of musical performance was that you simply had to practice more diligently for more hours and acquire as much performing experience as you could so that you would eventually get used to the challenge of it enough to maintain at least a base-line level of competence wherever and whenever you had to play. No one I knew then ever spoke of there being any extra-musical methods for dealing with stress in the performing situation. “Nerves of steel” was the order of the day.

Shortly after that disappointing recording experience I also read the library copy of Alexander's third book *The Use of the Self: Its Conscious Direction in Relation to Diagnosis, Functioning, and the Control of Reaction*<sup>36</sup> hoping that his description of how he learned to improve his use of himself on his own while reciting might help me discover a way back to what I had lost. I found his writing hard to comprehend and I couldn't really glean any guidance from it, so I finally resigned myself to live out the rest of that school year as “my pre-Alexander self.” Nevertheless, the vivid memory remained strong of something remarkable happening within me during that first summer of nearly daily lessons, and I felt certain that it would return if I could just have more Alexander hands-on work and have more of a chance to learn how to maintain the flow of directing better on my own.

Fortunately, I was able to go back to the same music festival the following summer and resume lessons with Joan Murray. As I expected, at the very first lesson her expert hands-on direction immediately brought back within me the balanced and integrated condition I'd lost so that I was

able to go on building upon it for the rest of the summer and right up to reporting for induction into the U.S. Army the following September. By that time, I think I'd begun to learn how to continue more consistently on my own – especially by applying the Technique to learning how to swim better, as I'll describe next – although my conditions of use may have also improved enough that the experience of fluidity simply stayed with me longer than it had the previous year. However, from that time on until ten years ago or so, I never went more than a few months without having some amount of hands-on work – either from another teacher or from one of the trainees in the teacher training course I conducted for a number of years. (I'll come back to this aspect later to illustrate what I ultimately learned for restoring and improving on my own my conditions of use without resorting to the help of a teacher's hands-on work. That skill took a quite a long time and a great deal of exploration to acquire.)

## 2 Second Summer of Lessons – Summer, 1966

### A SOCIAL ASPECT OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

A very inspiring socio-emotional experience related to the Alexander Technique that I had during my second summer of Alexander lessons happened when four first-generation Alexander teachers,<sup>37</sup> Walter and Dilys Carrington, Kitty (Merrick) Wielopolska, and Marjorie Barstow, were visiting Joan and Alexander Murray for two weeks. One evening I needed to stop briefly by the Murrays' cottage to pick up something that I'd left there earlier, and all of these teachers were sitting in the living room talking after having dinner there together. When I came to the door Joan invited me in to say hello to everyone, and my immediate impression at seeing them all at the same time was that they were there together in a wonderfully positive way that I'd never before sensed in the presence of a group of people. I'd known many kind, thoughtful, and happy people so far in my life and had grown up in a large and very caring extended family, but there seemed something even more considerate and balanced about these experienced teachers' interaction with each other. I couldn't help thinking that this heightened positiveness was due to the fact that they were all consciously maintaining their balanced, upward flow of direction in relation to each other – a flow that, in essence, contains an attentive, unaggressive, uncompetitive quality of being. My few moments in that room certainly added to my steadily growing sense that there were even more benefits to be gained from the Alexander Technique than I had originally thought. This experience seemed all the more significant in light of the fact that I eventually learned of a few long-standing rivalries and conflicts between some of these teachers that would normally have caused animosity in others to make it impossible to miss as soon as you came into their presence. Maybe I would've noticed some of those undercurrent qualities if I'd stayed longer in the room, but my main impression of "upness" and "positiveness" was so strong that I doubt the feeling would have changed much.

### SWIMMING

During that second series of Alexander lessons, which included several lessons with first-generation teacher Walter Carrington, I also decided to try to apply to swimming what I'd learned so far about using myself in a



consciously guided way. I loved being in the water of ponds, lakes, and swimming pools and had always wished I could swim really well for long distances. However, I'd never been very good at it and was barely able to get from one end of a swimming pool to the other without a great deal of effort that quickly tired me out. I thought this shortcoming was due merely to a lack of strength in my arms and torso that I felt had also kept me from being successful at conventional ball sports, even though I was good at activities like acrobatics, ice skating, and social dancing that required a fairly reliable coordination, balance, and control. Fortunately, since the music festival was located between two fairly large lakes, it was easy to find a quiet, shallow cove where I could take plenty of unhurried time to explore incorporating my Alexander skill into the demands of propelling myself through the water. I also realized that I needed to study each component of the process very carefully to see if there might be anything that I'd been doing while swimming in my habitual way that I'd need to change or leave out; and of course there was plenty.

It's important to add here that a central facet of the Alexander Technique that I'd already been learning in my "Alexanderized" flute lessons was its approach to breathing that emphasized the importance of *allowing* air to return (preferably through the nose) by maintaining the fullest possible lengthening and widening of the back and torso during an outbreath. This way, the natural vacuum created in the lungs by the outbreath is automatically filled by the atmospheric pressure from the outside air – quite a different process from relying on actively *taking in* a breath. ("Take a big breath," is what we're often erroneously told to do for wind-instrument playing, singing, medical exams, etc.) I knew this more natural approach to breathing had to be the *main* thing I should focus on in swimming, so I *always* wanted to be sure to allow enough time for air to return instead of *taking* it in – no matter what I would eventually need to change in how I was using my head, torso, arms and legs as I propelled myself through the water. (I go into greater detail about Alexander's approach to breathing in Chapter 9, "Working on Breathing: Exploring its Relation to Vocal Production and Wind-Instrument Playing.")

Since I was mainly interested in doing the crawl stroke, this very different attitude toward breathing made me realize that I would need to focus on expelling my breath *into* the water while my face was submerged and then merely turn my head to one side to *allow* air to return "by itself." That meant that the first thing I worked on was just floating face down on my stomach without any intention whatsoever of propelling myself forward *through* the water with my arms and legs. It took me several days to



master this basic coordination of expelling breath out into the water and then allowing air to return as I turned my head to the side. This was difficult because I had the long-standing and strong habit of keeping my head out of the water to look ahead of me in the direction I was swimming – as I’ve since observed others often doing as well who seem not to know how to swim without keeping their face in the water on their out-breath. Of course, by keeping my head out of the water to watch where I was going, I was contracting the muscles of my upper spine and torso in such a way that cut off their fullest lengthening as a source of power to my arms and legs. That central tightening also meant that I was preventing my entire rib-cage from remaining at its most expanded, which meant that my in-breaths couldn’t be as full as possible. It was soon clear that when I’d tried to swim forward and keep my head out of the water in the past, I’d been *constantly* making it impossible for me to breathe freely and fully and, in turn, I was keeping myself from being more fully buoyant, which meant I had to spend more overall energy just to keep from sinking.

After adopting this new mode of floating while keeping my face in the water to expel breath and then turning my head to the side to allow air to return, it was logical next to see if I could propel myself forward a few yards by merely kicking with my feet and legs – but still not using my arms to make strokes. Once this combination of fuller breathing and leg action was working well, it was fairly easy to add the movement of just one basic crawl stroke with each arm. This was a bit harder to coordinate, but it all soon came together if I took enough time between each pair of strokes – especially because of a tip my Alexander-oriented flute teacher gave me that he’d learned from the head lifeguard who was a retired diving specialist and physical education teacher. That tip was to use your arms and hands in the crawl stroke as if you were reaching out above your head to climb a ladder. This image helped to add more lengthening to the reach of each arm-stroke – all the while keeping fingers and thumbs together to give me the fullest power for propelling through the water. I only practiced doing two strokes at a time for a while, then four, along with allowing plenty of “rest” time in between each series so that I could always be sure to regain my fullest lengthening and widening in stature and make sure that my breathing would stay as free and as full as possible. Then I would do six, eight, or more strokes until I was swimming pretty continuously – even though I was still in fairly shallow water.

After several days of this quiet exploring, I decided to go over to the main swimming area and take the test to qualify for swimming out to the raft in the deeper part of the lake – something I really wanted very much

to be able to do because there was such a beautiful and peaceful view of the lake and woods from out there. As I recall, the test was to swim three laps of the fairly long, cordoned-off swimming area using any strokes you chose – and then stay afloat for whatever remained of the 30-minute test period. I dove in at the lifeguard's signal and began swimming my laps in the slow, easy way I'd been practicing, but while I was swimming, I began to realize how much I was enjoying myself – even though I was in much deeper water – because I felt so free and so buoyant in comparison to the struggle swimming any distance had always been for me. Because I was having such a good time, I decided to go on swimming laps instead of just treading water or floating on my back after I'd swum the mandatory three laps. I soon lost count of how many laps I'd actually swum and had no idea at all of how much time had gone by until the lifeguard finally called out to me that I'd passed the test and could come out of the water. As it turned out, he'd forgotten to tell me when the required time was up because he'd been preoccupied by a conversation with someone he was talking to on the dock while he was watching me that he'd forgotten to check his watch. When it turned out that I'd actually swum longer than I needed to, I was astounded that I wasn't tired at all. Ever since then, I've enjoyed being able to swim at long stretches without tiring – while constantly applying all I've learned about using myself in a more balanced way through my Alexander study and teacher training. Of course, the same basic approach has served me well for all other activities too – especially those requiring an overall strength that I never had access to before.

That story brings me to a similar experience I had in Army basic training the following September, fairly soon after I'd made these breakthroughs in swimming.

### 3 U. S. Army Experience 1966–1969

#### BASIC TRAINING – SEPTEMBER, 1966

##### *The Low Crawl*

At the end of my second summer of Alexander lessons (1966), I was suddenly confronted with the prospect of either being drafted into the U. S. Army for two years without any specific assignment or of auditioning for a musical unit where I could get an assured position if I enlisted for three years. I chose the latter and was accepted into the Army Field Band that went on long concert tours all around the country.<sup>38</sup> However, eight weeks of basic infantry training were also required of bandsmen, and that experience certainly proved to hold further challenges for what I'd been learning in my Alexander lessons so far. These challenges ranged from the strenuous calisthenics we had to do each day as part of our “physical training” (PT) on through a broad spectrum of reactions and responses – often including harsh intimidation and goading on by our superiors. But the most difficult thing of all we had to contend with was the “low-crawl,” which we usually had to do for at least fifty to a hundred yards several times a day during the eight-week period.

Low-crawl is basically a way of advancing along the ground at the lowest possible level – often while carrying a rifle in front of you across your forearms – not only low enough so that you won't be seen by the enemy but also so that you can maneuver under low-hanging barbed wire while machine-guns fire close above. We also had to be able to do low-crawl at great speed as part of the weekly and final PT tests to qualify for promotion to our next assignments. Failing to pass the final test automatically resulted in being “recycled” for another eight weeks – something everyone wanted to avoid at all costs. Along with the daily training aspect of it, low-crawl was also used on the spur of the moment as a main form of discipline or punishment if you, your platoon, or your company needed reprimanding – even for quite minor reasons.

Low-crawl was so difficult to do because it was actually supposed to substitute for running fast and because it required you to stay in a horizontal position with your chest in constant contact with the ground so that you could keep as far as possible below an enemy line of fire. Doing it efficiently seemed to take a strength in the arms and upper torso that only the very athletic trainees possessed, but each time we had to do it,

even the strongest trainees seemed as exhausted by it as the rest of us. One side-effect was the scraping and tearing of the skin on the insides of your knees and the undersides of your forearms and elbows – since these places, along with the inner edges of your boot soles and heels, were your main points of contact with the ground you needed to use to propel yourself forward. Then, after your arms and knees became raw or bleeding, that, of course made low-crawling all the more difficult and painful – especially if you had to do it over a gravel road or rough terrain. However, the main effect of low-crawling was that it very quickly winded everyone – particularly because we were always goaded by our drill sergeants into doing it as fast as we could.

As I mentioned before, I'd never been very good at sports that require a lot of strength and endurance, so I was concerned that I wouldn't ever be able to low-crawl well enough or fast enough to pass the final PT test. I didn't think that being "recycled" for another eight weeks would make me very much stronger, so one day while our platoon was sitting on a grassy field taking a break, I decided to try to figure out a better way of low-crawling by using what I'd learned so far in my Alexander lessons. Since I'd already had success at improving my swimming by applying a non-endgaining approach, I figured there might be a chance of discovering something similar with the low-crawl too if I could just take the same slow, careful time exploring each component of it that led up to that earlier exciting breakthrough in swimming.

Because our sergeants were usually barking at us to crawl as fast as we could, I soon realized that it was basically the speed that made it impossible for me to maintain the fuller integration I'd experienced in my Alexander lessons. So, while we were resting there on the grassy field, I decided to roll over on my stomach and – as with swimming – slow the separate actions way down, moving only one elbow and one knee at a time with lots of pausing between each "stride" so that I could be sure to regain my fullest lengthening in stature and my freest flow of breathing. The first thing I discovered, of course, (just as Alexander observed when he recited in front of a set of mirrors) was that I'd actually been tightening and shortening my whole torso and spine by pulling my head back all the time that I was trying to propel myself along the ground. Then I realized, as with swimming, that this was mainly because I felt I needed to keep looking ahead toward a goal in the distance. But I also realized that this central contraction was made even worse because I was trying so hard with every ounce of total energy that I could muster. As with my old, subconscious swimming habits, the pulling back of my head and the accompanying shorten-

ing of my spine and narrowing of my torso accounted, in turn, for my getting so quickly out of breath. All these “interferences” with my central, head-spine-torso-limb integration ruined any chance at all of my crawling in a well-coordinated way without quickly getting extremely winded and worn out.

Also, as with swimming, when I could stop shortening my spine by stopping pulling my head back, it allowed me to lengthen and widen more in my torso so that my breathing continued to flow freely and so that my arms and legs could stay integrated with my whole back’s power for propelling me ahead. Otherwise, my local arm and leg efforts would merely be hauling my head and torso “along for the ride.” So instead of continually trying to look up in front of me by raising my head and tightening the muscles of my spine and back so that I could look in that direction, I also found that if I kept the top of my head leading forward toward my goal all I needed to do was look off to the side of each advancing “stride” of arm and opposite leg to keep track of where I was in relation to the surroundings. Then, once my full lengthening and widening in my torso was working for me more continuously as my main source of power, I could raise my head from time to time, if I wanted, to look directly ahead without tightening my spine and torso so much that it cut off the central power supplied to my arms and legs.

After practicing this broken-up and slow-motion approach for a while, I found I could begin to crawl at that slow speed for a good distance without getting winded or tired and without damaging my knees and elbows. Then, when we were commanded to do it over the next few weeks, I eventually built up to a more efficient crawling speed by *not* trying to race so fast all the time as everyone else seemed to feel they had to. However, the crowning moment to this whole story came a week or so before our last PT test. Our company was doing target practice on the rifle range and my platoon had just finished its first round of firing when our drill sergeant – instead of letting us take a break like the other platoons had been allowed to do – said that since we hadn’t done well on barracks inspection that week we should get down and low-crawl out to the distant road (about 50 yards away) and back. Then we all got down and low-crawled out to the road, but when we got there, the sergeant called out to us, “That’s good enough. Anyone who wants to can get up and walk on back.”

Since I thought I could use more practice for passing the final PT test that was coming up soon, I decided to go ahead and crawl back to the starting point where we’d been resting on the grass. However, as I was crawling back, I was concentrating so much on maintaining the lengthen-

ing of my spine and torso and using myself as well as I could that I didn't notice I was the only one who crawled all the way back. Then as soon as the sergeant called our platoon into formation he asked who it was who'd crawled all the way back. I didn't speak up and identify myself because the last thing you wanted to do in Basic Training was to be singled out for something – bad or good – since it usually meant you'd be chosen first for other duties or penalties. Right away, though, someone pointed me out, and the sergeant immediately said, "Step up here, son." – motioning for me to come and stand next to him facing the platoon. I was sure he was going to humiliate or harass me for trying to be virtuous or heroic or trying to outshine everyone else, but instead he said very proudly and emphatically, "Now I want all of you to look up here, because here's a *real man*." To top it off, he turned to me and said, "You can fall out, son, and have a smoke." If he only knew how easily I'd done it – and that I didn't even smoke!

It's obvious to me now that I probably couldn't have made it successfully through those eight weeks of Basic Training if it hadn't been for my experience of the Alexander Technique during the previous two summers – not only for managing the low-crawl better – but for countless other reasons too. Even just in following commands and orders, I think Alexander lessons made a big difference in my effectiveness, although I also had had a good amount of experience in high school and college playing in marching bands that required following very careful instructions and executing complicated maneuvers at the same time as playing an instrument. But I also remember two other incidents from these eight weeks that illustrate well what Alexander work allowed me to do more effectively. One was at a barracks inspection by our platoon sergeant when he called us into formation outside and went down the lines of trainees inspecting each man's uniforms and equipment to make sure we were wearing and carrying them as required. He looked me over, didn't say anything, and went on to the next trainee, but then he suddenly turned back and looked me straight in the eye and said, "Armstrong, how come you never do anything wrong?" I didn't respond because I didn't think there was anything to explain, but I was surprised that he'd actually been noticing that I usually managed somehow to keep myself fairly consistently "in good order" in a way that many of the other trainees didn't – especially the younger ones just out of high school who'd never worn any kind of uniform before or done any form of disciplined drill.

Then, another time, also while standing at attention at the end of another inspection, we were given the "at ease" command. But instead

of slouching down – “relaxing” – like everyone else seemed to do after “holding” themselves at attention, I just continued to stand in the same equalized balance in relation to gravity as I did when I was “at attention” because there was no difference to me in comfort or energy level. “Attention” was the same as balanced standing as far as I was concerned, and it was much more comfortable than “collapsing” or slouching, which is what everyone else seemed to do when they were “at ease.” For me, standing “at attention” wasn’t straightening up and holding myself stiff like most would interpret it. But that day, after I’d stood there comfortably and peacefully for a few moments, one of the trainees next to me suddenly said, “Hey Joe. ‘At ease!’” assuming that I hadn’t actually heard the command because I hadn’t “relaxed” like everyone else.

### *My Army Band Alexander Experience*

The rest of my three-year Army stint also proved to be eventful from an Alexander point of view. While our band wasn’t rehearsing, playing concerts around Washington, DC. or on tour in various parts of the country, I used our off-duty time to study Alexander’s books. Then, when I could get a weekend pass, I also went out to Michigan for more Alexander lessons with either Joan Murray or to Boston for lessons with two other skilled teachers.<sup>39</sup> During these Army years I also attempted to do some “experimental Alexander work” with several of my bandmates who asked me to show them something about the Technique because I often spoke about how valuable I felt it was to me personally and for musicians in general. Before this time, I never considered trying to show anyone anything with my hands because I knew that I didn’t have any idea of what was involved in that aspect of teaching. I understood that it was a unique and subtle skill and that Alexander himself had required trainees to complete at least three years of full-time training for learning it when he established his first training course in the 1930s. I also knew that this same three-year standard was upheld by the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) that was established after Alexander’s death in 1955 by a number of teachers he trained, so I felt I should never in any way claim to be an Alexander teacher.

However, one bandmate who was an accomplished athlete and very interested in anything to do with superior coordination became so intrigued by what I told him about the Technique that he insisted I try to show him how it actually works. He was obviously in ultra-good shape muscularly and seemed to understand a lot about achieving an optimal level of coordination and strength. He became extremely curious to see



if what I'd been describing might add some insight to his idea of good coordination and self-management – especially because I didn't show any outward signs of conventional sports training myself. Since there were no Alexander teachers anywhere near where we were stationed, and since he assured me that I couldn't do him any harm because he'd been on his school's wrestling team, he pretty much challenged me to try to show him what the Technique entailed. I finally agreed to try to demonstrate something for him with my hands – but only on the condition that we acknowledge that I wasn't a trained teacher and that I really didn't know anything about how to teach the Technique in the way that it had been imparted to me.

We started by my asking him to sit down on his barracks room footlocker, which was a foot-and-a-half high trunk we often used instead of chairs and had moved to the middle of his room. Next, I asked him to consider standing up again soon but not to do anything to prepare for that action. Then I put one hand at the base of the back of his head and top of his spine the other hand under his chin and jaw with the idea of eventually asking him to see if he could let me use those contacts to guide him into standing without any help on his part. I remembered, in general, that those were the main places my teacher had kept her hands when moving me in and out of a chair, so I merely matched them as best I could. However, I had at least understood that the essence of the hands-on Alexander experience came from the teacher basically leaving the hands still but with an upward-flowing intent that had nothing to do with any kind of active manipulation at the places of contact like you might experience in massage or various manual therapeutic methods.

As I established these quiet contacts with my hands at my bandmate's head and chin, I don't remember exactly what I said to him by way of any specific instructions, but I think I asked him just to try to stay aware of the relation of his head to his spine and to my hands and to be sure not to make any extra tension or changes in that relationship, and then I attempted to guide him into standing. He was easily able to allow me to do this without seeming to help me in any way. Then while he went on standing there, I continued to leave my hands quietly at his head and chin with the same upward-flowing intention and asked him to see if he could let me guide him back into sitting again while he kept thinking of going up and away from the floor and the foot locker rather than thinking of sitting back down. He followed my instructions and I was able to move him into sitting on the footlocker again without his dropping or sinking down onto it. This action went smoothly too as far as I could tell, and it seemed to me



that I at least hadn't done anything harmful to him. But by that time it was clear that he was certainly able to withstand much more forceful contacts than I was using, so I stopped being so concerned about "damaging" him in any way. Then I think I asked him to let me stand him up and sit him down a couple more times as I kept reminding him not to do anything to help me. I may also have reminded him at various times to keep "thinking of" the basic directions I'd been taught, which were "neck to be free, head to go forward and up, and back to lengthen and widen." As I recall, our entire session only lasted about ten minutes.

To my surprise, even though I didn't feel that I'd done anything significant with my hands, my bandmate was astonished at the effortlessness of moving and being moved in this way because he could clearly see and feel that I wasn't exerting much effort either. But he was even more impressed by the experience of being in such a different general state afterward from what he was used to in relation to gravity. He seemed dumfounded by how remarkable it felt to him, and I was amazed at his reaction because I certainly couldn't perceive with my hands that we had made any changes in his overall musculature that would account for his feeling so different. We obviously hadn't made any outward or observable change in what most people would call his "posture" either, which was fairly excellent anyway. But he was so impressed by what had just happened that he immediately wanted me to demonstrate the same procedure to a friend, so he went down the hall to get him saying, "You've *got* to come and see this amazing thing that Joe can do!" The friend joined us, and I did pretty much the same things with my hands to guide him from sitting to standing and back to sitting – asking him not to make any particular tensions in his neck or to help with his legs, etc. This bandmate was just as astonished as the first bandmate had been, and I was equally surprised that all this had just happened again – even though this second bandmate wasn't as athletically inclined as the first bandmate.

After these questionable "successes," I eventually became bold enough to explore using my hands on several other bandmates who'd also become interested in the Technique, and all of them seemed to find what I tried to give them very helpful. Of course, I'd spent a good deal of time talking with them about the benefits and principles of the Technique when we got together for meals in off-duty hours and on our long concert tours, and I think that these conversations helped them to absorb more from my hands-on work than they otherwise may have – as well as giving them some further understanding of how they could apply the experience to their daily lives. In fact, one of these bandmates even found that he could

use what he'd learned from our few sessions of work together to keep himself from panicking when he got an injection from a doctor or dentist. He was amazed by this breakthrough because he'd thought that his panic in those situations was something that he'd have to carry with him for the rest of his life. But in spite of these positive results, I continued to insist that I wasn't in any way qualified to teach the Technique, and I urged each of these bandmates to try to have a full series of Alexander lessons whenever they could go to a trained teacher – which a number of them ultimately did after they left the Army. In fact, one even decided to take the full three-year teachers' training course and has been teaching the Technique for many years alongside his career as a professional musician. Also, whenever our band would perform in one of the cities where there was a fully trained Alexander teacher, I would usually try to arrange for at least a few bandmates to have an “official” introductory lesson. They were always impressed and excited by the experience and couldn't resist spreading the word to other band members. I also I think these full-fledged lessons helped them understand why I couldn't claim to be a legitimate teacher.

In retrospect, I've often thought that these bandmates had a fairly positive experience when I used my hands on them in this imitative and crude way because even a little bit of sustained, gentle, upward, and positive direction from another person's hands can sometimes produce significant results. But I wonder if that may also be because this kind of contact is so foreign to anything most of us experience as adults, even though we may have once received something like it from our parents or other caring adults when we were children. Also, even in our band's non-combat situation, there was still an undercurrent of fear that we could be transferred at any time to a place where our lives would be in danger; so the positive Alexander-type contact may have somehow alleviated a certain degree of subconscious neuro-muscular stress (and cortisol levels?) in these bandmates I worked with. Over the years since I completed my training to become an Alexander teacher it's become even more obvious to me that most people don't really know how to touch each other in a very positive way that promotes the other person's overall well-being. And I think it's also very rare that we experience a psychophysically enhancing contact from specialists such as doctors and nurses who must regularly touch us in their work. I think that my great enthusiasm for the Technique and my essentially caring attitude may have contributed a lot toward giving these bandmates a positive overall experience too. In any case, my hands-on contacts and spoken intentions were always essentially “upward” in

relation to gravity's pull, which, in and of itself, must contain something important.

I suppose you could also say that what I was doing with my hands on these occasions was more “Alexander-like” than any other hands-on methods, but, as I'll describe later, it became shockingly clear to me on the first day of the teacher training course that in doing what I had done when working with my bandmates, I had been very far from having any understanding of what the hands-on process actually entails. I realized very quickly in the training class that I could never have achieved this standard on my own even if I kept exploring for a long time along the lines I'd been pursuing with my bandmates.

During my three years in the military, my original Alexander teacher and her husband also began their explorations of anatomist and anthropologist Raymond Dart's “procedures”<sup>40</sup> that they were finding to be a valuable adjunct to Alexander teaching. The procedures basically involve assuming and remaining in various evolution-based positions that professor Dart recommended for unmasking and unravelling any muscular tightnesses or abnormalities we may have built up in our growth and development that can hamper us from functioning in the most balanced and free way in relation to the surfaces supporting us at any given moment – specifically considering our right- or left-handedness as a major influence on how our balance and coordination develops. It was extra exciting to be a subject for some of the initial demonstrations of what my teacher and her husband had been learning from meeting with professor Dart himself and from studying his writings. Some additional lessons I had then with the two experienced teachers in Boston also helped in coping with those very demanding years in the army, and all these lessons confirmed for me even more that the Technique has something essential to offer us beyond the individual approach and personality of any particular teacher.

During the last year of my Army enlistment, I realized that I needed to study the Technique much more intensively to see if I could become a full-fledged teacher of it before I went on to pursue my musical career any further. I felt this expertise in the use of the self should be an essential part of any flute playing or flute teaching that I might do and that experience in the Alexander Technique should be a required foundation for any serious musician or performer. But more importantly, it also seemed clear to me that the Technique allowed for a way to deal with and move beyond ingrained reaction patterns that we would normally think of as an unalterable part of our personalities – a generally held attitude that I think may lie at the root of many of the world's greatest problems. It had

become obvious to me that these patterns of use of the self could actually be consciously reorganized to ensure the most positive and constructive responses to all life's challenges. This socio-emotional aspect of the Technique greatly appealed to me just at that time because I'd become increasingly dissatisfied with most religious and philosophical teachings as a means for dealing with negative and destructive behaviors. The potential for social change that the Technique offered was also a strong motivating factor in my wanting to train to teach it. These broader insights came mainly from my slow and careful study of Alexander's four books, which I finally found I could begin to comprehend if I gave myself plenty of time to ponder each paragraph without feeling I had to push right on to its end ("endgaining") as I would usually have done.

During this same period I also read a number of talks by J. Krishnamurti<sup>41</sup> that my teachers had recommended. His approach to looking at life's habits and problems seemed to echo Alexander's in many ways – particularly in how he, Krishnamurti, helped people to temporarily set aside their beliefs and pre-conceptions so that they could look together with him at problems or various basic facets of life "from scratch" in order to find out their root cause and come to a fresh way of looking at them from the perspective of what might be best for us as individuals and for the rest of humanity. His talks often help listeners and readers to see how so much of what we believe to be true about life and human relations is often based on our particular culture's social conditioning and may not necessarily be accurate or true for all humanity.

It seemed to me that Krishnamurti's approach mirrored Alexander's challenge to his readers to examine their immediate problems from the vantage point of life passing down through the centuries. Alexander also exhorted us to question all aspects of our supposed knowledge in every sphere and ask ourselves why we believe certain things to be true about life and ourselves – especially in psychological, religious, political, moral, ethical, social, legal, and economic areas. He claimed that if we are "even and direct" with ourselves, we'll often find that our supposed knowledge – or "the boasted truth" – is mere illusion, rather than valid information gained from taking a "process of reasoning" that's as free as possible from belief, prejudice, and pre-conceived ideas.<sup>42</sup>

All these inspirations and ideas were further enhanced during this period by my becoming close friends with a woman who had been on Alexander's first teacher training course in the 1930s. My talks with her about the Technique had a strong influence on my thinking and teaching for the next twenty years until her death in 1988, and we actually published

a book of our talks about her experience with the Technique that many have found very moving and informative.<sup>43</sup>

During my last year in the Army I applied to one of the four STAT three-year teacher training programs in London, which was led by Walter Carrington, one of Alexander's assistants,<sup>44</sup> with whom I had already taken lessons at the music festival I mentioned earlier. I was accepted into his course, and as soon as I was discharged from Army duty in September of 1969, I sailed to London to begin my training. However, I immediately found that any illusions I had about being able to learn to teach the Technique in a shorter than required amount of time were completely shattered.

## 4 Teacher-Training in London, 1969–1972

On my first day of class when first-generation teacher Peggy Williams was instructing and guiding me in how I should direct myself as a whole while she placed my hands *for* me in a well-directed way briefly on another trainee, I was stunned to find out that *none* of what I'd done in using my hands on my bandmates met any of the basic requirements of what is actually involved in giving Alexander lessons. After that day, I thought it might even take ten years of training before I would be capable of using my hands to teach in any fundamentally valid way.

What this teacher helped me to realize very clearly was that at this beginning stage of training I had to focus *entirely* on directing my own use of myself as a whole (which I also soon realized was far from the standard it needed to be for teaching even though I'd had quite a lot of private lessons) and not attempting to focus *at all* on using my hands themselves in any isolated way to direct the use of or to try to feel what was happening in the classmate she was placing my hands upon for me. She showed me with absolute clarity that if I took any initiative *at all* at that stage to place my hands on the other trainee by myself, a fully integrating stimulus wouldn't be transmitted from the use of myself as a whole to the use of the other trainee as a whole – even though the stimulus might be basically positive, as it was with my bandmates.

It's also worth pointing out that most private Alexander students have no idea that the teacher-trainer's very careful moment-to-moment hands-on scrutiny and directing of the trainee is required for several years if the highly-evolved full training development is to take place. Equally important is the feedback from the person who is having the trainee's hands placed upon him or her – especially if this “receiving” person is another teacher or an advanced trainee. Without this double scrutiny and feedback about your use of yourself as a whole at every step in the development of all facets of the hands-on skills required for teaching, self-deception is very likely, and you could easily get the idea, as I nearly did in the Army, that you're doing the same thing that expertly trained teachers are doing with their hands.

As I reflect now on my fifty years of teaching the Technique and my ten years of training others to teach, it's even clearer to me that I never could have acquired the same level of expertise and understanding that I received from the three-year training experience if I had merely continued

working with people on the basis of what I thought I understood from my experimental work with my Army bandmates. I think I may have become a fairly good fake Alexander teacher and people could've benefited somewhat – like my bandmates did – from what I would try to give them, but the results would've fallen far short of what the Technique ultimately has to offer in re-educating and restoring students' entire use of themselves if a teacher is competently trained. What I was doing with my hands in my Army explorations – even though well meaning – was merely suggestive manipulation rather than transmitting a direction from my whole self through my hands that could facilitate or cultivate the integrated working of another person's entire musculature and other supportive tissue.

It also became apparent early on in the training course that the full-time teachers, as well as the numerous other certified teachers who frequently visited, were working at various levels of experience and expertise in the use of their hands – often reflecting how long they'd taught. It was easy to detect that some didn't always stop “doing,” or “endgaining,” with their hands and that they needed more experience in getting consistently past that tendency. I often thought that this endgaining in some of the teachers and students may have had something to do with their generally limited conception of the Technique as mainly having to do with movement and balance aspects of living, rather than with all aspects of life – especially emotion, character, social attitudes, etc. But it could be stunning to see what happened over time with students who were particularly aggressive, domineering, manipulative, or artificial upon entering the course and then eventually began to exchange those tendencies for being considerate, genuine, and whole. Or the opposite was even more impressive to see when reticent or shy people would shed their “shell” and come forth with a more outgoing, vibrant, and gracious demeanor. It was also apparent that some of the senior teachers' remarkable skill with their hands extended far beyond what most of us could dream of achieving until we'd taught for a long time. Their expert ability was obviously the result of their many years of cultivating an ever-higher standard of use of themselves as a whole every moment of their lives.

#### CONDITIONS AND MANNER OF USE: A CRUCIAL DISTINCTION

Another aspect of Alexander's discoveries that became clear during the training course is the distinction he made between manner of use and conditions of use. Manner of use pertains, of course, to *how* we do things – respond, behave, manage our relationship to gravity, etc. – whether we do them consciously by choice or habitually and subconsciously. Conditions

of use pertain mainly to the *qualities* of muscular, ligamental, and tendinous tonus (anywhere from extreme tightness to extreme flaccidity) that exist in us regardless of how good or how poor our manner of use may be at any given moment and regardless of whether these qualities of tonus are more recently acquired or long-standing – perhaps even stemming from earliest childhood. In either case, our conditions of use, which we often aren't aware of because they are so deep-seated, usually cannot be immediately altered at will. However, most aspects of our manner of use can often be improved comparatively quickly through a brief application of the skills of inhibiting and directing either on our own or in collaboration with the hands-on work from a teacher. For example, a change of manner of use is what takes place when you become aware that you've been subconsciously tightening the juncture of your head with the top of your spine when you react or prepare to respond and you simply *stop* doing that, which is also the first "step" in promoting your total lengthening in stature that the Technique cultivates.

Realizing these distinctions fortified for me the fact that complete Alexander teaching and teacher training is attempting to deal with both manner and conditions of use – perhaps emphasizing one more than the other at times, but never one to the exclusion of the other, since they are so mutually dependent. For instance, even though skilled chair work seems to focus mainly on students' manner of use, their conditions can also be greatly influenced then especially if the chair work is prolonged for more than a few moments. Likewise, even though table work appears to focus on improving students' conditions, their manner of use can be significantly addressed then too if their attention to inhibiting and directing is sufficiently engaged – for example, while they're speaking and listening during conversation, reciting a poem or text, singing, moving a hand, arm, or leg, etc. Table work is certainly not meant to be a time for the student to "relax" or daydream like one would expect to happen with massage or forms of manual therapy that are administered while someone is lying down. Table work is just that: *work* – for the pupil just as much as for the teacher.

In the training course the teachers wouldn't usually speak of a trainee's conditions in that trainee's presence – presumably because it might prompt the trainee to try to make a change by directly manipulating some of the specific aspects in question. You might hear a teacher say, "Oh, she has a very strong pull down the front; but she does inhibit and direct fairly well." Or you might hear the converse: "His conditions have improved, even though he still doesn't seem to be able to inhibit very well." But it



was generally conceded by all the teachers that good conditions of use were both a major goal and a necessity for everyone in training, no matter how “normal” they appeared to be upon entering the course. As training progressed, it became ever more obvious that without good conditions of use, particularly in the working of your back as a whole and in the overall equalized flow of lengthening throughout your entire supportive musculature, an improved manner of use alone wouldn’t be sufficient for managing a full teaching practice of giving a number of lessons each day.

Of course, a main feature of poor conditions of use – in contrast to the unbalanced tensions and collapsings people often make in their habitual manner of use – is that we don’t usually, and often can’t, *feel* – or perceive – these tightnesses or flaccidities in the early stages of learning and training to teach the Technique because they may have existed in us for so long that they’ve come to feel “natural” and “right,” to use Alexander’s own words.<sup>45</sup> These long-term conditions also often harbor elements of strong emotion and social conditioning or may be due to adopting very early modes of holding areas of ourselves to manage basic functions like bowel and bladder control and erotic feelings. A lot of what many people do neuro-muscularly to develop social “self control” and conform to gender and professional roles comes into play here too. We usually don’t even begin to perceive how deeply ingrained these tightnesses are until we experience the new means of control that offers an alternative of a more integrated, overall lengthening support in relation to gravity.

It also became apparent during training that, as teachers, we couldn’t begin to be able to assess what changes in conditions need to happen in our students or understand how to direct them with our hands toward those changes unless we’d experienced enough improvement in our own conditions of use to know what we’re looking for in those we teach. But these positive changes usually happen very gradually over the course of the three-year training, and it can come as a rude awakening when we begin to teach ordinary pupils and realize that their conditions are far below the standard of even a first-year trainee who has been receiving several hours of daily hands-on Alexander work four or five times per week.

It’s worth noting too that it became ever more apparent that there can be a broad variance from person to person in terms of how well they can perceive – or feel – what’s happening in themselves interoceptively, proprioceptively, and kinesthetically from moment to moment. Some people have quite poor self-perceptiveness (“imperfect sensory appreciation,” to use Alexander’s expression<sup>46</sup>) and they often can’t perceive changes in muscle tonus even when it has come about very

distinctly in the context of the hands-on work they receive from a teacher. The opposite is also true: that others may have an extraordinarily high degree of self-perception. However, many fall somewhere along a broad spectrum between that high level of awareness and a poorer one. The range can also fluctuate from time to time in the same person according to changes in general health and whatever stressful or emotional experiences they may be going through.

#### LONG-TERM CONDITIONS OF USE

One particular experience of a change in my long-term conditions of use during the teacher training made their distinction from manner of use dramatically clear to me – especially because the change happened to me so unexpectedly and because it ultimately proved to be associated with a long-standing phobia I'd had since adolescence. By the time I began the training course the phobia was something I'd come to accept that I'd probably have for the rest of my life. It basically centered around certain kinds of birds, but I usually managed to avoid situations that might trigger it. I'd long since felt, though, that it wouldn't have to interfere with the main things I needed to do in life, although I did have a vague idea that psychoanalysis or psychotherapy might provide ways for reckoning with it if I ever decided to explore those methods.

However, one day during my second year of training, I was standing alone at the back of the classroom quietly directing myself when something suddenly changed deep in my chest just behind my breastbone (maybe in the sternocostalis area and somewhat in the intercostals and front of my diaphragm). It was the lengthening of a tightness that I hadn't had any perception at all of its being there because, as I later realized, it must have been lodged there for at least fifteen years since the event that triggered the phobia. It also wasn't a tension that I'd been subconsciously "holding" that I could merely "let go of" or redirect into a lengthening if a teacher pointed it out to me – even if they could detect it with their hands – and I doubt that it would have responded to massage or other manipulative approaches to dispersing areas of tightness. The tightness had simply become a part of what it "felt like to be me."

Of course, this sudden change wasn't a "mere release," it was actually a *transformation* that allowed that region to become a part of the general lengthening and widening of the musculature in my whole chest – my whole torso – and it immediately brought a greater freedom in my breathing and a deeper sense of well-being. However, it didn't set off any sudden emotional catharsis like you sometimes hear of people undergoing

with methods like Wilhelm Reich's bioenergetics or Ida Rolf's structural integration. I certainly had no idea at that moment that the change had anything to do with the bird phobia – or with any other kind of fear or difficult emotion for that matter. Meanwhile, over the next few days I was able to go on maintaining this greater chest freedom as part of my overall lengthening and widening upward flow in relation to gravity, and it seemed like the change was well on its way to becoming a permanent part of my day-to-day manner of use of myself as a whole.

However, on the weekend I decided to go to a nearby park to do some reading, and while I was sitting there several pigeons suddenly flew down near my feet to peck at some crumbs scattered beneath the bench. Normally I would've immediately become uncomfortable and got right up to find another place to sit. This time, though, none of the panic reaction began to happen, and I found I could easily stay sitting there without being troubled at all. But then, as I went on reading I began to notice that I was slowly starting to contract that region of my chest in a way that was obviously a part of the old condition of tightness that had been so chronically lodged there just behind my breastbone. Fortunately, I caught the tensing response – that was now a matter of my *manner* of use – soon enough to be able to redirect it back into the improved lengthening and widening of my entire stature and the freer flow of breathing that I'd been able to incorporate into my general use of myself over the previous few days. Then, after quickly recovering this fuller lengthening and widening direction, I could go on sitting there reading and looking at the birds from time to time without much bother – even enjoying their markings and movements. This was astonishing to me, to say the least – and it certainly felt like a great triumph. (I would think that my cortisol level remained fairly normal as well.)

As time went on, and as my conditions of use continued to improve because of the daily hands-on class work and my ongoing self-directing, I soon realized that the previous chest tightness had harbored not only the particular bird phobia but that it was also the seat of other anxieties and fears – ones that were surely all part of the general conditions of use that Alexander called “unduly excited fear reflexes.”<sup>47</sup> For instance, even though I was managing to maintain my overall upward flow in relation to the center of the earth, I noticed that I would also start to contract the same area in my chest when I passed a stranger at night on a dark street or when I was about to go on stage to play a demanding concert. Much later, I did figure out what might be called the “psychological” origins of the bird phobia from my adolescent years, but I seriously doubt that either

this conceptual insight alone, any type of medication, or any amount of verbal analysis of the problem could've brought about the same change in my chest or yielded as much improvement in my ability to manage the more general array of fear responses that were also bound up in that long-standing tightness.

I should also re-emphasize that this particular transformation of chest tightness was probably only able to happen as part of the general improvement in my overall manner of use of myself in daily life from moment to moment. The specific change didn't just become "no tension" in that region – which would have been a mere "collapse" – but it actually changed into and became a part of my overall lengthening and widening direction in relation to gravity. That slow, general improvement in my overall manner of use also provided me with the confidence that any concomitant muscular change would be OK – if not actually welcomed – because such an integrated overall base of support was being cultivated. On the other hand, I could well imagine it being a traumatic experience to have had that particular area of chest tightness manipulated by someone who might have approached it with a localized and forceful pressure and whose only goal was to achieve "a local release" in order to "cure" me of my fears or even just to "help me be free of tightness" in that region. I should further point out that I don't think this change in conditions could've come about merely through having Alexander hands-on work that focused solely on my manner of use while I was doing various daily or professionally skilled actions. The enormous amount of regular chair and table work I was receiving on a daily basis from highly experienced teachers was unquestionably at the root of the change, along with my continual inhibiting of my habitual manner of use and my continual directing of an improved manner of use to the best of my ability from moment to moment in all my waking hours.

#### THE MUSICAL SIDE OF THE TRAINING EXPERIENCE

During these three teacher-training years, I was able to work even more carefully than before on revising my flute playing based on the intensive experience I was having in the course. On most days I would come an hour early to the school to do this revising – re-learning, actually – and it proved to be quite a big challenge very much along the lines of what Alexander himself described he needed to do to overcome the faulty habits that had so jeopardized his voice as an actor.<sup>48</sup> I became even more aware than I had been earlier that the simple act of bringing my flute up to my lips would set off all kinds of subtle and habitual patterns of tension that would

sabotage any good over-all coordination long before I played a single note. You would think that flute playing would be a fairly straight-forward thing to do, but as I mentioned, it can actually be quite problematic just because of the asymmetrical way the flute needs to be supported and played. Years of practicing and performing in this twisted-up way that most flutists automatically fall into from the beginning – especially when they start, as I did, in primary school years when our arms are considerably shorter than an adult's – often lead us to build up habitual and subconscious patterns of tension and tightness that can take a long time to unmask fully and transform into a more balanced overall coordination.

Even though I'd worked a lot during the three years I was in the Army on applying my Alexander understandings to flute playing that I had learned from my previous summers' flute teacher, I wasn't able to go so fully into the re-learning process there because our band was often performing two long concerts a day so that most of my early subconscious habits were still being set off while meeting that intensive demand. So the time during these training course years of "going back to scratch" flute-wise while simultaneously refining my overall use of myself for becoming an Alexander teacher, brought me to a much deeper level of unmasking my old patterns of use at the flute and replacing them with more balanced and continually improving ones. It also helped that I didn't have any regular performing obligations then to tempt a return of the many old subconscious patterns of playing. Also, from time to time the training course director would have me bring my flute to one of the private lessons he gave us every three weeks, and his careful scrutiny then of how I was using myself as I played was always a good reference point for assessing and affirming my progress at the instrument.

Of course, all of our training-class experience in Alexander's approach to breathing and speaking was also invaluable in my work for refining every aspect of my flute playing, especially by helping me to avoid interfering with the relation of my head to my total lengthening in stature in everyday speech. This careful and very specific work – particularly with regard to refining Alexander's demanding "whispered ah" procedure – gave me a basis for focusing on every aspect of the whole of myself that I could use for working on all elements of my flute playing over many years to come – particularly in terms of refining the nuances of tone production and the use of vibrato that I aspired to and for incorporating ways of practicing that I later learned from my study with oboist Fernand Gillet<sup>49</sup> who employed a similar principle to Alexander's in terms of giving yourself more time than usual just before a demanding action that might cause you to dis-

coordinate yourself if you didn't have the chance to "think well" on what you needed to do in order to best perform that action. Alexander called this our "critical moment," just before we act.<sup>50</sup>

#### "DOING CELLO"

Another valuable experience that I had during the last half of the teacher training course was having cello lessons with, Vivien Mackie, a class-mate who had studied with the remarkable Pablo Casals. I had long been inspired by Casals's playing, conducting, teaching, and humanitarianism as he performed and crusaded for world peace well into his nineties wherever he could, and I was always on the lookout for any opportunity to learn more about him and his approach to performing.

Vivien had studied with Casals for three years after she graduated from music college, and he worked with her meticulously to entirely re-build her playing. So she conceivably received much more from him in understanding the essence of cello playing of the highest order than most others who already considered themselves fully-formed performers and went to study with him for far less time. My thought was that if I could learn from her even a few of the fundamentals that made Casals's playing – and hers – so wonderful I thought I might be able to use my Alexander skills to transfer some of that experience and understanding over to my flute playing and my approach to music making in general.

The cello lessons were a revelation right from the beginning even though I had learned some string-playing fundamentals on violin by taking a semester of string class in college. None of that experience, though, had much significance in relation to what I began learning about string playing in general from cello lessons with Vivien. Some of the most basic concepts we covered were "elasticity," "doing only what is necessary," and being able to use the left-hand fingers like "frogs' tongues" – all of which stemmed from her work with Casals.

Part of our arrangement for the cello lessons – which we usually had during our lunch break at the Alexander school – was that I would also give any relevant feedback or observations from the point of view of my Alexander experience so far, which included four years of private lessons and one year of the teacher training course before Vivien entered it. So there was something of an element of mutuality and discovery in our work together in each session, which we soon came to call "doing some cello," rather than "cello lessons."

I don't remember how many months we worked together in this way, but by the time I finished the training course Vivien had managed to help

me build up enough overall skill and understanding to be able to play all of Saint-Saëns's "The Swan" (even from memory). This accomplishment was astounding to me and just as musically gratifying in its full scope of expressiveness as it would have been if I had learned to play this piece on flute with my advanced skills and experience.

The cello lessons gave me *exactly* what I was hoping for – and more – in terms of the actual experience of Casals's approach to performing through the cello as his main "medium." From then on I was able to carry that model with me over the following years as I continued to work on refining my flute playing toward ever fuller expressiveness by translating the elastic kinesthetic cellistic experiences of arms, hands, fingers, and thumbs over to the use of my breath, lips, and tongue.

It was also interesting to realize that a good deal of what I was learning about using my arms and hands at the cello was made more possible by the changes in my overall coordination that were happening directly as a result of all the daily training in the use of my hands that I was receiving from the teachers in the training class. This was particularly noticeable when my whole back and torso began working more fully as the main source of support for my arms and hands, which had long been more "detached" or "disconnected" from my torso and back due to the years I'd spent holding and playing the flute so intensively.

My musical and Alexander collaborations with Vivien continued for many years, but one of the most fascinating and revealing experiences involving Alexandrian "inhibiting" in our doing cello was a "game" she introduced me to after I'd pretty much learned the basics of getting around the instrument through working directly on pieces rather than doing exercises, scales, playing in the conventionally-numbered positions, etc. Vivien remembers the game differently than I do, and both of our detailed accounts of it appear in the book-length conversations we eventually produced in 2002 on her experience studying with Casals and the resonance of his teaching she found in the Alexander Technique.<sup>51</sup> But my memory of the game was that she seated herself opposite me at her cello as I sat at mine, and she suddenly and unexpectedly said to me, "Do this!" immediately before playing one very powerful and exciting note, which was obviously the beginning of a whole piece in its fullest expression, rather than just a random note of such-and-such pitch, length, volume, etc.

At first, I felt totally baffled – mainly because I don't have perfect pitch and couldn't immediately identify and duplicate the note she had played, but also because I felt its expressive power was way beyond my skill at



that point. So I pretty much froze in embarrassment and great feelings of incompetency. However, while I was completely caught up in my reaction, she suddenly said again “Do this!” and played the same striking note.

I quickly realized that Vivien wasn’t going to take “I’m sorry, but I can’t.” as an answer and that she also had every confidence that I should be able to do what she was asking – since we’d had more than enough cello lessons by that time to give me all the basic skills I needed for matching that single note and the way she played it. I quickly tried to gather my wits so that I could at least try to watch her more closely to see exactly which finger she was using on which string and at what point along the string it was placed, as well as how fast she moved the bow along the string, etc. Then I asked her to play the note one more time so that I could try to inhibit my old reaction pattern and give myself much more of a chance to take in with my eyes and ears exactly what she did – even though I would have to “translate,” as it were, what I saw to my side of the room as she had to do in her lessons with Casals where she also sat at her cello facing him at his cello with no printed music between them.

Vivien obliged and played the note again, but this time I was at least able to take in which finger she used on which string and the approximate place on that string her finger touched. I went ahead and gave it a try. But I was still fairly far off pitch – though not all that far. At least I could tell then that I *wasn’t* on the right pitch, so I asked her to play the note again so I could be sure of it, and the next time I tried it I got it right! Nearly perfect too – with the entire expressive character of the bow stroke as well.

But before I could get too far with my amazement and great sense of accomplishment, she immediately said again, “Do this!” adding several more notes to the first. However, by then I made sure to watch and listen carefully so that I could merely add what she gave me to my first “success.” And before long, as we worked back and forth in this way, she had “given” me the whole first phrase of the prelude to Bach’s third cello suite, and I had given it back to her too!

I don’t think I’ve ever experienced a more exciting and fulfilling accomplishment in learning music in my entire life.

It was also clear that my ability to absorb and “mirror” what Vivien gave me was very dependent upon the level of use of myself as a whole that I had reached at that stage of the Alexander teacher training. If it hadn’t been for acquiring that general skill and awareness, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to “do this” nearly so successfully at the cello in such a short amount of time – especially the setting aside (“inhibiting,” to use Alexander’s term) of my strong feelings of incompetency. Those feelings



probably would've stayed with me far longer – maybe even through the entire process, no matter how thrilling it was – and made it a much more arduous undertaking for both of us – if we had tried to do this “game” much earlier in my training.

In retrospect, I think that if I had stayed on in London for another year or so, I can well imagine that we could even have done “do this” with that Bach prelude enough times that it would have given me the experience and ability to play the whole movement accurately and fully expressively – especially if Vivien had the time and patience to “give me” the notes in this same musically complete way. (Many years later we also did “do this” with her giving me phrases from Ravel's *Pièce en forme de Habanera* and me “receiving” them on flute. That experience was also extremely gratifying – especially because we both had been teaching the Technique for so long and were more used to “waiting” instead of instantly trying too hard to be right.

#### ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY LECTURES

As part of our teacher training, we also had lectures twice a week in anatomy and physiology. During my first year these lectures were given by Edward Gellately, a teacher on the course who was also a medical doctor, and for my last two years they were given by Don Burton, one of the trainees who had been trained as a physiotherapist in the Royal Air Force and had worked at a world-famous physiotherapy center. He had originally intended to become a trainer of physiotherapists, but when he began having Alexander lessons he realized that the Technique held so much more to offer in terms of its powers to rehabilitate a person's overall use of the self, so he decided to become an Alexander teacher instead. He once told me that most of the patients he had treated in his private physiotherapy practice really only needed Alexander lessons and not physiotherapy to improve their specific, medically-diagnosed conditions. We felt very lucky that he also presented his lectures in a way that supported Alexander's understanding of an excellent use of the self as a whole, and this orientation added to our confidence that all aspects of the Technique were in line with current scientific and medical knowledge.

#### THE DIRECTOR'S LECTURES AND TALKS

The training course director Walter Carrington's half-hour readings and lectures three times a week were also an important and inspiring part of the course. They were extremely valuable because he was so adept at speaking extemporaneously on all aspects of the Technique. He would

usually either read aloud and give commentary on a passage from one of Alexander's four books that we were going through together, or he would speak at length on a specific topic related to learning and understanding how the Technique applies to all of life. His knowledge of Alexander and Alexander's writings was extensive, and his way of elucidating the important points in each paragraph or section of the books was always enlightening. As I listened to his detailed descriptions and comments, I often felt that I was also improving my manner of use without overtly attempting to do so. I've never heard anyone speak so brilliantly and meaningfully on the Technique – or on any other topic, for that matter. But the main result of his talks – for me, at any rate – was that they served to fortify my conviction that it's critically important in every aspect of our lives for us to learn how to manage our use of ourselves from moment to moment to the best of our ability. Many of his talks and interview conversations have been published, and they are an invaluable part of the literature on the Technique.<sup>52</sup>

One of the most inspiring things I ever heard Walter say was during a private lesson I had with him near the end of my training. He said, "You know, Joe, I don't give too much thought to religion and spiritual matters, but I *do* think there is such a thing as 'the human spirit.' I also believe that there's such a thing as 'the evolution of the human spirit,' and, to me, that's what the Alexander Work is really about: the evolution of the human spirit." This statement was also quite unusual for him to make because he ordinarily limited himself to speaking about the most practical issues of how we need to manage the use of ourselves in daily life. Yet, when he said this to me, it also made me realize all the more why he was able to maintain such a positive and constructive attitude toward everyone from moment to moment as if each second was an opportunity for us to evolve to a higher level of human spirit – both on our own and together with others.

#### FINAL DAYS OF TRAINING

Understanding and progress during the training course happened extremely gradually and required constant attention to building up the consistency of inhibiting and directing that was needed for facilitating the overall balanced working of the supportive function of my musculature in relation to gravity as the basis of every aspect of the hands-on work we were learning. It wasn't until about the middle of my third year that my conditions and manner of use of myself as a whole had improved enough for me to gain a constancy in my overall direction sufficient for working on

another person without the guidance of a teacher's hands. I don't think it took that long because I was a "slow learner" either. In fact, some trainees seemed to need even more hands-on work and daily practice at inhibiting and directing than I did. But from that point on it did feel that I was at last on my way to becoming a full-fledged beginning teacher. Eventually, during my last 12-week term I was allowed to work on other classmates without supervision, and the main senior teachers also recommended that I start teaching a few private pupils at the school outside of class time. So, by the time I received my teaching certificate in July of 1972, I had enough experience to return to the U.S. to begin a private teaching practice of my own, which I hoped to do in a major city while also pursuing a master's degree in music.

## 5 Teaching, 1972–2019

Before returning to the U.S. from training in London, I already had the inspiration to find a way to incorporate the experience and understanding of the Alexander Technique into a long-term involvement with other professional musicians – perhaps also extending it to include those involved in the other fine arts. My main sense of what the Technique could offer musicians was an atmosphere free from endgaining competitiveness so that focus could be fully on the pleasure of playing together and expressing music's essence to serious listeners. I knew this project might take a number of years to materialize, and it seemed that the best place for it to happen would be a major city that already had a high level of artistic life. I also hoped that this environment would provide me with the opportunity to pursue a master's degree in music that included further flute study, so I chose Boston because of a flute teacher there whom I'd heard very good things about and had hoped to study with before I had to enlist in the Army. I had also visited there a number of times to have Alexander lessons and had performed there while I was touring with the Army band, so the city was fairly familiar to me by then too.

Also, a former classmate on the London Alexander training course had spent several months in Boston teaching the Technique as a guest at the New England Conservatory of Music where his work was enthusiastically received. What he told me about that experience reinforced my sense that there could be a lot of interest in having a musician-Alexander teacher in the city on a long-term basis.

Boston had the added attraction of being the home of Frank Pierce Jones, one of the few Americans who had trained with Alexander himself and his brother, A. R. Alexander. Dr Jones<sup>53</sup> was also conducting research on the Alexander Technique in the psychology department at Tufts University, and I thought it could be valuable to become more acquainted with the work being done there too. As I mentioned earlier, I had met and had lessons with him prior to training in London, and when I told him I was considering coming to Boston, he encouraged me to do so and it was heartening to me for him to offer his support in helping me get started with my teaching practice by bringing me to a lecture he was scheduled to give to musicians at the New England Conservatory.

Soon after I arrived, I was given introductions to several music teachers who already had some experience of the Technique, and they

were helpful in setting up demonstrations for fellow faculty members as well as recommending their students to come for lessons. Within a few months I had a fairly full teaching practice of enthusiastic music students, professional performers, performing arts faculty members – as well as people from other professions and walks of life.

The late 1960s and early 1970s had seen the rise of various sensory awareness disciplines and meditational practices that seemed to me to perpetuate the dichotomy between “mind” and “body” that the Alexander Technique seeks to dispel in how we experience ourselves from moment to moment. Because of this view, one of the main points that occurred to me soon after I began full-time teaching was that my students were essentially hindered in their learning about their use of themselves *as a whole* because of their use of those nouns “mind” and “body.” So I decided that I should *never* use those terms in teaching or writing about the Technique – nor should I allow my students to do so in my conversations with them. Eventually, I discovered that if we excluded those nouns it didn’t hamper our communication in any way and that an alternate and more effective vocabulary could easily be substituted to reinforce the experience of psychophysical unity that the Alexander Technique fosters. I found that if we merely stuck to the gerund and verb forms “thinking, moving, feeling, perceiving, conceiving,” etc., they would serve just fine in paving the way for my students to foster an experience and conception of wholeness from moment to moment in “reaction to the stimulus of living.”<sup>54</sup> For example, saying “I thought in my mind that . . .” could be more realistically and effectively expressed as “I was thinking about such-and-such a subject.” Or the words “My body feels tired today” could be just as adequately and more accurately expressed as “I feel tired today.”

Since my undergraduate degree was in music education, I’d been required to take numerous courses in general education too, so I already had a keen interest in building up the best understanding of what constitutes effective teaching and learning. As I began to give Alexander lessons, I found myself doing a good deal of further reading on the subject – such as the educational writings of John Dewey (who had studied the Alexander Technique), John Holt, and others.<sup>55</sup>

#### GROCERY SHOPPING

During my first summer of teaching in Boston (1973), I had another experience that further illustrates the possibility that the Technique offers us for drawing upon our overall integration as a source of strength that people usually believe needs to come from developing specific areas of

muscular power – for instance, in the arms or legs. This happened when my former Army bandmate who had been so enthusiastic about the Technique came to Boston for an introductory series of lessons while he was on summer break from his orchestral job.

He had taken an apartment in the same townhouse where I was living, and I began giving him lessons nearly every day. But not long after we started working together, we decided to go out for dinner at a restaurant that was about a twenty-minute walk through town. After we finished eating we decided to stop at a supermarket near the restaurant to get some groceries. We had each bought a full bag of them and as we came out to the street my bandmate asked how I thought we should get back to our apartments. When I said that I was planning to walk – especially since it was such a nice evening – he looked quite surprised and said that if he walked all the way back carrying his full bag of groceries his arms would be killing him by the time we got there; and remember here that he was the same muscular, athletic bandmate who had been on his school wrestling team.

So I said, “Then let me take your bag. I can carry both of ours.” He rather skeptically gave me his bag, and then we walked all the way home as I easily carried both bags without getting fatigued at all; also remember here that I’d never been very athletic, nor did I have anything like the muscular development in my arms that my bandmate had. He was astonished at how I could have done this, but for me it was obvious, of course, that I could only do it because I was using my *entire* musculature as a whole in a lengthening way to support the weight of the groceries – particularly allowing my arms to work as extensions of the power of my whole back, torso, and legs each step of the way. Of course, my ability to do this was entirely due to my intensive Alexander teacher training that gradually reorganized my overall coordination as my primary source of power *without* focusing on developing strength in any particular muscular area – except, perhaps, my back *as a whole*.

## SECOND YEAR 1973–1974

By the summer of 1973 I had become better acquainted with Frank Jones by having occasional hands-on work from him and by meeting with him and his wife, Helen,<sup>56</sup> socially. She had partially trained with the Alexander brothers and was equally enthusiastic about the Technique, so the three of us had many fascinating and inspiring conversations – mainly centered around what it might take to bring the training of teachers in the Alexander Technique into a university curriculum one day as part of

a degree program. When I began to consider various options for earning my master's degree, I discussed the prospects with them and, with their strong encouragement, I eventually decided on enrolling at Tufts where I could pursue a combined degree program in music and psychology. This particular program would allow me both to do research into the effects of the Technique on musical performance<sup>57</sup> and to study flute with Fernand Gillet, a retired and ingenious oboist from the symphony (he was in his mid-90s at the time)<sup>58</sup> whom another Army bandmate had introduced me to. The next two years brought many valuable experiences in exploring aspects of the Technique from a scientific point of view as well as many revelations that consolidated my flute playing in a way that was very much in keeping with the principles of the Alexander Technique. This was because the woodwind teacher had developed an approach to working on music that was based on giving yourself more time *just before* a difficult or demanding note (Alexander's "critical moment")<sup>59</sup> so that you can have a better chance to "project" the most accurate "messages" to fingers, breath, lips, and tongue that will ensure the passage's best outcome when you ultimately play it as it was originally written.

As I worked on my degree and its thesis research project over the next two years and played several concerts with faculty members, my Alexander teaching practice continued to grow and thrive, and after I finished my two-year course of studies it was easy to decide to stay on in Boston to see if the ideas I had for a musical and Alexander collaborative would eventually begin to materialize. I had already met and made friends with numerous local "kindred spirits," and when I spoke with them of my vision they were intrigued and enthusiastic about the prospects it held – especially since there were so many musicians who knew each other well from playing and performing chamber music together, which had also become my favorite musical genre.

Over the course of those first years of teaching, I had also begun to explore the possibilities of teaching in conjunction with several music schools and theatre companies. This seemed a logical next step in promoting more recognition and acceptance of the Technique in the performing arts in the U.S. since it was already being fully incorporated into the leading music and drama schools in Great Britain.

Even though I had invitations to teach at some music departments and a theatre festival, I eventually decided that it would be best for me to work on my own to build the kind of arts collaborative that I still only vaguely envisioned. As I moved forward basically in collaboration with my own friends and enthusiastic students, this path eventually led to bring-

ing people together for various house concerts, short Alexander courses for musicians, and workshops for regular students that I gave with visiting Alexander colleagues. All these activities coincided and overlapped with my starting a training course for Alexander teachers in 1978 that lasted for ten years.



## 6 Introducing the Alexander Technique:

### The First Three Private Lessons

During my early years of teaching the Alexander Technique I developed an approach to presenting its main features in each student's first three private lessons that may be somewhat different from the introductory lessons other teachers give. Since I've pretty much followed this procedure up to now, I'd like to describe what I do in each of these lessons in case the ideas they include might be of some interest to readers. I should also add that I never introduce the Technique to more than one person at a time, but I'll be using the plural "students" here, along with the pronouns "them," "they," and "their" to avoid the more cumbersome "he or she" and "his or hers." After students have had a substantial number of private lessons, I've sometimes offered them the opportunity to have work in a small group of similarly experienced students – especially so that they can have the chance to consider how to best manage their manner of use while interacting with others in a social situation. Other teachers have sometimes also joined me in offering these classes.

#### FIRST INTRODUCTORY LESSON

When students arrange to come for their first lesson I ask them to allow for us to take at least an hour and a half so that we'll have plenty of time to cover all that's needed without any pressure to rush the process. Then, for each following lesson, I usually ask them to allow for a full hour, even though Alexander lessons have traditionally been given for only half an hour. I find that trying to fit a lesson into half an hour makes me feel pressed to produce results so quickly that it keeps me from doing the most effective work I'm capable of – especially if students have some serious condition they have come for help with. If they were coming four or five times a week, as I did for my first lessons and as people often did for their initial private lessons with Alexander or his assistants, we might not need a full hour. But most of the people I've taught haven't been able to afford lessons so frequently, nor have they usually had enough free time to come more than once a week.

Instead of immediately doing hands-on work with students as I think many teachers tend to, I prefer to have us first sit across from each other for a while so they can tell me in detail why they've come for lessons and what they hope to learn or receive from the Technique – even if they've

had some previous exposure to it – and so that I can eventually begin working with them with my hands right from where they’re seated. Usually, most people have some condition or difficulty that they are looking for help with – often after trying various disciplines or therapies – but some have simply heard that the Technique is a “good thing” that might be useful for improving their lives or professional skills in a general way. However, if they’re also intending to pursue a method for improvement that I feel is in conflict with the Technique, I usually ask them after the lesson to complete their work with that approach first so that they’ll be able to know for sure which results are produced by each method and so that we can avoid as much as possible having to deal with any conflicting effects or concepts involved in the other approaches.

One example of a conflict that I’ve encountered numerous times is with students who have thought that having a massage just before they come for their Alexander lesson would help them to be more receptive to what the hands-on work in the Technique is attempting to cultivate. It’s always clear, though, that the massage work has brought them into a limp or “collapsed” state that makes it far more difficult to elicit the balanced, overall lengthening flow of direction that we’re cultivating with the Technique than it would have been to “convert” into a balanced lengthening in stature the conditions that were part of the tensional patterns that were present before they had the massage work. This situation makes it even clearer that some people’s idea of “being relaxed” or “comfortable” – particularly when they’re lying down – is equated with a muscular state that’s essentially a sinking *down* onto the surface beneath them – a “collapse” – instead of a balanced upward flow of energy in relation to all the surfaces they’re in contact with.

Also, if students intend to continue activities that foster interfering patterns of tension, it especially hampers the Technique’s potential to re-educate and improve their manner and conditions of use so that they can progress beyond any specific problems they have come to seek help with. In many instances, it may be important for a person to stop the problematic activities for a while until an improved use of the self as whole is built up as a new standard to live and work by. This is often the best way to proceed in the long run, but some people feel they must continue with these demanding activities no matter what – particularly if their profession requires that they do. Often, though, they don’t succeed in making a long-lasting overall change until after they’ve finally had to stop these stressful activities because their debility has become so extreme that they simply can’t avoid experiencing a great deal of discomfort, pain, or even

complete loss of control whenever they engage in the actions that evoke the underlying tensional imbalances.

Whatever people's motivation may be for coming to find out what the Technique has to offer, I find that this initial conversational time is very important for establishing a rapport with them that can help them be more open to receiving what I'll eventually be communicating in the hands-on aspect of the lesson. Then, after they've given me a fairly complete idea of what they may be looking for from the Technique, I make sure to state right off that it's primarily an *educational* method – even though it can have many physiotherapeutic and psychotherapeutic benefits. I go on to say that it involves two main aspects: the first is what we can communicate to them with our words and help them experience with our hands-on work as we bring about more and more of an integrated working of their musculature in relation to gravity's pull; and the second aspect is what they can learn to use on their own in every facet of their lives as well as applying a particular way of “working on themselves” for maintaining and improving upon what they receive in lessons.

Then I say that the main ability the Technique is dealing with is our power to influence the quality of tonus in our muscular, ligamentous, tendinous structures *solely* through our thinking, our intention, or our imagination alone – particularly *without* making any movements to bring about a change or improvement – even though it's very likely that the functioning of other soft tissue structures will be affected indirectly by this influence too. [Note: from this point on I'll be using the terms “muscular” and “musculature” to refer to all muscular, ligamentous, tendinous aspects.] To demonstrate this aspect of intention, I ask students to rest their hands on their lap as they're sitting opposite me and simply be aware that their right-hand index finger – *without* their looking at it, and especially *without their moving it in any way at all* – is *already* pointing in a certain direction through space while it's merely resting quietly there on their lap. Then I ask them *only* to think of, intend for, or imagine that finger pointing *more* in the same direction it's already pointing – but still *without moving it in any way at all* in space.

When I see that they've followed my instructions and haven't moved their finger in space, I say that I think they should probably notice that it has at least become a little more energized or vibrant than it was when it was merely resting there before they gave any attention to it or sent any “messages” to it. They usually agree that this change in their finger's texture has happened, so I say to them that, if they choose to, they can also go on intending for their finger to point *more* in that same direction it's

already pointing while we continue talking. I also add that as their attention becomes more focused on our conversation, that enlivened or lengthened quality in the finger will probably fade.

At this point I emphasize that this particular use of our thinking, intention, or imagination is the main ability that the Technique is attempting to draw upon and cultivate. But I also add that this ability isn't used in the Technique for affecting a specific part in isolation; it's used for affecting the *whole* of ourselves in relation to gravity's pull so that we can have the most balanced functioning, superlative freedom, and a refined control in managing ourselves both when we're moving through space and when we're still. In Alexander teaching we call this use of our imagination "directing." It's akin to what some researchers call "kinesthetic imagination," which is involved in imagining the sensation of making a movement through space without actually moving. However, the realm of imagination involved in Alexander directing has more to do with influencing the basic state of muscle and other soft tissue tonus – which can range anywhere from being collapsed to extremely rigid or to being vibrantly elastic and invigorated – in relation to all the surfaces we are touching from moment to moment whether we are still or in motion. It's not about "making movements" even though some degree of movement may take place as a tightness transforms into a balanced texture as part of directing ourselves as a whole.

Some procedures for rehabilitating stroke patients and those recovering from accidents, as well as research into procedures to enhance the use of prostheses and exoskeletons, have used the terms "kinesthetic imagination" and "visual imagination" to represent the difference between imagining the sensation of making a movement and imagining what a movement looks like even if a person can't actually make the movement by ordinary means. However, neither of those terms seems accurate for representing the function of our imagination that we call "directing," which may also involve a visual imagination component and a proprioceptive or interoceptive imagination component that has more to do with the quality of feeling of muscle tone we experience when we're still rather than with the quality of feeling when we make a motion through space.

I think most approaches to teaching the Technique avoid using the word "imagining" to describe the process of directing – or what Alexander described as "projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms"<sup>60</sup> – and some have called the process "thinking in activity"<sup>61</sup> or simply "thinking" as distinct from "doing." Some have also said that directing actually produces subtle movements that evoke the desired result in the

supportive action of our muscles in relation to gravity's pull. Yet while it's true that some slight movement may occur as a consequence of our directing when there's been a certain degree of "holding" or "tightness" going on in our musculature, after that change from shortening to lengthening occurs – or even when there is an enlivening of flaccid muscle tonus – there remains the matter of how this change is *maintained* in conjunction with the ongoing, overall, general directing of the self as a whole. Continued directing is still needed for incorporating and sustaining the result of the change, but this continual directing is not a repeating of movements; it's the maintaining of an overall, ongoing state of being in relation to gravity's pull whether we're in motion or being still.

Next I explain that our ability to direct ourselves in an integrated way in relation to gravity is also often governed by how we habitually respond to life's various stimuli – particularly to sudden stimuli that set off some degree of tension resembling what we see in the startle pattern. Then I ask students if they are familiar with the pattern. Most of them say they aren't, but even if they do know about it, I still like to show them photos from the research study<sup>62</sup> that captured what happens in someone just before and immediately after a sudden and unexpected slamming of a door. As I hand them the pictures of the experiment, I also point out that the corresponding electromyograph readings immediately below show not just that the subject immediately "tensed up" but that the tensing happened in a *pattern* that quickly involved the musculature at the juncture of the base of the back of the head and the upper spine and passed down the trunk and limbs in a fraction of a second. I also add that when the same experiment was performed with a milder surprise stimulus – like the dropping of a pencil – the response only appeared in that region between the base of the head and top of the spine but nowhere else. To further illustrate the point, I describe the slow-motion film study of a number of people reacting, one after another, to a surprise gunshot. I emphasize how it's striking to see in the film that all the people respond in exactly the same way by suddenly distorting the relation between their head and spine and by generally shortening and narrowing their entire stature. I sometimes like to add that it would be interesting to see the results of the same experiments done with subjects who have had different degrees of experience in the Alexander Technique – particularly to find out if there's a difference in degree of tensional response from person to person or in the length of time it takes for them to return to a more balanced functioning of their head-torso-limb relationship.<sup>63</sup>

Usually, students are quite surprised and impressed to see these photo examples, and I go on to tell them that some version of this kind of obstructive tensional response pattern between the head and spine is often occurring in most people during many of their activities from moment to moment – especially if they are under a lot of stress, are in a great hurry, or are trying extremely hard to accomplish some task. Then I say that even simple, everyday actions – such as speaking – also often contain some aspect of this distorting element in the relation of their head to their spine and that this interference can be at the root of many difficulties and disorders, whether these difficulties may be classified as “physical,” “mental,” or “emotional” in nature. Sometimes merely imagining or thinking about a troubling event or a complex topic can hamper an integrated flow in the supportive function of our musculature.

This initial part of the lesson usually takes about fifteen or twenty minutes, and by this point students seem a good deal more intrigued to find out what I’ll present to them next. Then I say that I’d like to have them try an experiment that can help them explore what sometimes happens in their head-spine relationship when they start to move. To begin, I say that I’d like to come over to them in a moment and see if they can merely *allow* me either to turn their head or nod it slowly with my hands while they go on quietly sitting there. When they agree (I’ve never had anyone say they won’t let me do this), I make sure to tell them that I’ll only use a very light contact at their head and chin, and I make sure to add that this exploration won’t be the Alexander Technique yet. Then, after I’ve gently and slowly turned their head and nodded it a few times with one hand at the base of the back of their head and top of their spine and the other hand under their jaw and chin, I take my hands off, step around where they can see me face to face again, and point out that their allowing me to do this turning and nodding *for* them is an example of their conscious ability to leave that juncture of their head and spine free from constriction. Of course, there’s obviously some degree of supportive muscular activity operating in them that keeps their head and torso from collapsing or falling – for instance, as can happen when we “nod off” to sleep for a few moments while sitting upright at a lecture or while watching a television program.

Next, as I’m still standing a few feet away from students, I say that I’d like to come over to them again and try the same experiment of turning or nodding their head once more, but this time I’d like them simply to *decide* that they *won’t* allow me to turn or nod it for them – adding that I’ll still only be using those same, gentle contacts at their head and chin that I just used in our first experiment. They agree again to let me do this, and

without fail they don't allow me to turn their head or nod it – *just because they've changed their intention* – and *not* because they've decided to create any particular muscular effort to resist my attempts to move their head. (I don't think an onlooker could actually see any difference in the student's head carriage while they're "refusing" to let me turn or nod it because the student's "holding" is usually so slight that it's not visible to the naked eye. Then I say to them that within that subtle distinction between "allowing" and "not allowing" the turning and nodding of their head lies the most essential function that the Alexander Technique is based upon. I go on to emphasize that *leaving out* any unnecessary extra tension that would impede that coordination between head and spine is of paramount importance to what we'll be exploring from then on about their use of themselves as an integrated psychophysical whole in all aspects of living.

*In the second lesson, as I'll describe in the next section, I draw views for students of our first two vertebrae and explain how they function in relation to each other and in relation to the base of our skull for allowing the turning and nodding motions of our head in relation to our spine. And I make sure to emphasize that these top two joints surround the juncture between our spinal cord and our brain stem and that this juncture lies more forward than most people think – more behind our nose and throat and in between our ears rather than at the back of our skull. Therefore, it's obviously critical that that this region not be impeded by any restrictive tension that might affect neural activity going to and from our brain.*

Continuing on with this first lesson while students are still seated, I ask them next to try another experiment that's still not the Alexander Technique but further paving the way to it. This involves asking them to consider standing up in a few moments while I leave my hand lightly in contact with the base of the back of their head and top of their spine so that they can be more aware of what may or may not happen in the relation of my hand and their head and upper spine before, during, and after standing up. When they've agreed for us to do this together and I've placed my hand lightly near the juncture of their head and spine, I ask them to go ahead and stand up. Inevitably, almost everyone presses their head back and down into my hand and onto their spine, and they usually notice this pressure right away – particularly because we'd just spent time focusing on the differences in tension that can occur in that upper-spine region. However, some people seem to believe that I've merely pressed my hand harder into the back of their head even though I haven't changed



the quality or strength of my contact at all. This mistaken impression is a fairly good example of Alexander's concept of "subconscious guidance and control"<sup>64</sup> that often occurs when we're creating some form of tension or making some response that we're not aware of until someone draws our attention to it or until our self-perception has improved enough for us to catch the beginning of the response that usually starts to happen as soon as we begin thinking of making it.

Then, while the student is still standing in front of the chair, I ask them to think of performing the same experiment in a moment by sitting back down again while I go on keeping my hand gently at the base of the back of their head and top of their spine. Just as they did with standing up, they usually press their head back and down again into my hand as soon as they start to move toward sitting – often, I think, because they subconsciously feel they should continue looking forward into the room along the same trajectory they're looking when they're standing fully upright. Then I make sure to say that it's not a "correct position" of the head we're looking for but a particular *way of directing* our head in relation to our spine. Of course, it should ultimately be possible to continue looking ahead without creating that extra tightening at the base of the back of the head and top of the spine. However, for the moment, it's enough for the students just to realize that this automatic pulling back and down of the head is habitual and unnecessary in the basic process of sitting down. By this time I think students have begun to understand that there's a general tendency to create excessive tension in their head-spine relationship that they had no idea they were making in this simple everyday action – and probably in a lot of other activities as well.

Finally, I say that we're ready to consider these same head-spine dynamics from the perspective of our overall relation to gravity and that I'd like to begin using my hands on them in the specifically Alexander way to demonstrate what a teacher's hands-on "directing" is attempting to cultivate. So I place my hands lightly in an upwardly directed way on their upper back and on the front of their upper chest spanning their collar-bones, and I say to them that this is basically what the general upward direction feels like that we're going to be cultivating. They usually seem to perceive that contact as a fairly positive one, even though it's very light. Then, to make a clear contrast, I merely *stop* giving them the upward-flowing direction of my whole self through my hands by slightly lessening my own overall upward flow in relation to gravity – especially without doing anything to actively press down upon them. Then I say that this "lower" – or more downward – condition is where they and most others



are usually functioning much of the time to a greater or lesser degree in relation to gravity's pull. But then I quickly resume giving them the upward-flowing direction, and I say that this, of course, is the main source of using our hand contacts that can impart an overall, integrated psychophysical experience. At this point students usually acknowledge the clear difference between the upward-flowing and downward-settling quality of direction that my hands have just given them – even though the underlying differences in my overall direction of myself probably wouldn't be visible to an onlooker since these changes aren't a result of my making any type of overt motion through space.

After demonstrating this distinction between “being more up” and “not being more up” in relation to gravity, I say that I'd like to continue with this same experimental approach and see if students can allow me to move them into standing by using that upward-flowing contact to guide them in a different way from when they stood up of their own accord a few minutes earlier. Before I go on to attempt to guide them into standing though, I place my hand again at the back of their head and upper spine and ask them to press their head back lightly into my hand so that they can feel what I'd like them to try to avoid when I finally guide them toward standing. I also tell them that I don't want them to help me at all by using any effort in their legs to propel themselves up into standing. To demonstrate what I'm asking them *not* to do with their legs, I place one hand lightly at the inside of their knee and ask them to press that knee gently into my hand so that they can see that this is the kind of tensing in the legs that people usually do to help in getting up. I also say that I hope they can be sure to leave out any of that particular extra leg effort too as they leave the effort to make the movement to me.

At this point, I think most students usually start to think it would be impossible for me to move them into standing without their making any of their customary muscular efforts to help me. To ward off that tendency, I ask them not to be concerned about *doing* anything to accomplish the action themselves and not to worry if I'm not able to move them into standing, because, if I fail, it will be *my* problem, not theirs. Nevertheless, I can usually feel with my hands – and even see with my eyes – if they are “getting ready to help me” (especially with their legs) when I begin to move their head and torso forward at their hip joints. Even merely inclining them an inch or so forward at the hip joints often causes them to start engaging their habitual “preparation-for-standing” muscular activity, which can also include drawing their feet farther back underneath them. If I perceive any of these preparations happening, I immediately stop

attempting to move them forward and remind them again that I don't want them to *help* in any way. Of course, this is when they often say that they can't see how it's possible for them to stand up without *doing* something themselves to make the movement happen (to achieve the goal, or "gain the end" of standing upright). This endgaining, goal-oriented activity, of course, is the crux of what Alexander chair work is devised to expose as a paradigm of what we can learn how to set aside or keep at bay so that we may be able to develop our ability to make the most appropriate and effective choices in all we do and think.

Most of the time – if I've communicated successfully enough with students so far – they can ultimately allow me to move them into standing, and I can give them an experience of moving in an entirely different and more integrated way than what they are habitually used to. But at the same time, I also hope to give them the overall sense of a general upward flow of energy that I'm constantly maintaining with my hands in contact with them – especially as I continue to do so after they've arrived at standing fully upright. At this point we're well on our way toward their having a more complete experience of what the hands-on element of the Technique can do in terms of influencing their entire state of being from moment to moment – not just the way they stand up or sit down, but the way they function in every aspect of living.

As I continue to reinforce their lengthening in stature with my hands while they're still standing in front of the chair, I next ask them only to *consider* the possibility of sitting back down again in a few moments. Then I also say that I want them especially to watch again not to press their head back into my hand or let themselves "drop" in any way toward the seat of the chair as I move them. I also make sure that the front edge of the chair is slightly touching the backs of their lower legs so that they can be confident that it's right behind them to arrive upon safely. Then I ask them to see if they can go on leaving that area at the base of their head and the top of their spine free of any extra effort while they allow me to guide them toward the seat of the chair. I emphasize that I want them to continue to remain concerned with maintaining an upward flow from the contacts of their feet on the floor rather than focusing on going downward toward the chair and arriving at being seated on it (gaining the end, or arriving at the destination). I go ahead and guide them into sitting, and I hope this experience can be the beginning of their learning that what we're focusing on is not about "accomplishing the action" but about managing the "critical moment"<sup>65</sup> *before* we act so that we can make the most balanced and appropriate choice in how we respond – even if

it means not responding at all when that seems the best choice for the moment while we go on maintaining our upward flow of lengthening as a constant, positive way of being.

At this point, I step away and face the student again and say that this “chair work” is one part of what we do in an Alexander lesson, and the other part involves working with them while they’re lying down on the long, firm table across the room. I explain that, while we’re working there, we can see if we can bring about even more improvement and integration in the functioning of their musculature in relation to gravity because they won’t have to contend with the act of balancing as they do when they’re sitting or standing. Then I guide them into lying down on the table on their back with their head resting on several thin books (the height of which depends upon how much long-term tightness – “conditions of use” – there is in the musculature connecting the front of their torso with their head). I also place the soles of their feet on the table so that their legs are bent at the knees and balanced as well as possible to avoid any “pulling” on their lower spine by the muscles – particularly the psoas – that run from their upper legs through their pelvis and attach to the lower vertebrae. I also say that I especially don’t want them to think of the work we’re doing on the table as an opportunity to “relax” because when most people engage in what they understand as relaxing, it usually means that they “collapse” in their musculature in a way that works against the overall, equalized upward lengthening flow we’re attempting to foster. I mention this to emphasize that gravity doesn’t stop exerting its pull upon us just because we’re lying down. As soon as I guide them into lying down on the table I also like to ask them to see if they can be as still as possible – without trying to *hold* themselves still by making any specific tensions. I also say that in Alexander lessons we call this state of being “leaving yourself alone,” which eventually can be experienced as the basis of a profound freedom – not just muscularly, but intellectually and emotionally as well, since lessons in the Technique aim to show how these aspects don’t really exist as separate functions. Then I go on to work around them several times for fifteen or twenty minutes with my hands in the way that’s usually done in traditional table work through directing their head, spine, shoulders, arms, back, and legs. And while I’m doing this. I ask them to think of maintaining several basic directions by saying aloud for them: “for the direction to flow forward into my face and up into the top of my head . . . to lead my whole spine to lengthen up out of my tail bone and sitting bones . . . so that my whole back can lengthen and widen,

and my knees can flow forward and up to the ceiling so that my whole stature can lengthen out of the contact of my feet on the table.”

While I’m working with students on the table, I also say that a part of what we’re doing there is attempting to bring them as close as possible to standing in a balanced way while they remain lying down. To emphasize this point I like to add that it would be especially useful if we had a platform attached at right angles to the foot-end of the table that would be broad enough for the bottoms of their feet to rest against if they were lying with their legs fully extended. Then, if the entire table top could be motorized so that when we were ready to have them go from lying down to standing up again, the table top could very slowly move from being parallel to the floor to being at right angles to it. This way they could experience the smoothest and most gradual transition from the table supporting their head, torso, and limbs over to the platform supporting them when they arrive at fullest standing. This could be accomplished without them having to make any specific sudden muscular efforts that might detract from the more equalized, overall distribution of support in relation to gravity that we’d achieved while they were lying in this “constructive rest position,” as it’s sometimes called. (As far as I know, no one has constructed a table that can make this slow change-over from lying to standing.)

At the end of the table work, I bring students up into sitting at the left side of the table by guiding them with my right hand at the back of their head and my left hand at the side of their right knee. Then I have them remain sitting there for a few moments while I go on directing them with my hands to reaffirm their focus on lengthening in stature from the contact of their sitting bones on the table before I go on to guide them into standing on the floor by turning them slightly to their right so that they can touch the floor with their left foot first. After they’re standing with both feet fully on the floor while I’m still standing behind them, I guide them with my hands at the sides of their ribcage to walk back out to the middle of the room until they’re standing in front of a level chair or stool that I usually use in teaching. There we can see if the table work has made any difference in how they experience being moved by me again from standing to sitting and from sitting to standing – mainly by using that same contact at the base of the back of their head and top of their spine. Inevitably, the chair work is markedly easier and smoother for them than before we did the table work. By this time I’ve gotten to know with my hands more specifically what their manner and conditions of use may need in terms of careful guidance, and I can often add still more to their total lengthening in stature in a significant enough way to help them experience a more

pronounced overall change in themselves – both during these movements to and from the chair as well as while they're sitting or standing still.

Usually, while I'm moving them into sitting, I repeat to them "You're still standing. You're still standing. You're still standing." All this time, I'm moving them toward sitting on the chair by mainly guiding them through space while encouraging them to bend only at the hip, knee, and ankle joints so that they can avoid any loss of lengthening in their spine and torso. Then even after they're actually touching the chair with their sitting bones, I go on saying "You're still standing. You're still standing." so that they won't be tempted to "give up" that overall standing lengthening just because the chair is there to take the weight of their torso, arms, and head. And when it seems like they understand that they don't need to sink into the surface of the chair, I finally say, "Now you're sitting." This tactic seems to help them continue directing their overall upward flow in relation to gravity in a way that they aren't used to doing when they've actually arrived at the seat of a chair. I think this strong tendency to "disconnect" our legs and feet from the use of our torso, head, and arms is also fostered a lot by contemporary furniture that's designed to slope backward and downward and often has soft cushioning that invites a sinking ("relaxing," or collapsing) of the torso and spine. (In my teaching room, I only use chairs and stools that have firm, level seats so that there's the least tendency to lean backward while sitting on them.)

At this point, I step away to face students and say that all we've just done with table and chair work is basically what we do in a regular Alexander lesson and that they are welcome to go away and think about whether or not they would like to take a course of lessons – which usually includes from thirty to forty to get a good start. Of course, I also say that we may spend some time in lessons applying the Technique to specific tasks – for instance, to speaking and reading, or to how they may play an instrument or sing if they are a musician, or to how they manage any other activity that they find demanding or tiring. I also add that in the second lesson I'll introduce them to a specific procedure that they can use for working on their own to maintain and improve upon what they gain in the lessons.

*Even though this first-lesson procedure may be somewhat different from what most traditionally trained teachers usually do in presenting the Technique, I feel that it has proved so effective over my years of teaching that I don't think I would ever want to revert to an immediate hands-on approach where the student is asked right away to stand in front of a chair and be guided in and out of it. Another point I'd like to make here is that*

*when traditional approaches to giving lessons use what is sometimes called “reflex standing” and “reflex sitting”—as you see Alexander himself using in the film of him working with some people who studied with him<sup>66</sup>—I think this maneuver can often tempt students to “brace” in their legs in a way that prevents them from accessing their most balanced lengthening in stature when they’re on their own. So I’ve chosen to leave that approach until later in my students’ lessons if it seems that they can benefit from it then.*

*I should also add that these introductory procedures I’m describing—along with many other aspects of my teaching and training of teachers—were greatly influenced by my earlier studies in philosophy of education and psychology that were required for my degree in music education. These perspectives were also validated for me many times over during the many private music lessons that I had prior to and after beginning my study of the Alexander Technique. Most of my views on education, psychology, and artistic creation were also later reinforced by key writings of John Dewey, John Holt, Carl Jung, Piero Ferrucci, and Susanne Langer, along with experiencing the innovative approach to early music education taught by Paul Knill and Mariagnese Cattaneo at Tufts University in the early 1970s, whose work I refer in detail in Chapter 13 on dealing with stress in performance.*

## SECOND INTRODUCTORY LESSON

In the second private lesson I focus mainly on giving students a fuller experience of maintaining an overall and equalized lengthening flow of direction from moment to moment. There I confine our time to chair and table work in a more or less continual hands-on way for the entire hour—except for taking time to present some drawings of several anatomical points that I think are useful for everyone to know as a basis for learning an improved use of themselves as a whole.

I make sure to say soon after we start that what we’re basically cultivating is a quality of overall freedom and naturalness that includes a positive and unaggressive attitude to life in general, and that it involves what’s most free and natural and the least held, braced, or propped up and what’s most vulnerable to falling at any moment when we’re standing, walking, or running. I also emphasize that it’s definitely not a type of “posture training” or the learning of an “alignment” of parts that we’re intending to establish and maintain, which would tend to be interpreted as holding ourselves in some kind of “right position.” Instead of that I say

we're hoping to communicate a way of managing ourselves best in any position or situation – even if it's hanging by our knees from a trapeze, performing a concerto, or merely lying still and resting. Of course, there's also the element of discovering our best “mechanical advantage” (the engineering term that Alexander sometimes used for employing the best relationship of our parts)<sup>67</sup> for any activity that requires us to remain fairly stationary for an extended period of time so that even fairly confined neuro-muscular configurations can be managed in the service of greatest freedom and poise. At every moment that I'm working with students while they're sitting and standing, I'm constantly assessing with my hands – as a basic requirement of freedom and naturalness – their availability to be moved by me ever so slightly and gently at all their main joints. If there is any bracing or “locking” going on in them anywhere – like holding themselves in some sort of “right posture” – then whatever else I may need to do with my hands doesn't have as good a chance to be fully effective in improving their overall, integrated lengthening.

I also like to mention that, for instance, if the students were actors playing the part of a shriveled-up old person in a play or film, a refined use of themselves as a whole should help them manifest their characters' twistedness more effectively than if they were hindered by various tensional habits or accumulated tightnesses that they may have carried around within them for a long time as part of their own attitude to life. Likewise, their ability to “project” the character's essence to an audience through their entire being from moment to moment should be even more effective because they've acquired this refined skill of directing their musculature by means of their imagination alone rather than relying upon manipulating various parts of themselves into the “shape” of what they think the character should look like “on the surface” at any given moment. (In the acting profession, I think this more superficial approach to character portrayal is sometimes called “mugging.”)

After I've covered these points while doing chair work, I take time to draw on a blackboard some views of the skull, the first two vertebrae of the spine (atlas and axis) and show their relation to the juncture of the spinal cord and brain stem for illustrating how closely related these skeletal and neural parts are to each other and to show why it may be crucial to manage this region in the best possible way from moment to moment. (I had intended to create my own drawings of each of these anatomical aspects to illustrate these next paragraphs, but I've had to abandon that idea because of difficulties with my vision. However, it's easy to find many



professional illustrations and detailed descriptions of these anatomical features on the internet.)

First, I draw a view of the bottom of the skull to show its central, rounded opening (foramen magnum) that lies just below the juncture of the spinal cord and the brain stem. On either side of this opening I add the outlines of the two convex oval shapes (occipital condyles) that exactly mirror the two concave oval surfaces directly below these condyles on the tops of both sides of the circular first (atlas) vertebra to comprise what's called the atlanto-occipital (spine-head) joint.

Then I draw a view of this first vertebra (the atlas) from above to show that it's basically a ring-shaped bone with two concave ovoid surfaces on either side of its central, circular opening, which makes it distinctly different in shape from all the other vertebrae that basically have a central and cylindrical-shaped body. I also draw a side view of this atlanto-occipital joint to emphasize that it's constructed specifically to allow for the nodding of our head at the condyles as they relate to their mirror concave shapes on the atlas vertebra beneath them.

Next I draw a view of the first and second vertebrae (atlas and axis) together so that it shows how the "tooth" (the "dens" or odontoid process) at the front of the axis extends upward inside the front of the circular atlas to comprise the main joint for the right and left turning of our head in relation to the rest of our spine. I also point out on this drawing how far forward these joints lie in relation to the back of our head. (Many people think these joints are near the back of their skull, but they actually lie much farther forward near the region behind our nose and throat and in between our ears.)

Then I draw a side view of the skull, atlas, and axis to show how these two uppermost joints surround the spinal cord close to where it enters the foramen magnum (the opening at the base of the skull) and merges there with the brain stem to connect the brain with the rest of the nervous system. I also point out that this neural-skeletal relationship is often left out of many anatomical illustrations because they usually only show *either* the skeletal structures or the neural features, so it's easy to miss the very close connection between the atlanto-occipital joint and the brain stem. However, even if both the skeletal and the neural aspects are shown together, it's often hard to make out the close relation of the two because the skeleton is usually pictured minimally from a hard-to-decipher cross-sectional view.

I think that making these drawings for students right on the spot is more effective than if I merely showed them pre-printed examples to look



at with me or to study on their own. I hope my drawings of these features should make it even clearer – especially because I’m also explaining their nature and function at the same time – that if there is excessive tightness (interference) in this region between the base of our head and our upper vertebrae it may have a negative influence on many aspects of our health and behavior.

With all these points in mind, I also like to point out that the brain stem influences some important functions like the cardiovascular and respiratory systems and the reflexive actions of vomiting, swallowing, coughing, and sneezing. It also includes links from the cerebrum down to the spinal cord as well as links up into the brain, and it contains information about touch, pain, and temperature from the face and head. Motor commands for eye movement, chewing, and facial expressions originate there, and it affects tear production, hearing, and balance as well as eye movements and visual and auditory processing. The brain stem is also crucial to normal motor movement, and among its many other functions it carries information to and from those areas we associate with higher intelligence.<sup>68</sup>

I also add that, although I don’t know of any studies that examine the possible effects of excessive long-term tightness or frequent and habitual tensings around the junctures of these top two vertebrae and the base of the skull, it’s not hard to imagine that *any* interference in that region with the free flow of “information” between our brain and spinal cord is likely to have a detrimental (or distortional) effect. Therefore, it also seems logical to assume that keeping this occipital-atlanto-axial (head-upper spine) region as spacious and as equalized as possible can be of great importance from moment to moment. I emphasize, of course, that managing this head-spine dynamic superbly well is fundamental to Alexander’s claim that how we use ourselves as a whole affects all aspects of our functioning – including the ways we think, feel, move, breathe, speak, rest, digest, heal, etc. This quote from an article titled “Human Postural Control” seems to point toward that same perspective.

A very high amount of muscle spindles are found in the suboccipital area [just below the base of the skull]. The muscles in this area, in particular the suboccipital muscles are responsible for receiving and sending information to and from the central nervous system.<sup>69</sup>

I often say to students that it’s worth noting how many people seem to have largely relinquished their ability to nod their head from this juncture at the base of their skull and their top vertebra. Instead, they often nod

in a way that originates from lower down near the tops of their shoulders or even farther down in their torso. This kind of mis-placed action would seem to imply that there's a good amount of "locking," or interference – and probably long-term tightness – going on in that important uppermost head-spine region.

Coupled with what we explored in the first lesson about head-spine dynamics in relation to standing up and sitting down, I hope that by this time I've demonstrated fairly fully how important it is for us, as a starting point, to maintain as much spaciousness and freedom as we can in that juncture between our head and our top two vertebrae – just as it's also important to maintain the fullest freedom and spaciousness in all the other joints of our spine and everywhere else in our skeletal system that some degree of unimpeded motion is designed to take place.<sup>70</sup> I also like to add that it shouldn't require much expertise – if we know what we're looking for – to see that many people "interfere" with or distort their head-spine relationship in a lot of their activities and even as part of their basic attitude to life from moment to moment. As I mentioned above, it's often easy to detect these interferences especially when people are talking and using their head to emphasize their words. It seems that they somehow feel they're being more expressive or convincing in what they're saying when they constantly engage in these habitual head motions, but most of the time I don't think that's what they're actually accomplishing. I also like to point out that newscasters and people being interviewed on television make a good study in this regard. You can frequently see that many of them are making unnecessary repetitive motions or holding excessive tensions in other parts of themselves. It's also revealing to compare variations from culture to culture in this "self-expression" aspect of gesturing; what seems most obvious is the difference between those who are subconsciously and habitually making their gestures, whereas others gesture more consciously and deliberately to illustrate or emphasize a certain point or feeling at a particular moment but otherwise refrain from any head or limb gesturing at all when words, tone of voice, and facial expression alone are enough to convey their intention or understanding. Of course, I emphasize to students that I don't mean to imply that "holding our head (or arms and hands) still" is desirable either, and this point should become clearer later in the chapter on breathing and vocal production.

After making the drawings and going over these points, I take students over to the table to give them a session of hands-on work for most of the rest of the hour. As I'm working with them while they're lying down I also say aloud for them in a fairly continuous way the main directions

(sometimes called “orders”) that I’d like for them to think of or “project” from their imagination while I’m working on them. I’m hoping that this longer period of table work will give them an even deeper experience of functioning as a unity in relation to gravity than we were able to achieve in the first lesson that was filled with a more general explanation of how the Technique is taught.

While I’m working with students on the table, I usually say the orders for them in the following way as I’m directing them with my hands at the corresponding places, telling them that I want them just to listen to the words as I say them and not try to *do* anything to act upon them:

*Think of the direction flowing forward into your face (cheek bones, forehead, and jaw) and up into the top of your head. Think of your whole spine lengthening up out of your tailbone and sitting bones and as if breath can come in between all of your vertebrae. Think of space deep inside your (right or left) shoulder socket and for your (right or left) shoulder blade to slip apart from your spine. Think of your (right or left) collar-bone to drop back and away from your chest and breast-bone and for space and breath to come in between all your (right or left) ribs as they slip apart from your spine and breastbone. Think of your knees going forward and up to the ceiling (or sky). Think of space deep inside your (right or left) hip joint. Think of a lengthening from your (right or left) hip to your (right or left) kneecap and from your (right or left) heel to your (right or left) kneecap. Think of your (right or left) heel to lengthen out from your head and spine toward the wall at the end of the table as I lift and support your (right or left) leg and lower it out toward the wall and bring it back into place again with your knee bent.*

Finally, I get students up from the table and guide them around to a stool at the center of the room so that I can work with them again while they’re standing and sitting. As we’re doing this work at the stool, it’s usually evident that the more extensive table work we’ve just done has added a good deal to their ability also to understand that in doing the chair work we’re not really interested just in how they get in and out of chairs, but rather that we’re using the chair work as a paradigm for managing *all* of life’s stimuli and responses; or as Alexander described it: improving our “reaction to the stimulus of living,”<sup>71</sup> – the most fundamental of which is our reaction to gravity’s constant downward pull.

Finishing up, I say to students that we’ll mainly devote the next lesson to going over a detailed procedure for working on themselves on their

own. However, I'm hoping that this second lesson has given them a much more complete experience of what a regular Alexander lesson is like.

### THIRD INTRODUCTORY LESSON

In the third private lesson I introduce students to a process of working on themselves that I call "ordering," which I distinguish from what other teachers often call "directing." Alexander and some of the teachers he trained seemed to use the two terms interchangeably to signify the process of "projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms,"<sup>72</sup> but I've found that making a distinction between the two can allow for the concept of ordering to have a particularly useful role in developing an organized way of improving our conditions of use of ourselves. The procedure also has similarities to some forms of meditation that involve remaining quiet and fairly still for a period of time as I explain in the next chapter.

After I've done five or ten minutes of chair work with students at the start of this lesson, I guide them over to sit on a stool next to the table as if they were going to write a letter or take some notes. I also bring out a writing slope for them to rest their forearms and hands on so they won't have to look down as far as they would if they were writing on the flat table – which, of course, could tempt them to sink or press down onto the surface in a way that can detract from their overall lengthening. While they're writing, I sit next to them at a right angle so that I can work on them continuously with my hands to reinforce their attention to their use of themselves as a whole during this prolonged task that only requires a series of small hand, finger, and forearm actions.

I intentionally delay handing them the writing materials until we've had a chance to make sure they're tuning in to their fullest lengthening in stature in relation to resting their forearms and palms on the writing slope. Then I finally give them the paper and tell them that I'll be continually encouraging them to take plenty of time to maintain their overall upward flow in relation to gravity – not only from the contacts of their feet on the floor and their sitting bones on the stool, but also from the contact of their forearms and hands on the writing slope, from the contact of their fingers and thumb on the pencil, and even from the contact of the lead of the pencil on the writing slope through the paper. Finally, I hand them the pencil, and after pausing a few more moments I ask them to write as a title at the top of the page, "Alexander Orders." It's also worth noting here that I make sure I don't give this dictation in any way that would cause students to write fast. Saying "pause" very calmly after they write each phrase also seems to help in reducing any "endgaining" energy that may be operating

within them for pressing on ahead quickly with the task – as people so often feel they need to do when taking notes or dictation.

Then I say that I'm going to give them the words for the orders to write down that we'll be going through later on in a detailed way while we're doing table work just as we did in their first two lessons. So I ask them to write the number "1" at the left-hand side of the next line of the page, and I make sure that we take plenty of time after this to attend to their upward flow of direction before I ask them to go on to write the words for the first part of that order after the number "1." Next, in as unhurried a way as possible I ask them to write "My neck," and then I deliberately wait for a few moments before I ask them to add five well-spaced dots – at least half an inch apart – after "neck" to represent a fairly lengthy pause between that first part of the order's phrase and its second part. Most students tend to write the words rather quickly, and this also tends to encourage them to put these five dots a lot closer together than half an inch; so I often need to ask them to erase the first series of dots they've just made and put in new ones even farther apart – at least half an inch or more. Even that "correction" helps to get them to relinquish any tendency they might have to get the words written down immediately.

After I've had students pause again to attend to their fullest lengthening and widening while I continue to give them an upward flow of direction with my hands, I ask them to write after the fifth dot: "to be free." Once more, I wait a little longer before I ask them to put five more well-spaced dots after "free." But by this time most students have realized they don't need to be in a hurry, and they usually slow down considerably on their own with their writing. If they do speed up again though, I'll deliberately take more time before I give them the next word-group or series of dots – all the while reinforcing their upward flow of direction. Generally, the dots stand for an important separation between the nouns and the verbs in all these orders so that they allow for the chance of merely placing one's attention in the particular region that the noun indicates but *not doing* anything to try to immediately affect that region by activating any muscular efforts there. *Waiting* a little while before adding the *intention* of the verb allows the verb to remain more of a *wish* for a change in quality of muscle tonus than to become a stimulus to *accomplish* an action (or some kind of movement through space) in that area. I think "animating," or "enlivening," muscular tonus, as distinct from "activating," can be a good way to think of the difference we're looking for with this process.

Finally, after pausing again, I ask students to put an asterisk after the last dot of this first order. Then I say that I'll give them the words that the

asterisk represents when we get to the end of this whole series. So the first order will look like this on the page:

1. My neck . . . . . to be free . . . . .\*

Then I go on to give them the four remaining orders in the same fashion – asking them to pause and return to attending to their fullest lengthening and widening after each phrase and after each series of dots. Here are the rest of the orders:

2. For the direction to come forward . . . . . into my face . . . . . and up . . . . . into the top of my head . . . . .\*
3. For my whole back . . . . . to lengthen . . . . . and widen . . . . .\*
4. For my knees . . . . . to go forward and up to the ceiling . . . . .\*

Lastly, I have them write the phrase that corresponds to the asterisk at the end the end of each of the above orders:

- \* So that my whole stature . . . . . can lengthen up out of the contact of my heels . . . . .

When students are working on this ordering process at home, I ask them to give each order four or five times before going on to the next. Then I say they should wait a little while before going through the whole sequence again in the same way, but I hope they'll be able to go through the series at least twice. I also say that I don't want them to look for or expect an immediate "result" when they give each order because it may not be that the orders begin to "get through" to an actual overall lengthening and widening until they've been given a number of times. Or students may give the orders on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, but the messages may not begin to get through to an overall lengthening and widening until Thursday. So we're not necessarily looking for a one-to-one, immediate correlation between a single order and the region it applies to. Direction may not get through to our head until we give the orders to our knees, etc.

*In his second book, Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual (pub. 1923), Alexander used the phrases "order the neck to relax, to order*

*the head forward and up to lengthen the spine.”<sup>73</sup> But in my study of the Technique with teachers he trained, the orders/directions were usually phrased: “neck [to be] free, head [to go] forward and up, back to lengthen and widen, and knees to go forward and away.” The words “neck to relax” were never used, nor was the spine mentioned in place of the back as a whole. The word “relax” was frowned upon because it was believed that it could only mean “collapse.” In fact, one teacher who knew Alexander well also reported to me that Alexander told him later in life that the words he had chosen earlier for the orders/directions were not necessarily the most effective; so it seems conceivable that even Alexander would have found different words to use had he lived longer and had his experience and understanding continued to evolve.*

I also point out to students the difference between “giving” the orders silently in a superficial way as we might do when thinking through a list of tasks we need to accomplish during the day ahead. But when there’s something very important that we want to be sure to remember to do we may “hear” ourselves inwardly saying “*But I must not forget to call my friend at eleven o’clock.*” Those words tend to become more fully “pronounced” in our aural imagination, and this fuller, non-vocal “hearing” of the words is what can have the best chance of reaching the “mechanisms”<sup>74</sup> – as Alexander called the various parts of us that are involved in supporting us in relation to gravity – even if the orders may also include some visual and tactile imagining as well. Often I tell students who are experienced musicians that giving the orders effectively is more like thinking through a phrase of music as they’d ideally like it to sound when they actually play it rather than merely having a tune “running through your imagination” on its own.

After we’ve finished with this writing process, I ask students to keep the page they’ve just written the orders on so they can refer to it when they’re working on their own until they know all the orders by heart. Of course, I could have just given them a pre-printed page of the words, but I think having students actually go through the careful and quiet process of writing the orders in their own hand-writing may register more fully in their consciousness and memory and even in their supportive tissue structures – especially since I’ve been constantly reinforcing the integration of those tissue structures with my hands at the same time that they’re writing the words. At the very least, this writing process gives them an experience of what’s sometimes called “application work” where

a teacher guides students through a particular daily or professional task with careful attention to their use of themselves as a whole.

At the end of this lesson I also give students a copy to study of a detailed article I wrote contrasting the process of directing to the process of ordering in working on yourself. It contains some useful references and quotes to illustrate my reasons for making a distinction between the two terms, and a revised version of the article follows this chapter.

I should acknowledge here that I think there may be good reason to allow for there being differing predominating modes of processing direction from person to person. I also mention in the next chapter that it may even be that some people have developed one of these modes – visual, aural, proprioceptive/kinesthetic/interoceptive, tactile, or verbal – more than all the others because of the expertise they’ve cultivated in a corresponding field – such as athletes and dancers (kinesthetic, proprioceptive, interoceptive), writers (verbal), musicians (aural/kinesthetic), painters, sculptors, etc. (visual). And it may be that those who have one mode working in them more predominantly will need to use a different mode of “ordering” from the aural one I’ve described here. In my initial lessons and teacher training in the Technique I only remember teachers saying that “directing” meant “thinking” or “wishing” – as distinct from “doing.” I didn’t really understand then what was meant by “just thinking” or “just wishing,” but I definitely understood that both expressions did *not* mean “doing some action” to accomplish the result of going up and lengthening and widening that I was experiencing through the hands-on work from a teacher.



## 7 Working on Yourself by Directing and Ordering

*This chapter contains a revised version of an article that I usually give students to read after I've introduced them to the process of working on themselves that I just described in their third lesson. The original article was published in 1994 by STATBooks.*

Working on yourself involves taking an extended period of time on your own solely to promote the integration of yourself as a whole, as distinct from applying the principles of inhibiting and directing yourself as a whole in daily activities. Of course, both processes overlap and can reinforce each other.<sup>75</sup> In my private teaching and teacher-training classes, I've tried to find ways to further articulate and clarify this facet of the Technique, but what I have done in this realm may only scratch the surface of what may be possible. Here are some of the main points I've put together on the topic that I go over with students in their early private lessons.

### PURPOSES FOR WORKING ON YOURSELF

There can be at least six purposes for working on yourself. All of them can be accomplished at once, though, if that's your intention.

1. To retrieve the most balanced working of the supportive function of your musculature after meeting a demand or when you're fatigued after a period of stress or extensive effort.
2. To maintain the improved condition of the supportive function of your musculature (your "conditions of use")<sup>76</sup> that you may have already achieved through lessons in combination with your own work on yourself and your application of the principles of the Technique to daily life.
3. To prepare for meeting a demand.

Several considerations come into play here. They include the length of time you may need to take in relation to the nature of the demand and in relation to the condition of your supportive mechanisms when you begin this particular period of work on yourself.

4. To continue meeting the demand of an activity you've already been engaging in.

This involves taking enough time to work on yourself so that your basic standard of use is not lost while continuing to meet the demand.

5. To assimilate and continue with what you may have gained in a specific session of hands-on work with a teacher.

The time immediately following a private lesson or a shorter “turn” from a teacher in a class situation may be the most important time for incorporating what you’ve received from the teacher’s hands and what you’ve learned in that period of time.

6. To achieve further progress on your own in improving your conditions and to make progress in relation to your general growth and development toward your fullest potential in life.

This also includes working on yourself in order to deal better with a particular immediate concern that might require careful judgment in resolving, or in order to deal more objectively, effectively, and creatively with issues from the past, such as are brought to awareness in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy.

Becoming more in touch with your reasoning processes (Alexander’s words<sup>77</sup>), as well as reaffirming and strengthening a particular life direction, also fit into this possibility.

#### DIRECTING AND ORDERING

Whether you’re working on yourself for one or all of the above purposes, the process involves what Alexander called “directing” or “ordering.” He didn’t make a distinction between the two terms in his writings, nor do most of the teachers I’ve known who trained with him. Sometimes teachers use the terms to refer to a silent, verbal process, and sometimes they use the terms to mean a totally non-verbal process. In my experience, I’ve encountered a lot of diverse opinions and understandings of the definitions of these two terms and about how they should be understood and used in the Technique. Some have been opposed to any silent saying of the words of the directions, while others feel that this approach should be an integral part of learning the Technique. For the sake of consistency in all that follows, though, I’ll begin by stating the distinction I make between the two terms.

I use the word “directing” to mean the completely *non-verbal* form of projecting an intention for a lengthening or freeing to occur in a certain way in a certain part – or the whole – of ourselves at any given moment. This process may include some involvement of our visual or tactile imagination, but I think the degree of that involvement may vary from person

to person according to how their interoceptive awareness is functioning at a particular time.

In contrast, I use the word “ordering” to represent the silent, but verbal saying of the directions or orders to ourselves. This process is distinct from saying the orders or directions aloud – either by the teacher for the student or by students for themselves.

#### DIRECTING

The purpose of both directing and ordering is to produce “direction,” or lengthening, in one or more parts of us that can be integrated into our overall, upward-going anti-gravity response – whatever our position or whatever activity we may be involved in. Direction could be described as a certain kind of enlivened and lengthened muscle tonus. However, I think it could also be said to affect a change primarily on a cellular level of all our tissue structures that can respond to gravity’s downward pull. I think many people involved in the Alexander Technique would describe the full effect of directing to be an equalized and flowing feeling in all our musculature and other tissue structures. Many would attribute this experience to a lengthening which is not what many people understand as “stretching” in our musculature in contrast to a shortening (tightening) or a “collapse,” but most would agree that the overall sensation of an equalized flow that’s created is accompanied by a sense of freedom and ease that’s rarely experienced in any other way. To my knowledge, no one has shown physiologically what directing actually is, but biofeedback research on the control of single cell activity appears to reveal something similar to what may occur as a result of the directing process as we use it in the Alexander Technique. One expert on biofeedback, Barbara Brown, described the process in her book *Supermind*:

The mind-brain has to project what the result should be, so the goal itself should be predefined. This is a very complex operation of mind, turning intention into action. The mind uses information to produce, effectively and efficiently, an ordered alteration of biological activity. The cells, the chemistry, the electrical traffic of the central nervous system are all directed to proceed orderly and efficiently to accomplish a predetermined objective that’s still in the mind’s eye. The result of this action is control, a voluntary control that changes physiologic activity in such a way that the changes are compatible not only with what the instructions call for, but also with the maximal precision the biological system is capable of – the finest possible discrimination of biological activity – changing the activity of a single cell.<sup>78</sup>

Alexander attempted to clarify the concepts of “directing” and “direction” in his third book, *The Use of the Self*:

When I employ the words “direction” and “directed” with “use” in such phrases as “direction of my use” and “I directed the use,” etc., I wish to indicate the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of the mechanisms.<sup>79</sup>

But in his first book, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, he had already distinguished the process of directing from the activity of making an actual motion:

. . . he [the student] must learn to give the correct mental orders to the mechanisms involved, *and there must be a clear differentiation in his mind between the giving of the order and the performance of the act ordered and carried out through the medium of the muscles.*

. . . suppose I have requested the pupil *to order* the spine to lengthen and the neck to relax. If, instead of merely framing and holding the 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. In effect it will be seen that in this, as in all other cases, stress must be laid on the point that it is *the means* and not the *end* which must be considered.<sup>80</sup>

#### DIRECTIONS AND ORDERS

The terms “directions” and “orders” refer to the parts of us that Alexander claimed we need to attend to in order to facilitate and enhance the most integrated use of ourselves. When these word-phrases are “given,” or when their intention is projected, they constitute the process he called “a normal employment” as opposed to an “abnormal employment” of the “working of the postural mechanisms.”<sup>81</sup> Whether the directions are projected verbally or non-verbally, this is the most common sequence of word-phrases that I’ve heard Alexander teachers use:

1. Neck free
2. Head forward and up

3. Back to lengthen and widen
4. Knees to go forward and away<sup>82</sup>

I also remember it being reported that Alexander used to say that the directions were to be projected “all together, one after the other.”<sup>83</sup> He describes the phenomenon in *The Use of the Self*:

This process is analogous to the firing of a machine-gun from an airplane, where the machinery is so co-ordinated that each individual shot of the series is timed to pass between the blades of a propeller making 1,500 or more revolutions to the minute.<sup>84</sup>

As I mentioned previously, in Alexander’s second book, he phrased the directions as: “order the neck to relax, to order the head forward and up to lengthen the spine.” But it seems that in later years the expression “neck to relax” was changed to “neck to be free.” I’ve also heard the phrases of the directions varied slightly in an attempt to make them more effective. For instance, the following wording was fairly common among certain teachers during my training years – with an emphasis on the word “let” in order to encourage students to avoid making some movement in the particular regions:

Let the neck be free,  
to let the head go forward and up,  
to let the back lengthen and widen,  
to let the knees go forward and way.

As I explained earlier, I find that using the term “neck” is misleading when it comes to how we actually perceive and direct our head and spine/torso coordination. Even though there are, of course, the seven cervical (or “neck”) vertebrae that are connected to each other and to the base of our skull by delicate sets of muscles, and even though these very small muscles also contain their particular nerve supply, there are other, larger “surface” muscles that function more powerfully and predominantly on top of them to affect the relation of our head to the rest of the spine – such as the sterno-cleido-mastoids that extend from the sides of the back of the skull to the breastbone (sternum) and clavicles at the front of the torso along with the trapezius muscles that attach from the back of the skull to the shoulder blades. Underneath these surface layers of larger muscle groups (and on top of the more delicate cervical musculature) there are

also other muscles that attach from the sides of the cervical vertebrae to the spine in the thoracic region, such as splenius capitis and splenius cervicis. However, even if we consider only these more surface, overlapping muscles alone (the sterno-cleido-mastoids and trapezii), there's good reason for setting aside the concept of "neck" in exchange for the "upper spine" region that's essentially a continuation of our "middle" and "lower" spine and sacrum.

Ultimately, as I already pointed out, we want *all* the vertebrae of the spine – particularly with regard to maintaining the openings between them that allow for a free flow of neural impulses to and from the spinal cord – to be as well supported and as unimpeded as possible. The essential element for encouraging and maintaining that fullest flow of support of all the vertebrae begins with the relation of the base of our head to the upper region of our spine, but this flow does not stop at the juncture of the cervical and thoracic vertebrae. In what follows, you'll find that I avoid using the word "neck" because doing so also allows for an understanding of Alexander's concept of "primary control" that essentially means "first in priority" of attention, rather than as some sort of righting reflex activity that has been shown he erroneously attempted to equate in his earlier years with Rudolf Magnus's concept of *Zentralapparat* ("central control").<sup>85</sup> So I think it can be enough merely to consider that the concept of "primary control" essentially implies that the managing of the relation of all our parts in response to gravity has a *primary influence* on all our activity and functioning every waking moment. In recent years, I've come to refer to the constructive, conscious use of our parts in relation to gravity as "positive primary control," whereas this improved, conscious use is distinct from what I would call "negative primary control," which could mean either a subconscious, or even a conscious, interference with the balanced working of our supportive musculature and other tissue structures in relation to gravity's pull.

As the director of my training course, Walter Carrington, once said to me regarding our "primary control": it's always operating within in us, "for better or worse, for richer or poorer"!

#### DISCUSSION OF VARIOUS VIEWS ON THE USE OF DIRECTIONS AND ORDERS

"Directing" was described by my first teachers as "thinking" in contrast to attempting to "do" something to achieve a result in your overall relationship to gravity's pull. Sometimes directing was also explained as "wishing," and I've found the word "intending" useful in my own teaching as a description of directing. Also, the phrase "an act of attention *alone*" can

be effective in the first lesson situation for describing the process – as I explained in the previous chapter.

I was never taught to do silent verbal “ordering” in my early years of private lessons with various teachers, nor was this form of ordering taught in the teacher training course I attended given by first-generation teachers. In fact, any silent use of the word-phrases was very much frowned upon there. However, in his book *The Alexander Principle*, first-generation Alexander teacher, Dr Wilfred Barlow does describe the use of words for teaching:

. . . information about use is conveyed by manual adjustment on the part of the teacher, and it involves learning a new mental pattern in the form of a sequence of words which are taught to the pupil, and which he learns to associate with the new muscular use he is being taught by the manual adjustment. He learns to project this new pattern to himself not only while he is being taught but when he is on his own.<sup>86</sup>

Dr Barlow isn’t clear here whether the words should be used silently or *how* the pattern is “projected” during the lesson or while students are on their own. However, I assume that he means “silently” when he refers to it as a “mental pattern.” Further on, however, he writes of a first lesson:

The teacher places both his hands at the sides of the neck and asks the pupil to say to himself the words “neck free, head forward and out” (or, if standing or sitting, “forward and up”).<sup>87</sup>

This approach to teaching was objected to by my teachers as being a form of conditioning, and I was inclined to agree with them. The extreme opposite approach, which was how I was taught, is simply to give students the experience first and wait until much later to try to get them to participate in any further way than merely leaving themselves as free as possible (i.e., “inhibiting” in order to be directed and moved by the teacher). Occasionally the directions would be said for you just before the teacher moved you into sitting or standing, but it wasn’t suggested that you say them for yourself silently then or when you were on your own. However, in thinking about this approach in retrospect, it seems as though it could also be considered a form of conditioning. As I described in Chapter 2, I had such a shocking experience during my senior year of college when all the wonderful upward flow of direction from my first series of lessons suddenly left me and nothing at all that I tried to “think

of” (or overtly “do” in the relation of my head to my spine, etc.) helped me to re-establish for myself the better conditions of use and upward flow I’d experienced so powerfully the previous summer. I’d understood intellectually that the improved result came from a certain use of my head going forward and up and my back lengthening and widening; however, no matter how I tried to direct my head and back, it only turned into a stiffening or holding because I was merely trying to find some sort of right position. It wasn’t until the very first lesson of the following summer that the directing and “up” quickly came back to me, and after that next frequent series of lessons it seemed that I’d gained enough basic experience and understanding of “directing” and “direction” to see me through the rigors of army life for the next three years.<sup>88</sup> Somehow I had learned to “think” or “intend” the directions then and, to a certain degree, this seemed to maintain the condition that had been cultivated by my teacher’s hands and words in the lessons. Of course, I also had intermittent hands-on work during my three years in the army before I left for England to join the teacher training course, so it could be that this fairly continual reinforcement I was receiving during those years merely gave me the mistaken impression that I was maintaining my improved conditions of use primarily from my own powers. This illusion seems to be borne out by what I describe later on about the effective results I achieved from using a first-generation Alexander teacher friend’s version of silent verbal ordering – that I’ll describe shortly – to deal with the detrimental effects of being quite ill and under a great deal of stress.

I’ve only found a few other written accounts of teaching besides Dr Barlow’s that give us any clues about the ways words might be used in working on ourselves. First-generation teacher Patrick Macdonald says something similar to Dr Barlow in his 1967 lecture to the Alexander Society entitled “On Giving Directions, Doing and Non-doing”:

Giving directions, then, is not and cannot be the same for a new pupil as it is for one of a few weeks, months, or years’ experience of the Technique. For the new pupil, directions start merely as words. These should be learnt by heart, in the proper order, and they should gain in content with time, experience, and the frequent application of the teacher’s hands. They must progress from being merely words to a release of force, which acts in certain ways along certain paths. The words, therefore, turn into acts, but acts of a very delicate and subtle kind which are not to be confused with the ordinary kind of activity commonly called a “physical act.”<sup>89</sup>



Mr Macdonald doesn't say that the directions are to be said by the pupil silently or aloud, only that, at first, they're words. It wasn't until I began questioning my first-generation Alexander teacher friend, Kitty Wielopolska, more specifically about how she taught the Technique to her beginning students that I found an account of "ordering" that was more complete. In our earlier conversations before I questioned her specifically about that aspect, I'd always assumed that Kitty meant the same thing by the word "ordering" that I'd understood to be non-verbal "directing"; however, when I eventually asked her to describe in detail how she explains "directing" to a student in an introductory lesson, she said:

I say the direction, or order, or request must be put into words, silent, but verbal, in the head. It must be a word. It can't be a mere thought.

I try to illustrate it by saying that when you start to get up in the morning you're sort of reviewing the day and you think "I've got to do this," and "I've got to do that, but *I must not forget to stop at the post office.*" And then *that* goes into words. *That's* important. You actually *talk* to yourself about certain things, and the rest is just a vague sort of smear. You may be making a casual list in your mind as you get dressed of the things you want to do, but the important thing, buying the stamps . . . it's definitely put into words.

When I'm teaching a first lesson, I want to emphasize the necessity of the word immediately, as F.M. did with me in my first lesson.<sup>90</sup>

Kitty definitely presents ordering here in a way that distinguishes the process from the results, as Alexander does in the quote above about the clear differentiation in the student's thinking between "the giving of the order and the performance of the act ordered and carried out through the mechanisms of the muscles."<sup>91</sup>

Physiologist Barbara Brown's biofeedback research seems to support all of what Kitty told me. Here's an extensive quote about the subject from Brown's chapter "The Intellect of the Unconscious" in her book *Supermind*:

One of the most striking features of the biofeedback phenomenon, particularly exemplified in the learned control of nerve-muscle cells, is the consummate orderliness with which the learning is accomplished. With no more than the mechanical representation of the muscle cells' activity and an explicit or implicit command to control those cells, somehow mental mechanisms execute the instructions with remarkable precision and remarkable rapidity. The result is an *ordered* alteration of

physiological activity. Through the brain's neural networks of millions of nerve connections, exactly those nerve filaments and their chemistry and electrical behavior are selected and directed to proceed with incredible efficiency to accomplish an objective still in the "mind's eye."

The rapidity, the specificity, and the efficiency with which this learning occurs (sometimes within two minutes or less) imply the existence of a mechanism for ordering the most molecular of the body's physiologic activities toward a new objective conceived and defined by the mind-brain's intellectual functions. This ordering action, moreover, *takes precedence over the effects of all spontaneous or automatic activity*, and is a strong indication that the mind-brain possesses a separate function capable of evoking and putting into effect orders for physiologic activity to follow, orders specifically tailored by either the mind-brain's own resources or by another of the mind's self-governing faculties. Since the result of the ordering process is completely compatible with the intention to change the physiologic activity and even though consciously there is no knowledge of how to proceed, the result is the most precise and parsimonious use of the available physiologic mechanism. One can now begin to think in terms of some highly developed innate qualities of the mind-brain complex, one of which could be called a sense of order.

A sense of order can be distinguished from other evolved senses that are subconsciously appreciated only. A sense of order is an awareness of the sequence of proceeding, and implies an ability to sense how things *will* fit as contrasted to a sense of continuity, or that things do fit, once fitted. It's different from a sense of harmony, which is the sensation and awareness of the appropriateness of elements to a particular pattern. A sense of order implies *an innate ability to anticipate orderly sequences*.<sup>92</sup>

Although I had known Kitty Wielopolska since 1968, she didn't tell me her account of presenting ordering that I quoted above until 1979. We had worked together often before that – mainly giving each other table work – and she would frequently say the directions, or orders, aloud as she worked on me. When she spoke the orders aloud for me, something deeper happened in my own directing than when we were engaged in regular conversation as we worked. Her saying the orders also had a much fuller effect than I would receive when other experienced teachers merely *asked* me to "think" the directions in a lesson. (A teacher might simply say, just before moving me from standing to sitting, "Now, if you'll just think of freeing your neck and directing your head forward and up," etc., and then they'd go ahead and move me into standing.) It was significant too

that Kitty's voice would become fuller and richer than her normal conversational tone when she said the orders aloud for me, and this changed quality in her voice also seemed to make it possible for me to "receive" the effect of the direction from her hands more deeply as she worked on me than I would when receiving work from most other teachers who often chatted continuously while they were working. There was also an unobtrusive quality in the way she spoke the orders for me, maybe because she spoke them as if they were just as much for herself as for me. As she spoke the words, "My neck to be free . . . my head . . ." etc., it also seemed if she was somehow providing my own "internal voice" with reinforcement by saying the orders for me as I would be saying them silently on my own.

Until then, I'd felt there was little value in working on myself any more extensively than by lying on the floor or sitting quietly and "directing" or non-verbally "thinking," the directions when I was fatigued or needed to prepare for performing in a concert, teaching a number of students in a row, or teaching a class of teacher trainees. I'd carried with me such a strong effect from all the hands-on work I'd had and all the directing I'd done in my three-year training experience that my direction manifested itself powerfully as a constant flow every waking moment and even in sleep. It seemed that no kind of calamity or effort could possibly destroy this constancy. Unfortunately – or perhaps fortunately – this proved to be a wrong assumption much like the one I'd made before I lost all my upward flow of direction under duress when I returned for my last year of college after my first summer of private lessons.

#### DISCOVERING THE VALUE OF SILENT VERBAL ORDERING FOR MYSELF

During 1980, I began to suffer from the recurrence of a health problem that I thought I'd completely overcome during my training. At first it only gave me periodic bouts of pain, but as the year went on these attacks became much more frequent and intense. Even strong painkillers couldn't stop the pain; but because I had a fairly good standard of use as a result of my training, I could usually recover from the initial bouts fairly quickly and resume my teaching the following day as if nothing had happened. Eventually, however, these continuing periods of pain began to wear me down and destroy my ability to retain my better conditions of use by merely "thinking" or "wishing" the directions. I could "think" the directions for all I was worth, but the "thinking" just didn't get through enough to my musculature and other supportive tissue to bring me back to the level of overall upward flow of direction required for giving several lessons a day along with teaching three hours of a teacher training class.

Since I couldn't get to an advanced teacher then to have extensive hands-on work for helping me regain my better standard of use, I decided to experiment with the approach to ordering I described above that Kitty Wielopolska had demonstrated while working on me, and it made a remarkable difference almost immediately. No matter how severe a bout of pain I had, by using her version of ordering I could always bring myself back to a baseline standard of conditions that would allow me to continue teaching until I eventually had surgery to correct the source of the problem.

Shortly after this success with ordering, I decided to try to pass the approach on to my students and trainees in case it might help them in their own work on themselves. At first, I gave it only to students who'd been having lessons for several years and who already spent a certain amount of time working on themselves as best they could by non-verbally directing. I'd been rather dissatisfied with giving private lessons up to that time because, no matter how much students tried to carry through with what I taught them and gave them with hands-on work, they'd lose more between lessons than I felt they should.

But the results that these experienced students had with ordering were striking. They felt it offered them an enormous boost in organizing their own work on themselves so that they could at last actually improve their conditions on their own. I soon began introducing ordering to beginning students in their third lesson – as I described in the previous chapter – and it became a vital part of my teaching from then on.

No doubt there could still be much debate on the validity of ordering and whether or not it should be used in either teaching or working on oneself. When I discussed the use of silent verbal orders with Walter Carrington after he had read Kitty Wielopolska's description of her explanation of ordering that I quoted above, he said he was very much against having students use words non-vocally in this way. He cited the example of seeing his mother, who had had Alexander lessons, mis-using herself one day, and when he pointed out to her that she "was pulling her head back," her response was "Am I, dear? I'm giving my orders!!"<sup>93</sup> However, he did concede to me that, at times, he would use words silently when working on himself even though he didn't describe exactly how he used them. Likewise, in a talk on the directions he gave at the end of my training he alluded to the possibility that others might sometimes, somehow, put the directions, or orders, into words. However, he may have been referring only to those of us in the class who had a good deal more experience in the Technique than the ordinary private student. He says in the talk:

We have seen that we live in a gravitational field. It's essential for us, therefore, to go up against gravity. But of course gravity is operating all the time, and because this is a constant factor in our lives, we need the constant reminder to go up. So when you look at the directions, or orders, they're not just something that you remember from time to time, that are given at the critical moment, that are just applicable now and then. You don't pronounce them all the time. You don't necessarily put them into words all the time. It's because you understand this and the concept that they're part of your attitude to life, what you want. And when you get it to that stage, you have got it made. And until you get it to that stage, you haven't.

With the ordinary pupil you can't expect to get direction. You can only hope to get a little inhibition. Gradually from the inhibition you begin to get the first taste of direction. Both inhibition and direction will be extremely intermittent and extremely precarious.<sup>94</sup>

In the same conversation with Walter Carrington about Kitty Wielopolska's approach to teaching ordering I asked him if he still found it important to take special time to work on himself, even though he had so many years of experience in the Technique. He said that he definitely still found it important to take this kind of special time, particularly because of the rigorous demands of his teaching schedule. He also said that, if for some unexpected reason, the time that he usually set aside for working on himself was cut short just before his afternoon teaching, then he found it much harder to meet the demands of the rest of the day's work. (When I was training with him, he would usually spend the last half of our lunch hour in his private teaching room with senior teacher Peggy Williams who gave him hands-on work – table work, as a former classmate recently told me who was also Walter's secretary at the time.)

I also asked Walter if he knew whether Alexander felt he needed to work on himself in his later years. Walter said that Alexander certainly did, and he quoted F.M. as saying, "If I weren't such an old fool, I'd spend a hell of a lot more time working on myself than I do – particularly during the holidays." Walter also mentioned then that he thought it was definitely important to allow for more time to work on ourselves as we get older. He said that he particularly liked to take extra time to work on himself, for instance, before he went out riding and that he sometimes did this while seated in a saddle mounted on a wooden sawhorse he kept in the training classroom to use as an aid for teaching students and trainees.

## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Whether working on ourselves by ordering or directing, or even if we don't take any specific time to work on ourselves, we're still brought back to the main claim of the Technique: that there's a "universal constant in living" – to borrow from the title of Alexander's last book – that involves the way we direct our use ourselves from moment to moment, either consciously or subconsciously, and has a direct effect on the functioning of our entire organism/self. Therefore, a constant conscious direction or intention that, if we are clear enough about the above distinctions I've made between "directing" and "ordering," would not and could not actually be the verbal ordering. Therefore, I see working on ourselves as an *aid* – an important aid – *to achieving* this constant positive influence. It's an aid that can include either directing or ordering, or both.

Ideally it would be preferable if we didn't have to take special time to work on ourselves at all. I would rather not have to ask students and trainees to do so, and I believe that there's a condition and manner of use that can be achieved that renders unnecessary and superfluous any working on yourself beyond the constant maintaining of inhibiting and directing "in reaction to the stimulus of living," as Alexander put it."<sup>95</sup> Many teachers I know have experienced this condition of use as a result of having three years of daily work in a teacher training course, but most of the time regular students and trainees need all the help they can get in improving and maintaining their conditions of use, especially if they're up against a very poor standard of conditions and manner of use of themselves or if they are having to deal with difficult health problems, injuries, challenging work activities, or stressful life situations.

If students have fairly frequent access to a trained teacher's hands, they might get along fine, perhaps, without taking any special time outside lessons for working on themselves – as I mentioned I was able to do for several months after I had my first intensive course of lessons. However, after a while when they stop having regular work from a teacher, they often lose the effect of the lessons and don't really know either how to improve their conditions on their own or even how to maintain the standard they've gained from the lessons. Ultimately, I think students should be provided with a means of working on themselves so that they can dispense forever with having work from another person's hands, which is what Alexander's writings seem to hold out as a possibility for everyone who studies the Technique.

I'm not suggesting that people necessarily give up *ever* having hands-on work from a teacher. I think that a trained person's hands may always

be able to offer us something that we can't provide for ourselves, but the kind of dependence on hands-on work from a teacher that many students and teachers still seem to rely on isn't really representative of the ideal of "constructive conscious control of the individual" that Alexander challenged us to achieve. Experiencing a change through the use of a skilled teacher's hands can be a wonderful experience on the student's part, and it's often astounding what an experienced teacher can do for students and other teachers, so it's easy to see that there's a great temptation just to leave the function of the Technique at that stage. However, that hands-on experience should only be the beginning of the journey – only an exhortation to students to learn how to bring themselves to a better state without the aid of a teacher and maybe even go far beyond what any teacher can give.<sup>96</sup>

Following are some suggestions for applying the skills of ordering and directing to working on yourself.

#### PROCEDURE I: ORDERING

To use ordering in working on yourself I recommend that you memorize the orders just as you would in learning the script of a Shakespeare play by heart. Don't alter the words in any way. Give the orders while you are basically still – either lying down, seated, or standing. Try not to have any distractions around, and take a period of ten to twenty minutes in which you can silently say the whole series of orders a number of times in an unhurried way. If you're sitting or standing, try to select a view that you can look out upon to keep your vision alive and active so that you don't drift inwardly into sensation, concentrated thinking, or fantasy. It's better not to focus your eyes on one object or one particular part of your view for very long, so try to allow for more and more of the scene before you to unfold and deepen in terms of textures, colors, light, shadow, depth, and breadth. Here are the four conventional orders as they have most commonly been taught in my experience:

My neck . . . . . to be free . . . . .

My head . . . . . to go forward . . . . . and up . . . . .

My back . . . . . to lengthen . . . . . and widen . . . . .

My knees . . . . . to go forward and up to the ceiling . . . . . (or, forward and away, when sitting or standing) . . . . .

Go through this series several times before pausing to rest a little while. That minimal amount of ordering should be enough to produce some degree of change in your conditions, even if it only settles you down a bit from the ongoing momentum of your regular activities. As I described in the sections about giving introductory lessons, I usually ask beginning students to use the following slightly altered version of the orders, adding the last phrase [†] to the end of each of the four main orders so that the whole of our stature has more of a chance to be influenced by the giving of each single order:

My neck . . . . . to be free . . . . . †

For the direction to come forward . . . . . into my face . . . . . and up  
. . . . . into the top of my head . . . . . †

For my whole back . . . . . to lengthen . . . . . and widen . . . . . †

For my knees . . . . . to go forward and up to the ceiling (forward and  
away when sitting or standing) . . . . . †

† . . . . . for my whole stature to lengthen up out of the contacts of  
my feet . . . . .

I also explain that Alexander's original phrasing of the second order was "head forward and up," and I say that I've taken the liberty of changing that phrase so that it doesn't imply a movement of the head forward and up through space. Most beginning students inevitably try to *do* something with their head to find a "right position" when they direct or order their head "forward and up," so I think it's worth taking special care to by-pass this tendency. Later, after they've had more experience through lessons, they can substitute "head forward and up" for "the direction to come forward into my face and up into the top of my head." But I try to make it clear that an *internal* change is what we're looking for, not a position, right relationship, or right "alignment," even though the relationship of parts may change as a secondary effect – particularly if there's been any holding or tightness going on in our musculature that inevitably contributes to a pulling of the head back and down in relation to the atlanto-occipital joint and the rest of the spine.<sup>97</sup>



I also think it's important to confine ordering to working on yourself while you're basically still and not to try to do it while engaging in other activities – at least not activities that require verbalized thinking or a specific use of your imagination, such as speaking, musical performance, or other creative endeavors. However, I have used ordering sometimes while I've been doing activities that have a regular on-going rhythm to them, such as running, swimming, and walking, which don't require much of any verbal thinking in order to be done well. If I don't do any ordering during those sorts of rhythmic activities, that's not to say that I stop *directing* in a non-verbal way so that it can permeate the entire activity.

"Special orders" may also be useful to supplement the basic orders. Kitty Wielopolska recommended that her students use orders at various times that might be considered more "psychological" or "emotional" in nature. For example, she might ask them to use:

Let all my stored bodily anger (or grief, etc.)  
Be dissipated by graduated amounts.

Or:

Let all residual tension be dissipated by graduated  
Amounts from my whole sacrum (or lower ribs, etc.)

Of course, she meant these special orders to be given only in the context of directing the use of ourselves as a whole in relation to gravity's constant pull, and not as isolated ends in and of themselves. She often quoted Alexander as saying, "Beware of specifics!" Sometimes I've devised my own special orders, particularly in conjunction with a certain life experience I may be working on to incorporate into my use of myself as a whole because it inspires me toward a more complete and compassionate way of being in "reaction to the stimulus of living."

I might also suggest that students add a word of "quality" to their phrasing of the orders, such as:

My neck . . . . . with peace . . . . . to be free . . . . .

For the direction to come forward . . . . . with peace . . . . .

into the top of my head . . . . . etc.

This sometimes seems to add a greater depth to the effect of each order. However, I think that students should choose for themselves the qualifying word or phrase that works best for them at any given moment. Someone else's head and spine might "interpret" peace differently from how my head and spine interpret it. The word or phrase of quality may also need to be changed from time to time if it "wears out" and ceases to have any meaning or effect.

#### RELATIONSHIP OF ORDERING TO MEDITATION

It's also worth noting at this point the strong similarity between the process of ordering and some techniques of meditation. I've often been surprised that students – and even some Alexander teachers – persist in viewing Alexander work as something mainly for the "physical self,"<sup>98</sup> while they practice meditation for quieting the "mind" and enriching or elevating the "spiritual self." If ordering is understood in the way I've described here, there shouldn't be much difference between the psychophysical effects of the two processes – that is, of course, if meditation is done within the context of directing the use of ourselves as a whole. With those thoughts in mind, I think these comments from *The Psychology of Meditation* by Claudio Naranjo and Robert Ornstein clarify the similarity quite well:

The word "meditation" has been used to designate a variety of practices that differ enough from one another so that we may find trouble in defining what *meditation* is.

A trait that all types of meditation have in common, even at the procedural level, gives us a clue to the attitude we are trying to describe: all meditation is a *dwelling upon* something.

While in most of one's daily life the mind moves from one subject or thought to another, and the body moves from one posture to another, meditation practices generally involve an effort to stop this merry-go-round of mental or other activity and to set our attention upon a single object, sensation, utterance, issue, mental state, or activity.

. . . while certain techniques emphasize mental images, others discourage paying attention to any imagery; some involve sense organs and use visual forms (mandalas) or music, and others emphasize a complete withdrawal from the senses; some call for complete inaction, and others involve action (mantra), gestures (mudra), walking or other activities. Again, some forms of meditation require the summoning up of specific feeling states, while others encourage an indifference beyond the identification with any particular illusion.

The very diversity of practices given the name “meditation” by the followers of this or that particular approach is an invitation to search for the answer of what meditation is *beyond its forms*. And if we are not content just to trace the boundaries of a particular group of related techniques, but instead search for a unity within the diversity, we may indeed recognize such a unity in an *attitude*. We may find that, *regardless of the medium* in which meditation is carried out – whether images, physical experiences, verbal utterances, etc. – the task of the meditator is essentially the same as if the many forms of practice were nothing more than different occasions for the same basic exercise.

If we take this step beyond a behavioral definition of meditation in terms of a *procedure*, external or internal, we may be able to see that meditation cannot be equated with thinking or non-thinking, with sitting or dancing, with withdrawing from the senses or waking up the senses; meditation is concerned with the development of a *presence*, a modality of being, which may be expressed or developed in whatever situation the individual may be involved.

This presence or mode of being transforms whatever it touches. If its medium is movement, it will turn into dance: if stillness, into living sculpture; if thinking, into the higher reaches of intuition; if sensing, into a merging with the miracle of being; if feeling, into love; if singing, into sacred utterance; if speaking, into prayer or poetry; if doing things of ordinary life, into a ritual in the name of God or a celebration of existence. Just as the spirit of our times is technique-oriented in its dealings with the external world, it’s technique-oriented in its approach to psychological or spiritual reality. Yet, while numerous schools propound this or that method as a solution of human problems, we know that it’s not merely the method but the *way in which it’s employed* that determines its effectiveness, whether in psychotherapy, art, or education.<sup>99</sup>

In *More Talk of Alexander*, Dr Barlow likens ordering to meditation:

Firstly it’s useful to tell students that for a short period at the start of the lesson they should “give their orders and not do anything to implement them.” I would call this “first-stage ordering.” This period of directing at once begins to calm the mind, and such an initial calming is not very different from the calming effect which might be achieved by meditation or prayer or some other repetitive mental disciplines. This effect is soon apparent to the pupil and in many disciplines the effect has been found to

be so beneficial it has seemed by persevering in such a way (and without elaboration) a sufficient “state of grace” can be achieved.<sup>100</sup>

#### PROCEDURE II: DIRECTING

Working on yourself solely by directing is more difficult to describe than working on yourself by ordering. In many ways, directing is more demanding to do without our trying to produce an immediate result or change. This is often why ordering can be useful in the early stages of studying the Technique, especially if the orders are “said” with the appropriate quality and at a slow enough pace. It’s easier to achieve a freedom from the act of trying to gain a result if you are saying the words and allowing *them* to work. But if you’re saying your orders in a hurried or frenzied way, they’ll easily be bound up with an endgaining attitude, and this often contributes to confusion, frustration, and more tension.

Directing, though, if not done with a gentle approach, can often result in “holding” or “stiffening,” so it’s useful to consider what source your most non-endgaining directing can stem from. I think that “awareness” or “attention” can be the best starting point. If you simply place your attention or awareness at your head, spine, back, and limbs, it can be the beginning, and if you can sustain that awareness – if only of your head and spine region – throughout an activity, it’s a great step toward acquiring skill in inhibiting and directing.<sup>101</sup> Even if you don’t actually succeed in altering any habitual patterns of tension as you maintain that awareness, you actually *have* altered the “thinking” part of the psychophysical pattern just by sustaining the awareness. The most habitual tendency in poor use is, when reacting and responding, to shift awareness away from yourself as a whole to some other field of focus and to cut off from interoception, proprioception, and kinesthetic perception entirely. This separating of attention becomes the “mind-body dichotomy” in actual operation. We “split” ourselves then and there in this shift of attention.

“Intention,” or further clarity of directing, can then be based upon this overall awareness or attention. This clarity of intention, then, comes mainly from knowing more and more about what excessive tension, interference, and pulling down you *don’t* want to happen. Of course, identifying or acknowledging where UP is in relation to the center of the earth – or gravity’s downward pull – is a good starting point from which to establish an intention to free yourself and to direct or “go up” in order to improve the integration of yourself as a whole, *whatever position* you’re in. Even invalids, for instance, or those who may be paralyzed from a stroke or otherwise incapacitated in some way by an accident, should be able to

direct and work on themselves according to the principle of integrating their head-spine-limb response to gravity's pull even if they may not be able to achieve a full manifestation of what Alexander called the "normal working of the postural mechanisms"<sup>102</sup> that can be elicited by a teacher in the sit-to-stand-to-sit dimension of chair work. Just because someone's not able to achieve this normal working of the postural mechanisms, the process of directing *toward an improvement* in what they *do* have access to can still be extremely important. As long as you're at least in possession of consciousness, your directing *toward* integration and wholeness should be possible. In fact, I would think that the most crucial thing for invalids, or those with restricting injuries or conditions, may be directing and working on themselves to complement whatever treatments they receive or restrictions they're subject to.

"Intending" for your head to be flowing forward and up, your spine to be lengthening, your back to be widening, and your limbs to be lengthening – all together and sequentially – can happen in a split second. Continually projecting these intentions falls under the category of directing that we're addressing here. Unlike ordering, though, this non-verbal procedure can happen while you're engaged in other activities, although it's often hard to do it then. I often work on myself by directing to improve my conditions of use when I'm riding a bus or train, looking in a shop window, or waiting in a checkout line. But there's a limit to how much of an improvement this directing can bring about, depending upon the demand of the particular activity or depending upon the strength of the stimuli around me. If the demands or the distractions in the situation are too great, then directing merely for the sake of preserving a basic standard of integration and "up" is often about all I can muster. But at least that's better than not directing at all because it's *constant* and *constructive*, and it's essentially helping to prevent a deterioration in my conditions of use. Then, when I eventually get some distance from the demand or the stress of the situation, this minimal directing that I've already been doing fosters a more immediate return to improving the balanced integration of my use than if I hadn't been directing during the demand at all.

#### JUST STANDING, LOOKING, AND SEEING

The following are some further suggestions for working on yourself to improve your conditions of use just by directing, although you might also want to combine them with some silent, verbal ordering at certain times – maybe at the beginning, to get some vital lengthening started. The main idea, though, is to see if you can make any changes in your conditions of

use by taking some time (at least ten or fifteen minutes) mainly dedicated to that goal in and of itself.

#### GETTING SET UP

If possible, choose a place for standing and looking where you have a view that you like – or at least a view with a variety of interesting things to look at all around your full range of vision (including your peripheral vision). It's especially good, I find, to have a landscape with some distance to look out upon too, even if you're indoors and have to look at it through a window and past the things in the room around you. Of course, if your view is of something inspiring like the Athenian Acropolis or a vast mountain range, that can sometimes "elevate" your directing even more than usual.

Limit yourself just to standing basically in one place, but don't think of it as trying to stand stock still. Keep open to the option of shifting the position of your feet from time to time if you feel you need to in order to avoid getting tired or stiff. Also be open to slightly shifting your weight over your feet a little from side to side or forward and backward as well as allowing for some turning from your ankles around to your right or left, even though you'll mainly be leaving your feet in one spot.

Most of the time, keep your balance centering above your heels, rather than forward over the arches or the balls of your feet, even though you're still allowing for *some* subtle shifting of balance around the six main weight-bearing points on your feet: your heels, the inside balls of your feet, and the outside balls of your feet just behind your little toes.

(If you're wearing shoes while you're doing this standing work, make sure they're comfortable but not too worn down – especially not on the outsides of their heels. If they're worn down on the sides much at all, that can affect the relation of your feet to your ankles and your lower legs, and it can throw your entire balance off, just enough to make it harder to let your upward direction bring you toward your fullest possible integration during any particular period of standing work. It's also better if the heels of your shoes are not too high, because that'll tend to pitch you more forward over your toes and tend to make you pull down into your pelvis, thighs, and lower back so that you add yet another obstacle to your chances of lengthening, widening, and integrating to your fullest.)

If you need to from time to time, give yourself the chance to bend some at your hips and/or at your knees if you start to feel you're getting stiff or tired in your legs or in your pelvis and lower back. Likewise, be free to raise or move your arms sometimes if you *need* to. The main thing is to be as free as you can be and not get stiff or fixed or held by trying to stay too

still. On the other hand, make sure you're not unnecessarily fidgeting or moving around very much. Only move (shift your weight, bend, turn, etc.) when you *really* need to do it to free yourself to lengthen and integrate more. You might find that you need to move some when you first start out standing; but eventually, as you begin to integrate more, you'll probably find you won't really need to move much, if at all. In fact, you might even find that a different kind of stillness comes over you that's more truly free and alive than anything you can achieve by trying directly to will yourself to be still.

#### BEGINNING

As you begin this period of standing and looking, see if you can be aware of your whole self and what you're looking at all at the same time. If you stop looking so that you can try to be more aware of yourself inwardly, that can easily lead you into a blank stare that causes you to fix or collapse, which then takes you more away from the full psychophysical integration you're hoping to improve during this time. On the other hand, it's important to be careful not to get so caught up in reacting to or thinking about what you're looking at so that it distracts you from your whole self in a way that makes you fix or collapse. Some of the time, especially in the early stages of this standing work, you might have to settle for shifting back and forth between focusing on your use of yourself in relation to gravity and your outward view. But more and more, both aspects can merge into one whole way of being and looking. Sometimes thinking of "looking through" your going up out upon your view helps to bring these two fields of awareness together.

(In case you don't have the gift of sight, I think you may still be able to use this standing and looking process by substituting a scene in your imagination for the actual scene around you. This idea worked well with a blind student I once taught, especially when she realized that she'd been "locating" her inner images and scenes more toward the back of her head and that this tended to cause her to let her head drift slightly backward over the top of her spine so that it hindered her head from leading her overall upward direction. When she placed her imagined scene more toward the front of her head – in her eyes and face – as if as if she was actually looking toward a view in that direction, this also made the "forward" direction of her whole head clearer and stronger, which, of course, improved her overall upward direction a lot too.)

It's also important not to keep your eyes dwelling too long on one point in your view. Just be calmly interested in taking in as many features and

qualities of the scene in front of you as you can, allowing them to come to your eyes rather than looking for them in a searching way. If your looking stays alive, interested, and appreciative so that you can enjoy all the qualities of the scene before you, it'll give you the best chance to improve your integration in relation to gravity as you're standing there. In a way, this kind of looking can also become a lot like what an artist might do in staying open to finding an inspiring view to paint or sketch, taking in all its nuances from many angles and perspectives, including how the light and shadows fall on objects in the scene at that particular moment of day or night.

Most of the time, the way that you're looking is also a reflection of how your overall integration is working as you're standing there. The more balanced and integrated your standing becomes, the more a richness and depth may come into your looking – and vice versa, the more your looking stays awake and alive, the more it can feed the integration of your standing.

When you're standing and looking in this way for a while, it can often turn into what I call “just seeing” – just seeing the qualities of the objects or scene as they *are* at that time of the day or night, and no more than that. This kind of seeing also comes with true inhibiting if you're really leaving aside your “preconceived ideas” and “fixed prejudices”<sup>103</sup> – Alexander's terms for some of our main blocks to learning an improved use of ourselves as a whole. I think Wallace Stevens's poem “The Snow Man” expresses wonderfully well this way of standing, looking, and seeing without projecting upon our view something of our own interpretation or fabrication. You can find the poem at: [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45235/the-snow-man-56d224a6d4e90).

#### GOING UP

While you're standing and looking and taking in your whole self in relation to gravity's pull on you, begin to see if you can notice where you might feel any tension, tightness, deadness, numbness, fatigue – anything that seems like it might be blocking your chance to be free and integrated into a balanced, up-going whole. If you find one or more of these places, don't dwell on any of them at first. Just be content to scan yourself and notice where these places are, only thinking of each of them as small fragments of the whole of you as you continue standing there looking and going up from the center of the earth with the wish to go on improving your freedom and integration.



Your main guide for locating where your going up is coming from is, as I said, the contact of your feet (basically the bottoms of your heels) with the floor or the ground; but some of your sense of up also comes from your looking out around you and *seeing* how everything in your view is related to your standing there on the earth (or on a surface attached to or resting on it). It's useful to acknowledge that the main function you're dealing with here involves how your supportive musculature and other tissue structures are working in relation to gravity's constant pull. And it's important to realize that this is a different function of your musculature from the one that involves moving through space. In standing, this supportive function is operating from the contact of the bottoms of your feet and runs up through your legs and into your spine, torso, and head, and it's governed well or poorly by how you direct your head-spine-limb coordination from moment to moment. (As I've said elsewhere, Alexander called our best use of this supportive function "the integrated (normal) working of the postural mechanisms."<sup>104</sup>)

So as you become more aware of the quality of your lengthening and going up while you're standing and looking, decide that you'll stick with that perceiving as much as you can as your main concern during this whole span of time that you've set aside for working on yourself. The real challenge is to go on sustaining your overall going up wish enough that you can begin to use it to affect those specific tensions, tightnesses, deadnesses, fatigues, etc. that you've noticed might be detracting from your freest state of being and then allowing them to transform into your fullest flow of upward lengthening direction.

I should acknowledge here too that if these tensions, tightnesses, deadnesses, fatigues, etc. sometimes carry with them various degrees of discomfort or even pain, it can be harder to stay with your overall going up and your looking, especially because there can be even more of a temptation to get quick relief by trying to make immediate, local changes in those places that seem to cry out for help. This, of course, is also where Alexander's warning to "beware of specifics!" is good to remember because a more effective and long-lasting form of relief can often come instead from just improving your *overall* going up and using that to "render aid" to these specific areas. The *real source* of your discomfort, pain, etc. (at least the kinds related to muscle tension and tightness) can usually be traced back to the fact that your overall integration is not working at its best, so improving your whole usually promotes the best chance to help the part that seems to be in trouble.

Sometimes it can take great patience – even courage – to postpone (inhibit) attempting to achieve quick, local changes to relieve pain or discomfort if they are fairly severe. All I can say to encourage you to stick with your overall going up when you’re contending with pain is just that many others before you (including me) have had success in ultimately relieving pain (even great pain) and discomfort in this indirect and generalized way. The most important thing to remember here, though, is *giving yourself time* for this approach to work. It can’t be hurried, rushed or pushed – even though it does take a certain intensity of energy and desire to stay with your going up steadily enough to build toward the psychophysical unity we’re looking for in the long run. Those common sayings in the teaching of the Technique, “Don’t try *too* hard,” and “Don’t try too hard *to be right*,” come in handy here too.

#### TENSIONS AND TIGHTNESSES

As I explained in the section on conditions and manner of use in Chapter 4, it’s important to make a distinction between the words “tension” and “tightness” in all processes of working on yourself. By tension, I mean any kind of efforts you’re making or any holdings you’re doing (even sub-consciously) that you can convert into lengthening fairly quickly, if not immediately, when you put your attention to them and when your wish to transform them is clear enough. (These kinds of tensions come under Alexander’s definition of “manner of use of the self.”)

By tightness, on the other hand, I mean any kind of contractions (even spasms) lodged in you that won’t immediately respond, if at all, to your *wish* to let them be transformed into the integrated lengthening of your overall going up. Sometimes among Alexander teachers we call these tightnesses “pulls,” because they’re usually pulling in very specific directions (mainly downward and inward) if we assess them closely enough. (These kinds of tightnesses fall under Alexander’s definition of “conditions of use of the self.”) Often we’ve lived with these tightnesses in us for so long and they’ve become so congealed that they may actually be cut off entirely from feeling (interoception). We often can’t realize they’re in us until we start to have work from a skilled teacher’s hands and we experience the overall integration and going up that unmask these tightnesses. They tend to lodge in certain common areas, but these places can also vary from person to person in terms of location and degree of tightness. It usually takes a lot of work from a teacher over many weeks (even months or years) before most of these tightnesses will begin to lengthen into our integrating whole, especially because many of the deeper ones can also be bound up with

our character and our emotions – our whole attitude to life, really. (What Alexander called our “reaction to the stimulus of living.”<sup>105</sup>) Even if these tightnesses might seem ready to lengthen from a more general “physical” point of view, we still might have some reluctance to letting them lengthen fully for all sorts of personal reasons. We may not yet have enough trust to let them transform fully into lengthening until we’re confident that our overall going up as a steady new source of psychophysical stability and power will serve us well in contending with whatever fear or attitude the tightnesses were helping us to cope with or maintain.

However, if many of these tightnesses do need long-term work, there’s always *some* chance that they might still respond at least a little to our working on ourselves as we do some of it each day. Of course, lying-down floor work often has an important part to play in improving our integrating too, and many tightnesses might respond better there than in this standing work. In fact, you might find you need to do some lying-down work first before you’re really ready to do this standing and looking work – especially if you’re very tired or tense.

Once you’re aware of any of these areas of tightness, go on to work on them very much in the same way as you approach looking at your view that I described earlier, being careful not to over focus or dwell on any one place too long. Instead, circulate around, only staying with one of them for a few moments at a time and continually returning to your total going up energy as your main source for improving and integrating. (Stay open to the chance that you might also uncover other deeper, “hidden” areas of tightness too as you free up the superficial ones more and more.) Then, after you’ve worked for a while in this way and you’ve improved your overall integration and going up considerably, you might find that there seems to be a major place or area that’s blocking you from further improvement. At this point you might want to start returning more often to that one place with your overall going up energy. However, even if you do this, it’s still important to stay with your overall standing and looking as much as you can to reinforce your general going up and lengthening and widening as your main source of aid to this one particular area.

#### TIME

The time you take for this standing and looking work may need to vary according to how busy you are, but I recommend that you do it for a minimum period of ten or fifteen minutes at a time so that you can have a good chance to accomplish at least some change or improvement – even if it does no more than quiet you down a little and help you transform some of

the tightness you might have built up during your earlier activities. Small changes may count for a lot in the long run because they can go on adding to your skill in directing, and they can pave the way for more significant improvements to happen later on.

Above all it's important to remember that sometimes these lengthening and integrating changes can happen when you're not even working directly for them. That's why the Alexander Technique can be such a great adventure in so many ways, and that's partly why it's sometimes called "a technique for the unknown." Very profound changes can take place when you're least expecting them, and they may bring new insight into freedom, integration, wisdom, character, and creativity. The more you open yourself to this whole spectrum of possibilities while you're standing and looking, the more it can affect your entire way of living and being.

Here are some short guiding points for working in this way, in case they might help you keep the process operating more as a whole.

1. Balance mainly over your heels.
2. Allow for bending, turning, shifting, etc. – but only if they really seem necessary.
3. Look out to your view "through" your standing.
4. Keep your looking alive, including your peripheral vision.
5. *Allow* the scene to come to your eyes.
6. Dedicate this period of time to improving your overall going up and lengthening and widening.
7. Notice tensions, and let them transform into your going up and lengthening and widening.
8. Notice tightnesses, and let your going up be the main source of transforming them into your overall lengthening and widening.
9. Allow for standing and looking to turn into seeing – without preconceptions, prejudices, or extraneous associations.
10. Be open to fullest psychophysical integration and to new insights about how this integration of yourself can fuse with your perception of your environment in ways you may never have experienced before.

#### SUMMING UP

Ultimately, working on yourself involves maintaining a clear distinction between making an improvement in the overall use of yourself only by either directing or ordering as distinct from making motions – however subtle – in attempting to achieve a result. This also means realizing that

even neuro-muscular changes gained through movement disciplines such as Physiosynthesis<sup>106</sup> or Yoga may be translated, so to speak, into directing if a clear differentiation is maintained between directing (or ordering) and doing.

As more research is done on the various facets of the Technique, I suspect that we'll find that "image" and "imagining" will also have to be taken more into account for understanding how directing and ordering actually operate, even though Alexander and many of the teachers he trained were opposed to what they called "visualizing." If verbal ordering is effective in any way at all, surely the words of the orders also produce images in us – as most words can – that may indirectly be a significant part of the process of improving our conditions and manner of use. Non-verbal directing may also not be very far removed from using some kind of active and deliberate imagining, even though we may still question the value of picturing our heads as helium-filled balloons or pumpkins on the ends of poles – as I remember hearing some Alexander trainees describe how they direct the use of their head and spine. But imagining our heads *as our heads* to allow for a lengthening of our spine and a widening of our whole back and torso surely isn't very far removed from "thinking" or "wishing" our heads to be leading a lengthening of our spine and a widening of our whole back and torso as part of our overall upward flow from our feet in response to gravity's constant pull. If "thinking" and "wishing" these directions don't involve *some* function of our imagination, it would be very surprising.

The work of developmental psychologist Howard Gardner on multiple intelligences may be able to shed light on the possible differences from person to person in how we learn to direct or order. He considers that we have seven main intelligences: musical, kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal and that there can be a difference from person to person in how developed each one of these intelligences is.<sup>107</sup> Other writing and research on the influence of imagery also suggests that the *words* we think to ourselves may only be transformed into physiological events through the operation of the *images* that the words produce in our imagining function. Obviously this process would need to take a certain amount of time (in terms of seconds, or even minutes) in order for it to operate effectively, and this length of time may even vary according to the emotional state and general conditions of use of each person at the particular time that they attempt this transformation. The extended and unhurried quality of time I've recommended above for ordering would be more likely to ensure this change-over from – or linking of – words to images that could then lead into an actual change

or improvement in the supportive function of our muscular, ligamental, tendinous, and other tissue structures. The varying requirements of each person from time to time of this transformational process might also account for some people not finding their attempts at ordering (*or* directing) to be particularly effective as a means of working on themselves.

On that point, it's interesting to note that Alexander teachers have often found that many musicians they teach are more able to immediately understand and incorporate the processes of inhibiting and directing into their lives than students with non-musical backgrounds. It's often seemed to me that this greater facility in musicians may be due to the fact that they're already very experienced in "projecting messages" from moment to moment from their imagination to their hands, arms, vocal mechanisms, etc. in order to produce the most expressive results on their instruments or in their voices. Others can be so intensely focused on their thinking that they may be quite out of touch with their self-perception as a whole. I've even had a few students who seemed so "estranged" from their neuro-muscular functioning that they weren't able to perceive any changes happening in themselves from the hands-on work I gave them, even though I could detect with my hands quite significant changes occurring in them. These students were often quite disappointed with their lessons because their friends had spoken so highly of the Technique and of the extraordinary experience they received from having lessons. Of course, this disparity could've been due to the possibility that I was simply not able to "connect" with these students' awareness and imagination in the best way for them to have the fullest experience of the Technique, and it may be that a different teacher would be more naturally on their same "wave length." By the same token, I've often thought that the reason I had such a powerful experience during my first private lessons in the Technique – apart from drawing on my experience as a musician – was because I happened to have the lessons from a teacher who "connected" with my imagination and life-understanding in a direct and complete way. Maybe the fact that she was an experienced performer had something to do with the outcome too because after having lessons from other teachers later who weren't experienced in the performing arts, I've often thought that I wouldn't have had such a deep and powerful experience of change if I'd had my first lessons from them.

In exploring the facets of working on myself over the past few years, I've also found it was useful to "engage" a highly personalized "avatar" in my imagination to enhance or deepen the effectiveness of my directing process. This involved conjuring the image of someone whose use of their

self is so naturally superb in the fullest psychophysical sense of character and comportment in daily life that I could be highly inspired to emulate them from moment to moment in all I do in life as well. Not long ago I found a definition in *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* that described an avatar as “the supreme glorification of any principle,”<sup>108</sup> and this fits well my use of the word to represent this highly personalized form of directing. I found that conjuring up various aspects of this avatar image could somehow enhance or deepen the effectiveness of my directing when I “applied” the image to – or “superimposed” it upon – either my use of myself as a whole or a particular aspect that I was directing as part of that whole. I also found it useful to imagine the feeling of my avatar’s hands directing me in the strategic places that a highly-skilled teacher would give me direction, and that approach could sometimes produce very effective results too. I know this idea sounds rather far-fetched, but I found that exploring this way of working on myself also seemed to have the potential to reach beyond the limits that a more self-centered or selfish kind of directing always had for me that wasn’t geared to include a generous and kind attitude to others. After all, in learning the Technique – especially in our earliest lessons – we are required to “leave ourselves alone” (inhibit) and not “try to do” anything that we *think* the teacher may want us to do in terms of moving or directing parts or the whole of ourselves. In effect, in the lesson situation we’re setting aside (inhibiting) our direct control in attempting to achieve results or improvements. Therefore, using the avatar imaging that I’ve described above becomes merely an extension of the “leaving ourselves alone” experience that allows for a deeper or fuller change to take place that also may be connected in our imagination to another human being’s attitude to life and general demeanor.

When considering this avatar experience there’s also the element of “subconscious imitation”<sup>109</sup> to consider – especially when I think of the experience I’ve often had when being with a group of people who’ve studied the Technique extensively. Often, during my training to become a teacher, I felt that all I had to do on many days to maintain an improvement in my use of myself was merely to come to the class where I knew I would see a good number of people all directing themselves positively to one degree or another. That visual input *alone* could also be considered a vital contribution to my ongoing development that I wouldn’t have had access to if I hadn’t come into that particular environment that day. Consequently, deliberately imagining an inspiring avatar’s characteristics doesn’t seem so far-fetched to me as it may sound to others. Of course, if one is blind



– especially if one has been blind from birth – the visual imagination component may not be as significant as it is for the sighted person. On the other hand, the imaginal function may be even more important and useful for a blind person than for someone who can see. The one blind person I had as a student – who wasn’t blind from birth – definitely used imagery as part of the directing process, even though the interoceptive experience in receiving hands-on work was just as vital for their learning as it was for a sighted person.

Another possibility that I’ve offered my students as an example of what the quality of their ordering might be like if it were reflected in music is the Adagio of Schubert’s *String Quintet in C Major*. I would also give them a recording to listen to from the Casals Festival in Prades, France where Casals performed the quintet with the Vegh Quartet, which can also be found on a youtube recording from 15:40 to 29:00.\*

Ultimately it seems possible to discover a singular direction that can facilitate a completely balanced integration in relation to gravity’s pull comparable to what we achieve in collaboration with a teacher’s hands-on work – especially when their hands evoke this integration from a contact at our head alone. My explorations have led me to a way of eliciting this total integration on my own by orienting my attention primarily to the region at the front of my upper spine – the prevertebral area just behind the back of my throat and pharynx. When I direct a gentle lengthening (or even just an “aliveness”) to happen there, it can evoke a lengthening flow in the rest of my spine and back that also connects through my pelvis to my legs to elicit a lengthening in them that, in turn, allows for an even fuller and deeper lengthening and widening of my back and whole torso. This directing of the front of my upper spine – linking to a forward direction of my jaw and chin – can also bring about a widening of my upper back, shoulders, and upper chest that continues on into a lengthening of my arms and hands. This entire sequence of lengthening and widening ultimately facilitates an energized leading of my head as part of my overall relation to gravity’s pull – whatever position I may be in – while it also accesses a deeper freeing and lengthening in my abdominal wall and pelvic floor areas as part of the fuller in-breaths that return by themselves, particularly after I expel my out-breaths on the whispered *p-o-o-o-o-m* sound that I describe at the end of the chapter on breathing and vocal production. The outcome of all this directing includes a renewed overall energy and a definite relief from fatigue or strain – particularly the kinds that can accompany aging. This

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\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfiYKK-Vwdo>



is the same kind of relief, of course, that frequently happens as a result of receiving hands-on work from an experienced teacher. It's also important to reiterate that this entire chain of vital direction comes about on the basis of NOT pulling my head back or down into my spine and torso, NOT shortening my spine or narrowing in my torso, NOT restricting my breathing, and NOT sinking down or collapsing into my pelvis, legs, and feet – as well as NOT attempting to DO any of their opposites.

I hope these descriptions, quotations, and thoughts may be of some use to anyone who is interested in exploring the possibility of working on themselves at times when they don't have access to hands-on work from a trained teacher. I also believe that many of the points I've raised here deserve careful consideration – especially in light of the approaches that appear to consider the Technique only to be a method for improving movement and carriage. That limited perspective seems to have been supported in recent years by some who haven't fully appreciated the fact that Alexander eventually substituted the term “primary control” for the earlier phrase “true and primary movement in each and every act.”<sup>110</sup> As he saw more clearly that an improvement in the use of the self comes about best by directing instead of doing, his work obviously evolved along the lines of greater refinement in the non-doing realm instead of the doing realm. Therefore, to advance with this approach to human development, I think it can be important for us to explore and understand more fully the basic properties of both ordering and directing.

In his introduction to Alexander's *The Use of the Self* John Dewey summed up well what it means to be fully engaged with the entire spectrum of improving our use of ourselves as a whole:

The technique of Mr Alexander gives to the educator a standard of psychophysical health – in which what we call morality is included. It supplies also the “means whereby” this standard may be progressively and endlessly achieved . . .<sup>111</sup>

I often like to remind myself of that last phrase: “. . . progressively and endlessly achieved . . .”

## 8 Inhibiting:

### “Your One Moment of Complete Freedom”

Another article that I like to give students is one I wrote that describes Alexander’s concept of inhibiting – the activity that’s actually the cornerstone of the Technique. I usually mention to them that the noun “inhibition” is frequently used in conversations and writing about the Technique, but I think the verb form “inhibiting” suggests a more vital experience, so I use it as much as possible in teaching, speaking, and writing on the subject.

Alexander made one of his most concise statements about the Technique in his fourth and last book, *The Universal Constant in Living* when he wrote:

My technique is based on inhibition, the inhibition of undesirable, unwanted responses to stimuli, and hence it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.<sup>112</sup>

Even though the terms “inhibition” and “inhibiting” have a fairly negative connotation in everyday language, the act of inhibiting that lies at the root of the Alexander Technique actually becomes extremely liberating because it essentially means leaving out or reducing to a minimum whatever we might be doing or thinking that can keep us from our fullest psychophysical integrating at any given moment. Alexander wrote that inhibiting gives us not only “freedom *of* thought and action,” but also “freedom *in* thought and action.”<sup>113</sup> His words are echoed in what Kitty Wielopolska remarked to me when we were discussing the subject of inhibiting: “It’s one’s moment of complete freedom,”<sup>114</sup> which I’ve also included in this chapter’s title.

#### ILLUSTRATION

To get a general idea of what Alexander meant by inhibiting, after you read this paragraph, set the book down and try to remain as still as you can for a few minutes. During that time, also try to be available in your whole self to notice what happens in your head, arms, torso, and limbs when you come to the point of deciding to pick the book back up again to read the next paragraph.

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Then, after you've brought the book back up to read these next sentences, ask yourself if you responded immediately to your decision to bring the book up again, or did you take some extra time to consider lifting it in a way that helped you remain in tune with your overall going up and lengthening and widening? If you took that extra time before the action, inhibiting is what you have done – especially if it allowed you to make your response in a more balanced and integrated way.

In its fullest form, inhibiting gives us the option of keeping at bay *all* immediate ways of responding that are automatic or habitual – whether they occur only in our thinking or in relation to actually carrying out an action. Usually, most people's *thinking* of doing an action and the *actual performance* of it are much more closely bound together than they realize.

When we can refrain from responding automatically and habitually – in the face of any kind of demand – by staying fully free instead of fixing ourselves or getting set for only one possible action or response, then we have a much better chance of responding in a way that's most balanced, most true to the moment, and most humane, even if we ultimately choose to make the same general kind of response we were about to make automatically or habitually. The process of inhibiting can also provide us with the chance to have a greater flexibility, originality, and integrity as our basis for whatever we do or however we respond – especially when we see that sometimes we don't really need to respond at all or when we understand that it wouldn't be best for the immediate situation if we do. Or we might realize that we don't yet have all the information we need for thinking or acting in the most constructive and productive way in the moment and that we need to be able to wait openly until we have a fuller or better understanding of what may be required. Creating this space between stimulus and response can unmask all sorts of issues such as "incorrect conceptions,<sup>115</sup> unduly excited fear reflexes, uncontrolled emotions, and fixed prejudices"<sup>116</sup> that Alexander saw as interfering with the most intelligent way of living that's based on an integrated use of ourselves in relation to all life's stimuli, including gravity's downward pull.

To reinforce the understanding of inhibiting in his work, Alexander quoted the Nobel prize physiologist Sir Charles Sherrington who wrote in *The Brain and its Mechanism*,<sup>117</sup> "often, to refrain from an act is no less an act than to commit one, because inhibition is co-equally with excitation a nervous activity."<sup>118</sup> We see then that inhibiting is considered by scientists sometimes to have a basic and positive function in living;

some processes and actions need to be suspended – at least temporarily – so that others may be carried out most efficiently and effectively just at the most appropriate moment, and not before. More recently, the Foothills Academy that specializes in learning disabilities wrote: “Inhibitory control is a core executive function. It involves controlling our automatic urges (attention, behaviour, thoughts, and emotions) by pausing, then using attention and reasoning to respond appropriately. Inhibitory control involves our ability to think before we react. It allows us to think about past experiences and then consider what the future consequences might be in a particular situation.”<sup>119</sup>

Of course, inhibiting alone is not enough to create the full freedom in responding that we’re looking for with the Technique, but it’s the *beginning*, the starting point. It needs to come first. When we can fully leave out our automatic responding, this then gives us the best chance to direct ourselves to go up, lengthen, widen, and integrate according to Alexander’s discovery for using ourselves as a whole. Then that integrating itself actually becomes our gauge and basis for choosing more wisely and responding more accurately and humanely – especially since it also offers us a standard for honoring and fostering the same positive condition in others and more of an opportunity to do so.

#### LEARNING TO INHIBIT

In Alexander lessons, when we use the action of getting up from and sitting down on a chair, inhibiting is actually the most fundamental ability we’re trying to help students learn and develop. These two seemingly simple everyday actions also reveal a lot about how the character of *all* our responses serves us to our best or worst advantage in every other life situation – especially at those times when we’re trying hard to achieve some result or trying too hard to make it right or excellent. Of course, Alexander called this excessive striving “endgaining,” and he often attributed it to “undue self-determination” and the attitude of trying to be right.<sup>120</sup> Here is one of Alexander’s most comprehensive statements on the topic, and I’m inclined to think that his words here are much more relevant today now that modern technology requires us to contend with even faster speeds of thinking and responding in our daily lives than anyone ever imagined in Alexander’s own day:

. . . a change in the nature of human reaction is essential if mankind is not to remain saddled with frustrating static and obsolete beliefs, ideas, conceptions, and relative values which have long since outlived their

usefulness . . . This should not surprise anyone who remembers that in most fields of activity man's craze is for speed and for the short view, because he has become possessed by the non-stop attitude and outlook: he is a confirmed endgainer, without respect to the nature of the means whereby he attempts to gain his desired end even when he wishes to employ new means whereby he could change his habits of thought and action.<sup>121</sup>

Through chair work in Alexander lessons we can also find out a lot about how we behave under stress, frustration, and too much stimulation about how other feelings and ideas might influence our thinking and our ways of doing things – since reacting to the prospect of getting up and sitting down also often sets off the same basic kind of subconscious thinking and responding in relation to gravity as does our reacting to the prospect of *anything* else happening to us, whether it's something that may happen in the immediate or the more distant future.

So it doesn't really matter if it's the action of getting up from a chair, thinking out how we might approach getting to know someone, or addressing the United Nations General Assembly – the same fundamental use of ourselves as a whole needs to be involved in everything we do. This is why Alexander called what he was attempting to help people achieve through the Technique “improving their reaction to the stimulus of living.”<sup>122</sup> Chair work, then, is the format that he devised for helping us understand, foster, and develop that improvement from moment to moment.

One of the things that traditional Alexander teaching wants most to help us understand through the process of inhibiting is that most of the time our automatic or habitual ways of behaving usually start out as automatic or habitual ways of *thinking*. The linking of thinking to doing usually happens so quickly and so subconsciously that it's hard to see it or catch it in ourselves until we've had a chance to experience the integrated way of being and moving that a skilled teacher's hands can give us while moving us into and out of a chair as we “leave ourselves alone” or “do nothing” but attend to directing our going up and lengthening and widening. As I said before, when I'm teaching I'll often begin to move a student out of a chair toward standing and then stop the motion just before I actually get to the point where their weight would ordinarily transfer from the seat of the chair primarily to their feet. In early lessons just at this point, much of the time beginning students have already begun to make preparations in their legs (and elsewhere) as if they're going to complete the standing movement by themselves even though they've agreed *not* to do anything to

“help.” This reversion to their habitual way of responding shows that they really haven’t been inhibiting at the “critical moment”<sup>123</sup> when they start to *think* – or *guess* – that standing up may be going to happen soon. They have actually *decided* subconsciously that they’ll need to help execute the movement. Then, as I also described before, many will even say at this point, “But how can I possibly get up if I don’t help with my leg muscles?” I explain again that getting into standing is not *their* responsibility. It’s mine, and if rising to standing doesn’t happen for them, that’s perfectly OK. It’ll be *my* failure, not theirs.

Once we’ve experienced the integrating and going up that come with sustaining our lengthening and widening both before, during, and after standing and sitting, then it can begin to become more and more of a basis for our finding the freest way of thinking and responding in all other situations. We can also more easily see that it’s essentially our *way of thinking* that we need to change or suspend (inhibit) and redirect so that we have the best chance of transforming our responding into a more integrated and appropriate outcome. Of course, some people may have some coordination difficulties or other conditions that may prevent them from standing up or sitting down – either on their own or with a teacher’s guidance. But other actions can be used to achieve the same understanding – even if it’s just making a vocal sound or raising an arm.

#### REACTING AND RESPONDING

As I begin to work more on helping students to develop their power of inhibiting in lessons, I find it can be helpful to ask them to make a distinction between “reacting” and “responding.” I define *reacting* as what happens first but may not be at all visible to an onlooker, whereas I define *responding* as the carrying through of that reacting into ways of moving – or behaving – that are often, but not always, visible to others, especially if they’re watching us closely. Reacting tends to involve changes *within* us that happen more “beneath the surface,” like changes in our breathing, blood flow, skin and muscle texture, and other internal changes that can vary according to what affects us (either consciously or subconsciously) both from our outside surroundings and from within us in our imagining, thinking, and feeling. Responding, on the other hand, involves muscular activity that usually includes *making some motion in space* – even if it’s only blinking our eyes or moving our head ever so slightly when something suddenly sparks our attention. Often skilled Alexander teachers can perceive with their hands the beginnings of our responses before we can

sense them ourselves – particularly, as I described above, when we get an idea that the teacher is just about to move us into standing or sitting.

This distinction between reacting and responding may seem like a false division to make because most of the time the two aspects can *feel* like they're one in the same. Or, at the very least, they can seem to happen in such a direct flow from one into the other that we might find it impossible to detect where any changeover from thinking to doing actually takes place until we've had quite a number of lessons. Even so, what we're learning with the Technique is how to free ourselves from the strong link between whatever may be stimulating us at any given moment and how we're responding to it. To help gain more clarity on this point, I think distinguishing between reacting and responding helps by giving us a model for extending the time we need for working on choosing our best way of responding. Usually a reaction takes place somewhere within us as soon as a stimulus comes into our sphere of living, but deciding whether or not to respond to it – and choosing *how*, or *if*, we should respond to it – often needs to come somewhat later.

It takes a lot of practice to develop enough skill at inhibiting to be successful with it in everyday living, and this skill also grows hand in hand with the growth of our skill in directing our head-torso-limb relationship to evoke the best working of our musculature and other supportive tissue in relation to gravity.<sup>124</sup> The more accomplished we are at inhibiting our automatic ways of responding, the more it's possible for us to maintain our overall integrating direction. And vice versa: the better we are at maintaining our integrating direction, the easier it is for us to deal appropriately and effectively with more and more powerful stimuli to react and respond.

#### PRACTICE SUGGESTION I

Since Alexander had no-one to help him improve his powers of inhibiting and directing, he devised a procedure for developing them on his own. I think everyone studying the Technique can benefit by working along these same lines – particularly if we have a skilled teacher's hands to verify that we're on the right track.<sup>125</sup> In fact, I would even go so far as to say that until we have this procedure fully under our belt, we probably don't yet have a working knowledge of the Technique. Here's one suggestion for using this practice sequence in the way that Alexander describes in his third book, *The Use of the Self*.<sup>126</sup>

To begin, choose an action that you'd like to discover if you can do it in a better way than you regularly do when you need to do it quickly.



Select a fairly short and simple task that doesn't always *have* to be done suddenly – like singing a note or phrase from a song, speaking a line of a poem, raising your arm to wave hello, taking a single step, etc. Then deliberately set aside a lot more time – maybe as much as five or ten minutes – for building up to doing the action than you would usually give yourself for engaging your musculature in a balanced way even though you might actually need only a few seconds to do so when the moment to act finally arrives. In other words, give yourself time to *wait*, even though you've definitely decided on what it is that you're ultimately going to do.

But do *not* go right ahead and perform the action. *Wait*.

While you're waiting, use that extra time to make sure that you're directing your head-torso-limb relationship as well as possible. (I'm assuming here again that, to a certain extent, you already understand how to give your basic head-torso-limb directions so that they have a positive influence on your overall lengthening and widening.) Once you think you're fairly well in command of your overall integration and you're able to go on sustaining it while you're continuing to wait and continuing to delay any responding, decide, but *only decide*, that you'll do the action you initially chose to do – not immediately, but *in a few more minutes*. However, again wait, wait, wait, wait, *wait!* And try to notice if *just* having made that decision *itself* to perform the action caused you to start to change anything at all in your overall integration. Often it will. And if it does – *especially* if it does – just go on postponing the action so that you can return to reinforcing your overall integration and going up as your *main activity*.

When you finally come to the stage that your deciding to act doesn't distract you from your overall integration and going up, then you *might* be ready to go on to the moment of doing the action. Then continue with your overall directing in order to again lead into doing the action.

But *wait again*, just a second or so before you're going to do the action. *Don't do the action after all!*

Instead, *decide again* what you'll do, just as if you were choosing all over again from the start. But this time give yourself several other possible choices in addition to your original one. (Alexander called this activity "making a fresh decision" – this *redeciding* at what he realized is our most "critical moment"<sup>127</sup> just *before* we turn thinking or conceiving into doing.)

Then, as before, in this new and "fresh" decision-making process, keep your overall integrating as your main priority while you make your *new* choice of action from these next four options. Choose either to:



1. go on, after all, and do your original choice of action – such as sing a note, or
2. do another fairly different action – such as raise your hand, or
3. do yet another action than either of the first two – such as stand up or sit down, or
4. just continue with directing your basic integrating and going up as your only activity.

With this procedure, *whichever* ultimate choice you make can have a better chance to be filled with your fullest integrating and going up just because you've allowed for these *different* possibilities. Therefore, no matter what you finally choose to do, your attention to integrating still remains your main – or primary – activity while the choices of any specific action remain more secondary right on through to finally doing one of them. If one of your choices is something that stirs up a lot of enthusiasm or excitement in you – for instance, like making music or reciting poetry often can – this temporary setting aside of your goal is rather like placing it on an imaginary shelf just off to one side where it can go on “shimmering” with its essential inspiration and intensity until you're truly ready to approach accomplishing it with your fullest going up and lengthening and widening as your main source of power.

This extended delaying practice also helps to temper any excessive power that your inspiration or excitement might have over you that could actually stand in the way of your doing the action most completely and wonderfully, especially if it's a deeply ingrained activity that you've learned to do at a very early age or that you've practiced for a long time – like walking, speaking, or singing.

In a way, you could say that this fresh decision-making procedure actually *equalizes* your choices so that you can bring the same integrating power to all of them. Even your fourth option – just waiting and directing – can contain the same heightened energy as the excitement of singing a note from a moving song. When you work this way for a while, the process can further empower your directing energy as much as it may improve your inhibiting ability in order for the two to continue to develop and ultimately function as one.

You may also benefit a good deal from going through this entire multiple-choice procedure several times before you finally let yourself go ahead to accomplish the action that you ultimately choose to do – especially if it's a task that you usually tend to rush through in a way that

gets you stiff or tired or that gets you frustrated because it often turns out less successful or rewarding than you hope it will be.

By now it should be clear that the time just *before* you act is the most crucial – the critical moment – even though it may ultimately mean leaving only a split second more time than you usually take between your deciding and your taking action. When you’ve fully left out all the unnecessary extra neuro-muscular preparing that you might be engaging in out of habit to be sure you’ll be right, it can often seem like the final action just “does itself,” without much, if any, sense of effort at all. The Alexander language for this approach is “non-doing,” as distinguished from “doing,” since “doing” usually carries with it some quality of an “endgaining,” excessive, and unnecessary effort. This approach, of course, is diametrically opposite to what most people do when they abide by the saying “If at first you don’t succeed, try and try again!” – which I think they usually mean: “try harder and harder each time.”

In my early years of study and teaching the Technique, Alexander’s approach to inhibiting and directing was often likened to learning the practice of Zen. And westerner Eugen Herrigel’s book *Zen and the Art of Archery* was sometimes recommended reading to Alexander students because of its description of how the aspiring young archer, under the tutelage of the Zen master, finally gave up *trying* to hit the target – “trying too hard to be right” – so that he ultimately had the sense of the arrow shooting “by itself.”<sup>128</sup>

#### PRACTICE SUGGESTION II

Another way of developing your skill at inhibiting (and directing) in daily life is to choose some fairly simple action that you usually do many times a day – such as opening a door, lifting a foot to climb a flight of stairs, or reaching to answer a phone, and each time the need for the action comes up see if you can remember throughout the day to pause a moment to reinforce your going up and integrating before you go ahead and do the action. Sometimes you might want – and need – to take longer than just a moment so that you can give your going up and integrating their fullest chance to enhance the activity, especially if the action is very demanding athletically or socially (for instance, if you have to lift something heavy or if you have to speak with someone you usually find difficult to interact with). Then, at the end of the day, reflect back and try to remember how successful you were at remembering to pause and reinforce your directing at these critical moments.

I'm remembering here a question that students sometimes ask me when they begin to realize how important and valuable the process of inhibiting and directing can be in life. They'll say, "Did inhibiting and directing eventually become automatic so that you didn't have to think of them any more?" They're usually a bit astonished when I answer, "No. It became automatic *to think of them* every moment."

#### THE BROADER VIEW

Another aspect that inhibiting can reveal to us about ourselves is the fact that we may actually be doing a lot of our preparatory thinking, choosing, and deciding *subconsciously* in a way that we've never been aware of before. Much of our responding usually begins so soon after our thinking and deciding because we're also guessing (preconceiving) so quickly about what we *might* need to be prepared for (again, endgaining) that we get distracted from our awareness of what's happening *now* in our going up and integrating. We're often trying so hard to be sure we'll be prepared in just the right way when the moment comes to act or respond that we're actually setting ourselves up to be "wrong" when that moment finally arrives. Then, especially if some different response or action is needed from what we were expecting to have to do, we often need to take extra time to dismantle the "wrong" before we can find our way through to the "right" or more appropriate response – for *now*. Early research into aspects of the Technique called this kind of preparatory muscular activity "postural set."<sup>129</sup>

I've often been astonished at how so many people seem to believe they know for sure what's going to happen in the future, especially the very near future in terms of the next few moments. During my years of teaching, I've particularly noticed the instances when students believe they know what I'm going to say next and they actually begin responding before I've made a complete enough statement from which they can be certain of the point that I'm intending to make. This endgaining habit can often set the stage for all kinds of social discomfort and misunderstanding when it happens in daily life – as it often seems to. However, if I can persuade students to apply inhibiting in these situations, the change in the "texture" of our communication is often dramatic – and quite a relief that paves the way for a much fuller understanding between us on whatever subject we're discussing.

One particularly touching example of this change happened in an elderly student of mine when he discovered that inhibiting allowed him to have a meaningful conversation with his adult son. Previously, the father

would never wait for the son to finish what he wanted to say before the father would break in with his own thoughts or opinions on the subject. I remember the day the father told me that he finally had a “realization” about inhibiting. He said to me at the end of that lesson that he didn’t think he understood exactly what it was that we were supposed to be inhibiting. And when I replied, “*Everything . . . habitual*,” he was quite astonished that he hadn’t realized that before. From that day on I found it enormously easier to communicate with him in our lessons too – because he could finally wait for me to finish what I would be in the process of saying.

Even if people don’t think they know for sure what will happen in the very near future, they still often feel they can at least do something to make it go their way if they try to control things in some definite, pre-determined, getting-set way so that they’ll be sure to get just the results they think they want or need (again: endgaining). Learning the process of inhibiting can throw a great deal of light on these and many other habitual tendencies, and it offers a unique opportunity for freeing ourselves from them. Inhibiting and directing can help us to be ready for *anything*.

Alexander wrote of the Technique as a way of bridging “the gap between the ‘subconscious’ and the conscious . . . by means of a knowledge gained through practical experience, which will enable man *to inhibit his impulsive ‘subconscious’ reaction to a given stimulus, and to hold it inhibited while initiating a conscious direction, guidance, and control of the use of himself that was previously unfamiliar.*”<sup>130</sup> These impulsive, subconscious reactions may also contain a whole realm of hidden material about our personality and attitude toward life that we may never have believed we could have any control over – even if we did become aware of it.

It’s also important to remember here that Alexander’s use of “subconscious” as an adjective (and not as a noun) is different from the use of “unconscious” as both a noun and an adjective in psychology, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis to refer to neurophysiological functions that aren’t available to direct perception or to images and feelings that occur in our dreaming that we don’t have any overt control over. Therefore, “subconscious” and “unconscious” are not interchangeable terms in the Alexander Technique vocabulary because “subconscious activity” refers to anything that we’re doing or thinking while we’re awake that we *could* be conscious of but often aren’t – until, for instance, it’s pointed out to us in an Alexander lesson or until we notice it for ourselves when we catch ourselves thinking about preparing for an action in a way that interferes with our overall integrating. Much of the time in the early stages of

lessons we don't realize how much we're affected by this subconscious interference until our action has been completed and we see, on careful reflection, that it didn't happen in the most integrated way it could have – especially if we've already experienced it in an integrated way and we've established that experience as a new standard for comparison. Through this sitting-to-standing-to-sitting procedure in our lessons we begin to realize the difference between what Alexander called “conscious guidance and control” and “subconscious guidance and control.”<sup>131</sup> He never used “subconscious” as a noun, only as an adjective or adverb, as when he wrote of “subconscious vs. conscious guidance and control.” From this point of view, I guess we would have to consider sleepwalking or talking in our sleep to be actions of “unconscious guidance and control” since there's no possibility of our becoming aware of doing those activities or even realizing the feeling of having just done them when we wake up.

Eventually, inhibiting can also reveal to us the true nature of our motives for doing whatever we do or for thinking whatever we think – especially when it comes to any fixed prejudices, beliefs, and preconceived ideas we may have, which, according to Alexander, are usually some of our main subconscious guiding influences.<sup>132</sup> Sometimes we may think we're going to do something for a certain reason, or we may believe that we're responding in a certain way that we've deliberately decided upon or chosen; but often, when we inhibit and take an extra bit of time between deciding and doing, we may discover that there were actually other, more subconscious reasons or motives behind our thinking or responding in that particular way that may have made the quality of the outcome seem to betray whatever we believed to be our best, conscious intentions. For instance, when a person seems to be doing something kind and is trying to be gentle or positive about doing it, but there still seems to be a coercive or controlling quality underlying it that produces an accompanying negative effect. The outcome doesn't really ring true as the gentle, caring thing the person seemed at first to intend, even if they believed their heart was in the right place when they decided to act. It very likely involved a degree of what Alexander called “undue self-determination” that so often results in endgaining and over controlling so that any interaction between equals is thwarted.

Conversely, I can think of times when I was using all of my powers of inhibiting and directing so that I would be sure to choose the best action or response that would respect others' needs and freedoms as well as my own. Yet others could only think that I was acting or responding out of self-centered interests rather than for the sake of discovering the truth

between us about the particular subject or situation so that we could make a wise decision about it together and move on in a positive way. Yet, if I hadn't been inhibiting and directing in those instances, I can imagine that a much more negative outcome could have come about. In those cases it's also possible that the other person was "endgaining" by "jumping to conclusions" about my "motive for action," as I think Alexander sometimes called it and psychotherapists would probably call it a form of "projecting."

With all these points in mind, you can see that inhibiting in the Technique can even provide us with the chance for a unique kind of "self-analysis" if we choose to allow it to do so and if we make the fullest use of the opportunity it gives us to look into our innermost motives for acting and responding. Regular psychoanalysis and psychotherapy often help us understand the *reasons* from the past that may lie behind our behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs. However, these approaches don't seem to offer such a practical way of working on unraveling and changing how such influences actually operate in the real-life moment-to-moment region between deciding and doing that usually stays hidden and unaddressed in the gap between subconscious and conscious activity that Alexander claims has been created by categorizing ourselves as having a separate "mind," "body," and "spirit."<sup>133</sup>

For instance, I've taught students who've undergone extensive psychoanalysis or psychotherapy and have developed a deep and refined understanding of how people and events in their past may have influenced the way they think and behave. Even though I could see how this understanding has given them great help in many ways, I've also seen that, to a certain extent, they often still tended to respond in the same ways they always have at the critical moments when their habitual characteristics tended to get in the way of successful and compassionate communicating and relating.

The most unfortunate thing about this point, though, is that these students often consider that they're already able to deal as well as possible with their habitual tendencies and attitudes as a result of their psychoanalytical or psychotherapeutic work and therefore see no need to allow for the possibility that the Alexander Technique could offer them any further understanding and skill in this regard, specifically through using and developing their power of inhibiting. Therefore, they keep the Technique compartmentalized in their thinking as only being something that helps them on a "physical" level, while the psychoanalysis or psychotherapy experience is what they believe helps them on "mental" and "emotional" levels.

The extra time and the power over our habits provided by inhibiting gives us the opportunity to look at ourselves and our lives from a much broader perspective than I think most of us usually do. Alexander called upon on us to try to “cease our muddled examination of the details just in front of us, and try to see our problems in the broad terms of one who can stand back and see life moving through the centuries.”<sup>134</sup> This broader viewpoint – which can occur when one is truly inhibiting – can also reveal how aspects of our cultural conventions, long-standing attitudes, and habits of behavior may be subconsciously guiding our thinking, imagining, and doing in ways that prevent us from progressing toward a more humane and civilized way of being in the world. Inhibiting allows us the possibility of finding that split-second where those more deeply ingrained conditionings and beliefs actually start to play themselves out in everyday life so that we can see beyond our blindness to them and have the freedom to take a more active and creatively compassionate role in managing our own destinies.

For teaching inhibiting in recent years, I’ve sometimes drawn upon ideas that I learned through my experience and study of Psychosynthesis – particularly as described in Piero Ferrucci’s book *What We May Be*.<sup>135</sup> If, as I got to know students better, I found that they regularly tended to lose touch with their directing and integrating when they reacted or responded in a certain habitual way – especially in conversation – I tried to come up with a phrase that would characterize the main impulse or attitude that may have been propelling their response into action so powerfully that it was diverting them from their most integrated use of themselves. Ferrucci used the expression “sub-personalities” for these behavioral tendencies that seem to detract from our most unified self; so I would sometimes decide that a student’s “clever fellow,” “helper lady,” “careful fellow,” etc. would be the label I’d use to remind them that they’d lost touch with their fullest directing – their fullest use of themselves. I might even give these sub-personalities more colorful names, like “your Tango lady” (who’d be subconsciously anticipating and actually moving in the direction she’d decide I might be going to move her next as one might be inclined to do when dancing with an experienced partner), “your chariot fellow” (who’s driving a chariot drawn by four powerful horses charging rapidly ahead through life), or “your clever fellow” or “clever lady” (who’s often jumping in with a very quick comment about a topic in response to whatever anyone else says).

Usually – at least in the early stages of learning the Technique – if someone tends to respond instantly we can be pretty sure that almost all



their responding will be habitual (their “habitual manner of use of the self,” as Alexander called it throughout his writings). And if they’re responding habitually, they usually don’t have the best chance of being truly free and spontaneous or fully constructive and caring. Inhibiting, then, not only gives us more freedom from habit, but it also gives us more *freedom to discover and choose* new ways of thinking and responding. Consequently, in certain instances, I think the sensing of this possibility may be what causes some people to shy away from or resist the Technique when they first encounter it. The thought of finding ways of thinking or behaving that are different from their habitual, automatic ones seems either just too big a demand or too threatening to their character and the way they’re used to behaving in most social situations.

The “herd instinct,” as Alexander pointed out,<sup>136</sup> is another force that can be guiding automatic behavior when someone gets swept up in the emotions, actions, and attitudes of others in a group or crowd and they find themselves thinking and doing things the same way as everyone else without making any real choice about whether they *want* to think or *need* to do those things that way at that time, or whether they even want to do them at all because “they’re just going along with the crowd.” “Subconscious imitation,”<sup>137</sup> can be another strong influence within us too, as Alexander noted – especially since we acquire many of our habits of carriage and speech from imitating those closest to us when we’re very young and then add other patterns on top of these later on as we try to fit into our culture’s attitudes and norms of behavior or try to emulate those we most admire or respect. Recent studies of the function of mirror neurons seem to shed light on how this aspect of subconscious imitation actually operates.<sup>138</sup> Since Alexander pointed out this tendency long ago, I’ll go into the subject of mirror neurons in more detail in the last chapter when discussing the factor of subconscious imitation.

Ultimately, inhibiting can become a constantly ongoing activity while nearly every waking moment presents us with a range of stimuli for us to react to that can quite easily provoke automatic and habitual ways of thinking or responding. So if you can identify and acknowledge what’s actually happening each moment – both outside you (exteroception) and within you (interoception; including kinesthetic perception and proprioception) – then inhibiting and going up from moment to moment can become your basic way of responding to life – your “reaction to the stimulus of living.” This is when you’re inhibiting at the most fundamental level, and again, this is the basic experience, understanding, and skill that “chair work” is attempting to provide.



Sometimes I think that the greatest challenge to inhibiting happens in conversation – especially when we’re talking about something that’s exciting or difficult or when we’re speaking with someone who’s overbearing, competitive, controlling, or argumentative in the way they converse. Nevertheless, even remembering for a split second before each phrase we speak to free ourselves from the temptation to take a quick breath and rush on into our words can often make a remarkable difference – not only in our own quality and effectiveness of communication, but also in our listener’s willingness to respect and absorb what we have to say.

To address this issue with students and trainees, I’ve often used psychologist Carl Rogers’s illustration of successful communication to encourage my students and trainees to inhibit and listen more carefully to others and to take more time before responding to another person’s statement. In a workshop enquiring into the nature of “congruence” in interpersonal relationships, Rogers and the participants found that if “Jack” makes a statement that “Susan” would like to respond to, Susan must first re-state Jack’s statement to *Jack’s satisfaction that Susan has actually understood it*. Then Susan is in the best position to respond with accuracy, etc. Almost always, though, when she finally realized his point, it became clear that she had *not* understood his statement fully, and when she finally re-stated it to his satisfaction, she saw that she actually had no need, or even any wish, to respond after all.<sup>139</sup>

#### “STOPPING” VS. “PAUSING”

In most of the early approaches to teaching the Technique that I’m familiar with you’d usually be instructed to think of inhibiting as “stopping” rather than “pausing” or “delaying.” Also, along with “stopping,” you’d be required to say “No” silently to yourself in relation to any habitual action you may be about to make or to any habitual thinking you’re starting to do – whether these patterns are happening because of some preconceived ideas you might tend to have acquired from this kind of situation in the past or because you’re guessing (consciously or subconsciously) what might be about to happen in the present that would take some special preparation to address. In other words, you’d be instructed by the teacher to *stop* and say “No” right when you’d start *thinking* that you knew what the future held – whether it would be during the lesson in the moment before an Alexander teacher would seem to be going to stand you up from sitting or when you’d be predicting and planning for the more distant future. However, I find that the word “stop” can sometimes tempt students to stiffen and try to hold themselves still. Therefore, I think the words “pause” or “delay” can often work as well as or better than “stop”

in helping students to remain free. Nevertheless, the following description of inhibiting by Alexander teacher John Hunter gives a good reason for using the word “stop”:

What Erika [first-generation teacher Erika Whittaker] would emphasize about inhibition is that a stop is not a pause: they are quite different. A pause implies that one is going to do the thing, but not yet. A stop has no such implication. We are free to do something else. If you press the pause button on a cassette player, the motor is still engaged; as soon as you release the button the machine can only continue in the same direction it was going. If you press the stop button, other options become available. That moment of really becoming aware of options, which I call discovering the moment of choice, is one that Alexander went to some length to try and explain. . . .<sup>140</sup>

On the other hand, if your stopping causes you to completely give up your motivation or inspiration for doing something that you want with all your heart to do superbly (like playing a piece of music), I don’t think you should completely sever the connection to that motivation and inspiration, which is what Erika Whittaker’s example of “stop” seems to imply that we should do. There must surely have been an element of this kind of excitement in Alexander’s own procedure that he described in *The Use of the Self* for developing his powers of inhibiting and directing an improved use of himself as a whole – particularly if the “certain sentence”<sup>141</sup> he chose for this exercise was from a Shakespeare play or other dramatic reading. It’s also interesting in his case that quite early on in the chapter he makes a clear distinction between “reciting” and “ordinary speaking.”<sup>142</sup> I’ve always assumed that the “certain sentence” he chose for his practice procedure was from a play or other dramatic reading since his main reason for working out a solution to his vocal problems was to help him to resume his career as a recitalist. So it’s easy to think that he chose a line for the exercise such as “This above all: to thine own self be true . . .” *in order* to reckon with the power that the inspiration to perform instilled in him.

I can also imagine, though, that Alexander may have chosen his “certain sentence” from daily conversation (e.g., “How are you today?”) just so that he would *not* have to contend with the extra energy of performance excitement. In this case of choosing a sentence from ordinary speech, it would be much easier for that stimulus to remain pretty much on the same level of energy as the other two options he gave himself: continuing with inhibiting and projecting the primary directions or lifting his hand,

etc. However, in the case of reciting a dramatic text, I could see that the aesthetic excitement in merely *thinking* of reciting a sentence from a play could affect his entire use of himself in a very vibrant way if he kept that excitement more contained in his imagination and didn't allow it to burst forth instantly into actual speech. Then merely "continuing to project the directions for maintaining the new use" or going on to "lift my hand instead"<sup>143</sup> could possibly have been informed with a more heightened direction of his whole self as well. I wish we knew what that certain sentence was that he chose!

#### NATURE OR NURTURE?

I've sometimes heard other Alexander teachers say "The Alexander Technique won't change who you are. If you're a burglar, it will only help you become a better burglar." These words were often attributed to Alexander himself, but I've never been able to accept that he actually made such a statement or even implied that it could be so. In fact, much to the contrary, in his first book *Man's Supreme Inheritance* he devotes several pages to discussing the "thief" and to what might be possible in terms of the thief being able to change his ways if "the psychophysical conditions which influence him in the direction of crime" are dealt with more fully than most programs of reform have the skills to employ with regard to a fuller psychophysical re-education.<sup>144</sup> So I tend to think that those who believe that the Technique doesn't have the capacity to "change who you are" – essentially your habits in living, or what Alexander called our "reaction to the stimulus of living"<sup>145</sup> – are those who believe that our basic response patterns and attitudes to life are ironclad for our entire life and even genetically programmed.

These thoughts also remind me that Walter Carrington once quoted to our training class when we find we're up against a resistant attitude toward the Technique, "A man convinced against his will is of the same conviction still." I suppose this attitude could be seen behind much of the tendency for people to cling to their habits of thinking and behaving as part of everything about themselves that they'd consider to be their "personality." For it seems that unless some people can be presented with a necessary – and desirable – alternative to "who they are," they probably see no need to consider other possibilities of thinking and behaving that would make the world a better place. Of course, there's nothing in the procedures involved in the employment of the Technique itself that would guarantee that a person would always use inhibiting and directing in order to choose to pursue a "good" end for *both* self and society. One could just as readily choose a

self-centered or destructive course of action and maybe use some of the skills learned through Alexander lessons to carry out that choice more effectively (e.g., pick the lock on a door, climb through a window to rob a house, etc.).

However, I believe learning “constructive conscious control of the individual” – Alexander’s own phrase – obviously carries with it *positive social implications*, as he also took great pains to point out. If we experience and enjoy a greater well-being and effectiveness in our own life as a consequence of having Alexander lessons, we usually become increasingly loath to have that well-being and effectiveness diminished by life’s difficult circumstances or by other people’s negative actions. Therefore, it seems to follow that we should also be able to more easily imagine that same need in others for an improved well-being and effectiveness. Then our broad perspective in living would surely be based either on a concern that the world and life in it continue in as constructive a way as possible, or else we wouldn’t really care if others live abominable lives or even perish. It becomes increasingly easy to see that the world could be a much better place if, at the very least, we would simply “do not unto others as we would not have them do unto us.” Certainly, Alexander’s writings contain a strong exhortation for us to move beyond an instinctive plane of existence to a more and more civilized one. Early in his first book, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, he claimed:

It is my earnest belief that the intelligent recognition of the principles essential to guidance by conscious control is essential to the full mental and physical development of the human race. Due consideration will convince even the skeptical that if mankind is to evolve to the higher stages of physical and mental perfection, he must be guided by these principles. They alone will bring men and women of today to the highest state of well-being, enabling them to grapple effectively with the problems of the day in the world of thought and action, gradually widening the dividing line which separates civilized mankind from the animal kingdom.<sup>146</sup>

In this regard, I also think we need to ask ourselves what we actually mean when we categorize someone as a “thief,” “burglar,” or any other of the many labels we so readily attach to others? The way many people use the word “burglar” makes it seem as if they regard all people who steal repeatedly or habitually to be genetically programmed to do so from birth, and therefore that it would be impossible to change this programming even if the people who possessed it wanted to change – and even if such

people were given the psychophysical means-whereby to work on making the change. Alexander did appear to allow for several possibilities, though, when he wrote that “a man may, as we say, [be] born a thief” and may be “cursed with the subconscious abnormal craving or habit which makes a man a thief by nature,” or “[on] the other hand, he may be quite normal at birth, but in early life he may drift into simple and apparently harmless little ways which through carelessness and lack of sound training, develop very slowly and remain unobserved” either by himself or others.<sup>147</sup> I suppose, too, that there can be a substantial difference between someone who steals regularly and habitually and someone who chooses only once, out of desperation, to break into a wealthy person’s house to take some valuables in order to buy food for her starving family because she can’t find a job that will allow her to provide for them as she had been able to up to that point. Maybe she even plans to make up for the theft when she gets a job. Surely, there could be other variations on the burglary theme that could also allow it to be viewed and addressed differently depending upon all sorts of other factors.

With these points in mind, it’s interesting to consider some research done in 2015 by Claire Nee at the International Center for Forensic Psychology at the University of Portsmouth in England. Her findings indicate that burglars *can* become “ex-burglars.” And in order to study the “nature” of burglars, Nee was able to locate “ex-offenders” who she was convinced had “truly ended their criminal careers and would not be tempted back into it” when she involved them in her simulated burglary experiment to explore what happens in burglars leading up to and during a theft. Ultimately, she writes that by “better understanding the decision-making sequence of a crime (*which often starts days before and at a distance from it* [emphasis added]), we can address this in rehabilitation by helping the offender to become more conscious of these decisions at an early stage (when it is easier to abandon the idea).”<sup>148</sup>

I would say that Nee’s approach isn’t all that far removed from what we’re seeking to help people do in Alexander lessons by teaching them to become more aware of their subconscious decision-making while we’re working with them from sitting to standing so that they can also learn to inhibit or delay that decision-making and re-direct their energy for an improved use of their “primary control” before *any* overt action is engaged in. In light of Nee’s research, then, it seems that we might want to amend that quote by some Alexander teachers to include the statement: “If you’re an ex-burglar, the Alexander Technique may make you a better ex-burglar.” However, if you’re a Hitler, I’m not so sure that the Alexander

Technique would make you a better ex-Hitler. Nevertheless, as my friend Kitty Wielopolska said to me, “Often. I think there’s nothing much more [than good health] that you can hold out for some people [who come to you for Alexander lessons], because no matter how fine a lot your pupils are, it’s going to take almighty God himself to make some of them stop being silly people. It’s going to take more than the Primary Control because they’ve only got what they’ve got. And then I say to myself, ‘*You can’t put any limits on the primary control and the changes and the vision it will give them.*’”<sup>149</sup>

If we consider inhibiting as a potentially positive force in the world, we might also do well to apply our experience and understanding of it to be inspired by the virtue *sôphrosynê* as praised by the ancient Greeks. Here is classical scholar Gilbert Murray’s description of it:

There is a way of thinking which destroys and a way which saves. The man or woman who is *sôphrôn* walks among the beauties and perils of the world, feeling the love, joy, anger, and the rest; and through all he has that in his mind which saves. – Whom does it save? Not him only, but as we should say, the whole situation. It saves the imminent evil from coming to be.<sup>150</sup>

Murray’s words also bring to mind two other instances from Walter Carrington’s teaching. He once said to me in a private lesson:

You see, Joe, there are some things that we just *must not* let happen.

We hadn’t been having a particularly philosophical discussion on that day, and he seemed to be intentionally refraining from saying specifically what those things were that we must not let happen. However, it was pretty clear that he meant “anything negative or destructive” beyond the mere pulling back of our head and shortening and narrowing in stature.

In another lesson Walter said:

You know, Joe, I don’t give too much thought to religion and spiritual things, but I *do* think there is such a thing as “the human spirit.” And I also believe that there is such a thing as “the evolution of the human spirit,” and, to me, that’s what the Alexander Work is really about: the evolution of the human spirit.

Ultimately, many people who’ve studied the Alexander Technique in depth feel that it can help you to be freer from both the past and the future

so that you can be more fully present, original, and compassionate in the moment. This is mainly what inhibiting allows us to do so that we can draw as wisely as possible on our past experience, our creative imagination, and our reasoning as we choose the best course of responding in the present or in planning for the future. In the case of planning for the future, inhibiting also allows us to be flexible so that if what we've planned for or hoped for doesn't happen after all, we can then be even freer to accept the unforeseen outcome and adapt to it more quickly and fully. This must surely be what true spontaneity requires, rather than simply responding impulsively from moment to moment to the slightest stimulus or whim. Philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer John Dewey illustrates this well in his "Introductory Word" to Alexander's *Man's Supreme Inheritance*:

To come into possession of intelligence is the sole human title to freedom. The spontaneity of childhood is a delightful and precious thing, but in its original naïve form it is bound to disappear. Emotions become sophisticated unless they become enlightened, and the manifestation of sophisticated emotion is in no sense genuine self-expression. True spontaneity is henceforth not a birthright, but the last term, the consummated conquest, of an art – the art of conscious control to the mastery of which Mr Alexander's book so convincingly invites us.<sup>151</sup>

The freedom and *challenge* that come with inhibiting are also the basis for the Alexander Technique often being called "a technique for the unknown."

## 9 Working on Breathing:

### Exploring Its Relation to Vocal Production And Wind-instrument Playing

This chapter is also a revised and amplified version of an article published by STATBooks in 1994.

Breathing can be considered to have two functions: one for the main purpose of supplying oxygen to our system for basic life-sustaining processes, and the other for the secondary purpose of propelling an extended column of air for speaking, singing, whistling, playing wind instruments, etc. In applying the principles of the Alexander Technique to supporting a column of air for these secondary demands, it's important first to cultivate an awareness of an unimpeded operation of our life-sustaining, tide-like flow of breathing, which I like to call our "natural resting rate of breathing" (NRRB). An awareness of and sensitivity to this unimpeded flow should be the foundation for any approach to vocal production or wind-instrument playing.

I sometimes like to describe the freest and fullest NRRB as "an alpine breath" because it's very much like the fuller breath that can come into us spontaneously as we're hiking along a wooded mountain trail and arrive above timberline where the air quality suddenly seems wonderfully fresh. In these moments it can seem as if a very full and free breath fills our lungs *by itself* without our having to do anything to "take" it in. This fuller natural breathing may also happen in other places where the air quality is fresh and pure such as at the seashore – or anywhere that we may be far enough away from the generally poorer city air that often seems to make us automatically, and usually subconsciously, "close down" our breathing to a minimum in order to prevent too much of the unhealthier air from coming into our lungs.

Alexander speculated that most people's NRRB is functioning far below the minimum standard essential for sustaining a healthy metabolism and general vitality. He also thought that many who live in the industrialized world are actually born with what he called a "low respiratory need" that's connected with their generally poor use of themselves as a whole in relation to gravity's downward pull.<sup>152</sup> However, he realized that at any given moment we're also usually able to improve our NRRB by positively directing our head-torso-limb relationship in a way that allows



our breathing to flow more freely and fully than when we're over-focused on our thinking, pre-occupied with our emotional reactions, striving hard to achieve a goal, etc. Therefore, a primary function of Alexander lessons is to progressively free up and deepen this tidal flow of air in and out of our lungs. However, it's important to emphasize that this improvement in breathing happens *indirectly* as the result of improving the *overall* conditions of our head-torso-limb relationship with the aid of a skilled teacher's hands-on work while we project the directions for maintaining the best use of our musculature in general.<sup>153</sup>

When we're being still and not speaking we have the best chance to experience and observe the left-alone tidal flow of our NRRB as it operates for the primary purpose of staying alive. Therefore, to begin exploring the nature of this tidal flow on your own, I recommend lying on a carpeted floor in the customary Alexander rest position – on your back with your head resting on a height of books that's neither too high nor too low for you, your knees bent with your feet resting a reasonable distance apart on a non-slippery surface, your upper arms and elbows resting on the floor at your sides, and your hands resting near the juncture of your lower ribs and abdomen. While lying this way, it should be fairly easy for you to be aware of the rhythmic flow of air coming in and going out – preferably through your nose while it's happening as part of your NRRB.<sup>154</sup> You might notice at first that attempting to be more conscious of your breathing seems to cause a bit of restraint in it; but eventually it's possible to “allow” complete freedom of your breathing mechanisms without any manipulation or interference on your part, and especially without deliberately attempting to “take in” a breath. You're essentially getting out of the way of your breathing by attending to your primary directions so that your breathing can happen *by itself* as it's designed to function.<sup>155</sup>

An obvious place to be aware of the tidal flow of your NRRB is at your costal arch, the area where your abdominal wall meets the front rim of your lower ribs and behind which the front edge of your diaphragm also attaches. As you're resting on the floor, your hands or finger-tips should lie near that juncture of lower ribs and abdomen so that they can also help you assess the quality of rib and abdominal movement accompanying the steady flow of air in and out of your lungs. Ultimately, your whole torso can even be affected by the NRRB as part of your overall lengthening and widening.

Anything that interrupts or restricts the free flow of your NRRB can be considered an interference. For instance, if you're preoccupied with an absorbing train of thought or caught up in an intense emotional reaction,

this can greatly hamper the functioning of your NRRB, and your tidal flow of breath can become shallow and labored as a result – even though it can often free up considerably once the thought or emotional issue is set aside or resolved. Of course, even making a single, quiet vocal sound interrupts your resting flow of breathing, and this simple vocal action often calls upon the muscular mechanisms of your entire torso to mobilize in such a way that creates a great effort in your abdominal muscles, diaphragm, intercostal (chest) muscles, and in all the musculature connecting your head, spine, and torso. This mobilization also happens even when you whisper just one word or make a single vocal sound.

After a few minutes of allowing an unimpeded flow of breathing in and out through your nose while you're resting on the floor, you may be able to become more aware of the difference between this steady tidal flow and any interruption of it. Once you've identified your NRRB, try making a single vocal sound like saying "yes," or "no," and observe what happens beneath your finger-tips at the juncture of your front ribs and abdomen – as well as elsewhere in your torso. Then especially notice *how long* it takes for these muscular areas to return again to their regular, equalized in and out flowing operation after you stop making the sound. Sometimes your NRRB doesn't return to its maximum, easy fullness until several breaths have come and gone by themselves while you've mainly focused on fairly continuously projecting the directions for the normal employment of your "primary control" ("head forward and up, spine to lengthen and back to widen, knees to go forward and away" – or "up to the ceiling," if you're lying down – and your entire stature to lengthen out of the contacts of your feet on the floor).

The ability to know when you've fully recovered your NRRB after meeting a demand on your breathing mechanisms that's induced by *any* vocalization or sounding of a note on a wind instrument is extremely important – no matter how full and rich the quality of these sounds may be. Ultimately, this awareness of your NRRB becomes the standard for, or basis of, any further vocal production or wind-instrument playing as you gradually work on producing longer sounds and phrases. Therefore, with practice and an improved manner and conditions of use,<sup>156</sup> it's possible for each in-breath during vocalization or wind-playing to be permeated by the character of the NRRB – instead of being affected by the audible gasp that so often comes with the habitual "taking a breath" in the way that so many voice and wind instrument teachers encourage.

This is a good place to cite Alexander's own description of what happens on the subject of allowing our in-breath to return by itself:

From the very first breath there's a more or less constant air pressure (atmospheric pressure) within the lungs, but not any air pressure on the outside of the lungs. Air pressure is sufficient to overcome the elasticity of the tissue of the air-cells, and to increase their size, when not held in check by the pressure of the walls of the thorax upon the lung-bag itself. The lungs are subject, however, to this pressure exerted by the walls of the thorax during the contraction [that propels your out-breath], and to the release of this pressure during the expansion of the thoracic cavity [that allows your in-breath to return]. The pressure that can be exerted by the walls of the thorax on the outside of the lung-bag is much greater than that which results from the atmospheric pressure (air pressure) within the lungs. Therefore, when we wish, as we say, to "take a breath" (inspiration), all we have to do is to reduce the pressure exerted upon the lungs by the chest walls, and to employ those muscular co-ordinations [lengthening and widening] which increase the intra-thoracic capacity of lungs (increased chest capacity), thereby causing a partial vacuum in the lung-cells of which atmospheric pressure takes advantage, by increasing the size of the cells and thus the amount of air in the lungs.<sup>157</sup>

Often in Alexander lessons it happens that students experience a spontaneous change in the freedom of their in-breath as a byproduct of an improvement in their general conditions of lengthening and widening that's being facilitated by a skilled teacher's hands – particularly while the student is receiving table work. We often see this contrast in expanse and depth of breath flow when students have been very busy or under a lot of stress. They usually haven't realized how "clamped down" (shortened and narrowed in stature) they'd become as a result of their involvements in these hurried and stressful situations – basically their "reaction to the stimulus of living," as Alexander called it.<sup>158</sup> When a freer and fuller breath returns, it's often a great relief.

The fullest potential for allowing our NRRB in-breath to go on happening during a social interaction was dramatically revealed to me in a private lesson I had with my training course director while he was telling me a hilarious story about the time Alexander insisted on accompanying him when he was called up to report to the London draft board during World War II. My teacher had been working on me for a while in the traditional way, taking me in and out of a chair while constantly giving me direction with his hands. Then, as I began to listen to him and allow myself to respond as I usually would to any funny story, he kept gently curving his left-hand fingertips just under the rim of my front ribs to help

me remember not to do any unnecessary holding on in my abdominal muscles and diaphragm, which I was inclined to do whenever I listened in suspense and delight to any funny story. As usual, he also kept using his right hand either at the juncture of my head and upper spine or lower down on my shoulders or back to reinforce my overall going up and lengthening and widening. However, this tale was so funny that I felt an overwhelming impulse to laugh loud and hard all the way through his telling of it – as I usually would do when laughing at something so hilarious. Somehow, though, with his finger-tips helping me to keep from holding at that juncture of my ribs and abdomen, he was able to prevent my laughing from constantly engaging my ribcage and diaphragm, and this allowed my in-breath to return in a normal, free-flowing fashion (the NRRB). Strangely – to me, anyway – this also created a long pause in my laughing that I wouldn't ordinarily have made or even thought possible when listening to something so captivating and funny.

As the story progressed in hilarity and my teacher told how Alexander immediately appealed to the men on the draft board to allow him to demonstrate on all of them how the Technique works, other peals of laughter would burst forth from me on all my out-breaths. However, during all this time my entire rib-cage and abdominal wall remained much closer to their fullest expansiveness than they otherwise would have since my teacher went on using his hand in such a way as to keep my rib-cage as open as possible for allowing the fullest in-breaths to return naturally by themselves. It was such an unusual experience compared to what I'd always considered to be my "natural" and "spontaneous" way of laughing (which was probably like most other people's as well). However, the most astonishing thing about it was that these "interruptions" – the pauses for free in-breaths – didn't change the *character* of my laughter itself at all when it actually did peal forth. It only became fuller and richer throughout the entire tale, which ended by my teacher telling that the draft board had granted him a deferment because of Alexander's demonstration of the Technique to the elderly board members. Then he went on with the story to tell that after this initial deferment ended and he went on his own to report again for induction, the same old gentlemen on the draft board eagerly asked why that "charming man" didn't come with him this time. Of course, by that time, my laughter had reached a very hearty stage even though the "spaces" in between bursts were still there too. In retrospect though, I'm not sure if I would've been able to experience this change in breath support in that lesson if I hadn't already spent a good deal of time working on applying Alexander's principles of respiratory re-education

to doing his “whispered ah” procedure and to my daily flute practice. Instead, I think it’s very likely that I would’ve remained seized up in my rib-cage and diaphragm regions in a paroxysm of laughter throughout the whole story, and no matter what my teacher would’ve done with his hands as he worked on me would’ve helped me to keep fully releasing my breathing and vocal mechanisms on the in-breaths throughout the story.

#### WAYS OF WORKING

An effective, graduated approach to working at incorporating the freer quality of your NRRB into everyday speaking, singing, and wind-instrument playing can be to progress carefully from single to multiple sounds, then to phrases, sentences, and on through whole paragraphs (as in reading or reciting a composed text). For working in this way, I recommend marking a text with phrasing breaks as frequently as possible in places that won’t disturb its meaning too much. Once you can read all the phrases of the text easily with the return of a full NRRB on each in-breath (no matter how long it takes for the in-breath to return), try increasing the demand by reading portions twice as long. Eventually, you may be able to build up to a natural rhythm of phrases as if you were reading the passage, or reciting it, to listeners. You may find then that you have much more time for easy and full in-breaths than you’ve ever allowed yourself before, which may also provide for a deeper expression of the meaning of each phrase to come through that likewise offers your audience a rendition that’s much easier to listen to and absorb.

#### STEP ONE

For introducing this reading and reciting procedure to students, I like, somewhat mischievously, to use the first paragraph of Alexander’s *The Use of the Self* because it has three quite long sentences composed of several phrases each. After I’ve worked with students for a while as they’re sitting and standing and we have their overall lengthening working fairly well, I hand the book to them and ask them to read this paragraph aloud straight through just as they would if they were reading it to a small group of listeners sitting around us. Here’s the whole paragraph, and I recommend that you read it aloud now too – as convincingly as you can – before you continue any further with the main text of this chapter.

My two earlier books, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* and *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, contain a statement of the technique which I gradually evolved over a period of years in my search for a means whereby

faulty conditions of use in the human organism could be improved. I must admit that when I began my investigation, I, in common with most people, conceived of body and mind as separate parts of the same organism, and consequently believed that human ills and shortcomings could be classified as either “mental” or “physical” and dealt with on specifically “mental” or specifically “physical” lines. My practical experiences, however, led me to abandon this point of view and readers of my books will be aware that the technique described in them is based on the opposite conception, namely, that it is impossible to separate “mental” and “physical” processes in any form of human activity.<sup>159</sup>

While the student is reading this aloud, I continue to monitor with my hands what’s happening in their breathing and in their overall use of themselves as I also go on giving them positive directions for improving and maintaining their going up and lengthening and widening. But almost invariably (even with professional actors, singers, and wind players) they only take quick breaths in between the very long phrases as they read the paragraph right through. Of course, by the time they’ve finished reading all of it, they’ve usually become quite aware of and even exasperated by how tight their breathing mechanisms have become since my hands have also been helping them to stay more aware of what’s happening in their ribcage and general use of themselves all the time they’re reading. They often protest that Alexander’s sentences are so long that it would be impossible to read this paragraph aloud without getting so tight. Nevertheless, they’re usually quite surprised to discover how severely they’d interfered with the free flow of their breathing in the simple act of reading aloud a single paragraph of text. Then, after they’ve finished, it usually takes a few minutes for their NRRB to return to its free flow in and out, and I make sure that they’re fully aware that it has returned to that freer resting state before we go on to the next phase.

#### STEP TWO

Staying with the same paragraph, I next ask students to echo me in reading each phrase while I take responsibility for deciding where we’ll pause to allow their breathing to return fully to their NRRB before they echo what I read next. I deliberately make quite frequent breaks – being sure to say aloud to students “pause” right after I read each phrase so that they don’t rush right in to repeat it immediately after I finish. During this “echo” reading I constantly give them directions with my hands for maintaining and improving their going up and lengthening and widen-

ing so they can avoid getting into that tightened condition that their first reading brought about and so they can be aware of when they're really ready to echo me with their fullest and freest possible in-breath. Here's the paragraph marked with breaks where I usually have students wait for their NRRB to fully return before they echo the phrase. Try it now as I've marked it here, just to see how you get along with your breathing while you're reading:

My two earlier books // *Man's Supreme Inheritance* // and *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, // contain a statement of the technique // which I gradually evolved // over a period of years // in my search for a means whereby // faulty conditions of use // in the human organism // could be improved. // I must admit // that when I began my investigation, // I, // in common with most people, // conceived of body // and mind // as separate parts // of the same organism, // and consequently believed // that human ills and shortcomings // could be classified // as either "mental" // or "physical" // and dealt with // on specifically "mental" // or specifically "physical" // lines. // My practical experiences, however, // led me to abandon this point of view // and readers of my books // will be aware // that the technique described in them // is based on the opposite conception, // namely, // that it is impossible // to separate "mental" // and "physical" processes // in any form of human activity. //

As you can see, I even allow for a pause before and after the single words "I" and "lines." Even though this extra time wouldn't seem necessary in most situations where we're reading to others, the pausing can actually allow for a depth of meaning to come through that students, or listeners, might not otherwise appreciate as much if they were listening to the passage being read right straight through without a free breath in those places. In fact, it's worth mentioning that all the pauses in this passage – once students get used to making them as they become more in tune with their NRRB – allow for a greater depth of meaning to flow forth from the whole paragraph. I think this entire process also allows students to appreciate more fully the importance of Alexander's statement here – a cornerstone of his entire Technique – that contrasts so much with conventional concepts of there being distinctly separate "physical" and "mental" aspects in how we live from moment to moment. If there's enough time, I might go on to have students read the entire paragraph again by taking less frequent breaks – maybe pausing after every two word-clusters – so that they can begin to get a sense of how they could practice building up the more constructive breath support on their own and come closer to



rendering the entire paragraph in an ever more natural and meaningful way.

#### POETRY READING

Later on in lessons I often use poems in a similar way with students by first reading each phrase for them myself and then have them echo it back to me – again, making sure that they’ve waited until they’ve taken the necessary time to be in touch with their NRRB and their overall primary directing before they recite the particular phrase I’ve just given them. I find that this awareness can be developed especially effectively while I work with them as they lie in the constructive rest position on the teaching table because they have an even better chance there than in standing and sitting to perceive what’s happening in their head-torso-limb relationship as I continue to work on them in the traditional way – often putting my hand just across their costal arch or tapping them lightly on their breast-bone if I see them holding their ribs and abdominal wall tightly instead of leaving those regions free before and after they echo the phrase. For this procedure, it seems especially important to choose a poem that students don’t know – or at least one they don’t know by heart – so that they won’t be tempted to “think ahead” and “get set” for the words that they know are coming next. Eventually, when students begin to be able to inhibit the tendency to jump in immediately to echo me by “taking” a quick, gasping breath, I start to give them somewhat longer phrases – again, to help them develop their power for making the return of the NRRB their main priority and guide. The first stanza of Keats’s “To Autumn” works well for this procedure, and most students really enjoy reciting it at the more leisurely and reflective pace.

#### *To Autumn*

Season of mists // and mellow fruitfulness, //  
 Close bosom-friend // of the maturing sun; //  
 Conspiring with him // how to load and bless //  
 With fruit // the vines that round the thatch-eves run; //  
 To bend with apples // the mossed cottage-trees, //  
 And fill all fruit // with ripeness to the core; //  
 To swell the gourd, // and plump the hazel shells //  
 With a sweet kernel; // to set budding more, //  
 And still more, // later flowers for the bees, //  
 Until they think // warm days will never cease, //  
 For Summer has o’er-brimmed // their clammy cells. //



## SOME EXAMPLES OF ADVANCED POETRY READING

Another inspiring example of the value of working on inhibiting and directing and cultivating the use of NRRB in poetry reciting evolved over the course of several years while giving Alexander work to a well-known poet and professor of poetry who knew many poems from memory. Often we would “work on” a poem – or you might say “process” it – in the last part of her Alexander lesson while I was still working with her on the table. It was also always clear that our taking extra time between phrases to maintain the freest possible flow of breathing helped to allow the poems to come alive in a way that may not have been the case if she’d merely read them straight through as they would need to be read in a traditional poetry reading setting. She recently wrote of our working in this way: “. . . the experience was hugely influential for me – not only in the general well-being that the Alexander Technique created, but also in my way of performing poems, my relation to my own breathing and expressive use of voice.”

We also worked on a number of French poems in this way, and since my own French was competent enough to follow along empathically, I think that helped to add a sense of richness and wholeness to the experience for both of us that may not have been there if I hadn’t understood the words as we went along phrase by phrase. Eventually, we even decided to give a performance for a meeting of the Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers of Mallarmé’s poem *L’Après-midi d’un Faune* combined with a solo flute arrangement of Debussy’s orchestral piece inspired by the poem. I think that we managed to rehearse, perform, and discuss this combination of works in a much fuller and freer way than we otherwise may have done because we had spent so much time in Alexander lessons working on reciting poetry in this non-endgaining way that continually allowed for a deep reception of the feeling in each poem. The performance was also a sort of mirror of our way of working on poems in her lessons because we left time in between each stanza for playing a corresponding section of the Debussy score.

## WORKING WITH WIND INSTRUMENTALISTS ON BREATHING

A similar process works well for wind players. It’s based on using a set of scale sequences in which you begin by playing only three notes of a scale at a time in eighth notes at about mm. 60 per every two eighths – allowing as much time as you need for your NRRB to return fully through your nose before you go on to play the next sequence of three notes that begin on the last note of the previous sequence (e.g., CDE [NRRB] EFG

[NRRB] GAB [NRRB], etc.) – avoiding “taking” a quick catch breath through your mouth just before you start a sequence. In fact, as with reading Alexander’s paragraph above, you may want and need to take more time for several breaths to flow in and out through your nose before you’ve fully retrieved your NRRB. Then, once you’ve become proficient at playing the scale ascending and descending in these three-note groupings with a return to the free-flowing NRRB in between each group, you play it as a five-note sequence in sixteenth notes on each breath (e.g., CDEFG [NRRB] GABCD [NRRB] DEFGA [NRRB], etc.). Next you may want to try a whole octave in sixteenths on one breath, then two and three octaves on one breath, etc. until you can play the whole scale up and down on one breath without forcing or squeezing your breathing mechanisms.<sup>160</sup> The same idea of pausing to allow air to return through your nose can also be used very effectively to build up good breathing habits while practicing a piece of music phrase by phrase – or even figure by figure – again, by taking plenty of time between phrases or figures to allow a full, free NRRB breath to return so that you avoid getting into any squeezing of your breathing mechanisms – even though in an actual performance there may not be enough time to allow your breath to return through your nose. I often remind musicians that music actually has “endgaining” built into it merely because playing a piece to meet full performance requirements means going from beginning to end *without stopping* – no matter what – except for refraining from making a sound on any actual rests that may be written into the piece. In a performance, the music *must* continue, and often, with most wind players and singers, it only takes playing or singing three or four fairly easy phrases in a row – by taking quick breaths in between each phrase – for all of their breathing mechanisms to become so tightened that they’re breathing in a much more constricted way throughout the rest of the composition. It’s the inherent demand in the music itself to move onward that we very much need to “re-educate” our breathing mechanisms in relation to our practicing in order for each phrase to be able to sound its freest and fullest when we finally put all the phrases (or expressive “portions”) together for a complete performance.

Take, for example, the “Allemande” of Bach’s A-minor *Partita* for solo flute, which consists of one continuous flow of separately articulated sixteenth-note motifs for nearly two and a half pages (with repeats of both its first and second halves!). If this movement is practiced “straight through,” or even page by page, it’s nearly impossible not to cultivate restrictive breathing habits that will be sure to carry over into an actual performance (possibly getting even more exaggerated by performance

stress as well). Therefore, it really behooves flutists to practice the whole piece many times “figure by figure” and to take all the time they need between the playing of each figure so that a fully free breath may return by itself through their nose (even though the breath will come in through their mouth in a full performance), (fig. 1). The same approach works well for the remaining three movements of the *Partita* that are also written without any breaks in the flow of notes – as are many passages in Bach’s compositions for flute, other winds, and voice. Of course, the greatest reward in following this approach of leaving more time for full in-breaths is that you also have much more time and more freedom to allow each figure or phrase to be filled with its fullest expressive character. Otherwise, when there’s an ever-increasing struggle with breathing going on, it’s much harder to allow the fullest expression to come through on each figure or phrase – particularly when all the notes are moving along in a constant stream of equal sixteenth notes as they are in this “Allemande.” By practicing with pauses for your NRRB to return, you’re actually giving yourself a doubly good chance at preparing for the best and freest possible performance of this tremendously demanding movement. My edition of the *Partita* says it’s to be played on either flute or violin, and that possibility has made me think of what difference there might be in the character of its phrases when a violinist plays this particular allemande. On violin it would obviously have to be played with separate bowings on each sixteenth note, and it also seems that it would naturally need to begin on an up-bow. Therefore, beginning on an up-bow could mean that the expressive energy of the down-bow on the second note would naturally require there to be a somewhat stronger inflection on that note. As these quite different actions of the bow arm and hand would continue throughout the movement, I think they would govern the expressive emphases of the note patterns quite differently from how most flutists would normally play them – which might generally tend to make all the sixteenth notes more equal in strength, length, and character.<sup>161</sup>

This possible contrast in “interpretation” between flute and violin renditions reminds me of the time a cellist friend once played for me an allemande from one of the Bach cello suites. When I remarked afterward that I was astonished to hear how exciting it was to hear it played in the powerful, dance-like way she played it, I was intrigued to hear her say rather matter-of-factly that to her it was actually a wooden shoe dance. Her telling me that about the cello allemande immediately made me begin to think quite differently about this flute allemande, and I try to let

something of that “dance” character affect every note of it that I play each time I work on it or play it all the way through.

Here’s a suggestion for working on the flute allemande (fig. 1). I’ve also written it here in accordance with the practicing procedures of oboist Fernand Gillet who always emphasized the importance of keeping a steady beat going on in your imagination even when you’re inserting extra breaks into your practice procedure so that you remain totally involved in the character of the movement, instead of just waiting “outside” the music’s sphere of feeling to let your NRRB return. I’ve inserted four bars of rest in between each practice portion, but you may need less than that for your NRRB to return fully:

ALLEMANDE  
BWV 1013

J. S. Bach

Original

Flute

Practice version

NRRB

NRRB

NRRB

NRRB etc.

Fig. 1. Allemande.

#### VOCAL AND RESPIRATORY RE-EDUCATION

Alexander thought that the majority of people living in urban settings tend to suffer from a poor functioning of their respiratory mechanisms, which can be an outcome of a poor general use of the self in reaction to the stimulus of living in a fast-paced environment, particularly where the air quality is also likely to be poor. In attempting to improve his students’

breathing function, he found that teaching them to produce a series of extended whispered tones on the vowel sound “ah” could have a freeing and vitalizing effect on their respiratory mechanisms if this procedure is done according to the principles of inhibition and direction of an improved use of the self as a whole. He thought that daily work on respiratory re-education should become a regular part of all his students’ work on themselves – particularly if they suffered from any respiratory troubles such as asthma, emphysema, hay fever, sleep apnea, etc. He was also convinced that freedom in our breathing/vocal mechanisms (ribcage, diaphragm, abdomen, larynx, etc.) is fundamental to a basic standard of good health, if only from the general standpoint of producing an adequate supply of oxygen to our blood and effectively removing the remaining carbon dioxide.

We often find some of the most detrimental effects of poor use of people’s respiratory mechanisms in speaking, singing, and playing wind-instruments to be a reflection of their abnormal use of themselves as a whole. These negative effects on breathing can even appear in people’s everyday conversational habits because of the subconscious mannerisms of head, arms and hands that accompany everything they say – even if they only speak one word. It often seems impossible for some people to express a single vocal sound that’s free from a constant and habitual gesturing of head and hands. Then, when they may need to make any fuller expressive gestures to illustrate their points at important moments, these motions are often hampered by the few “half gestures” they habitually make that seem somehow to make them feel they’re communicating more effectively as they search for the best words to express themselves. A whole network of head, trunk, arms, and hands activity is often subconsciously set off even before the person utters a single conversational vocal sound – much like Alexander initially discovered himself doing when he merely *thought* of reciting some lines from a play, as first-generation Alexander teacher Lulie Westfeldt pointed out:

Alexander went over very carefully in his mind what actually happened [at the “critical moment” just before he began to recite]<sup>162</sup> and decided that he had no control over what he did with his body once the *idea* of speaking had come into his head. It was the idea that caused the trouble and brought about a reversion to the old pattern in spite of all his intentions and desires. He then decided that the *idea of speaking and the body patterns he had always used when speaking must be inseparably fused*, and that to eliminate the old faulty pattern he would have to eliminate the idea of speaking. His problem

was to get rid of the idea of speaking and yet speak! What a staggering feat of control lay before him!<sup>163</sup>

Often this subconscious habit in preparing to speak occurs just as much when we're merely listening to someone else speaking – particularly in a one-to-one conversation. Subconscious guidance and its effects usually rule our state of being for the duration of the conversation and these effects can often linger long afterward.<sup>164</sup>

First-generation Alexander teacher Tony Spawforth may seem somewhat reserved in the youtube video of him describing Alexander's whispered "ah" procedure, but it's clear that he manifests an overall constant direction of himself that's an excellent representation of what the Alexander Technique attempts to cultivate as a basis for speaking.\*

Walter Carrington, another first-generation teacher, also exhibits a fine example of speaking without unnecessary head and limb gesturing in his lecture-demonstration on youtube.†

It's also clear that Walter is allowing plenty of time for his NRRB in-breath to return between each phrase, and this is surely a central factor in his remarkable ability to speak continuously and at great length about the Alexander Technique to his students and trainees without suffering any kind of vocal strain. Some may find his manner of speaking halting because he pauses more frequently than most people usually do between phrases, but when I trained with him it always seemed to me that he was well aware that if he deliberately took slightly more time between phrases it would give his listeners the best chance to take in and understand the points he wanted to communicate.

#### BEGINNING WITH A WHISPERED TONE

The whispered tone is useful for working on improving the use of our breathing mechanisms because it keeps us farther away from our vocal/speech habits than when we engage our vocal cords to produce sound. Often the simple act of setting our vocal cords into vibration elicits a tensional response in our head-torso region that's extremely difficult to inhibit and re-direct toward a truly balanced level of overall functioning. Lessons in the Technique often reveal that professional voice users and wind players frequently suffer from an "overuse" of their respiratory mechanisms because of the various manipulative approaches to breath support and

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\* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-XXr1-y4Tc>

† <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VNLM69CLvBQ>

breath control they've learned or subconsciously developed over many years of practice. Alexander used a whispered "ah" sound as the basis for his main approach to respiratory and vocal re-education – not only with singers and actors, but with all other students as well. His instructions for the procedure were to (1) think of something funny to make you smile, (2) retain your upper lip off your upper teeth with the smile, (3) let your jaw drop, (4) whisper "ah," (5) let your jaw close after the "ah" while still retaining the smile, and (6) allow your in-breath to return through your nose. Each of these instructions is meant to be governed by maintaining your overall best use of yourself as a whole in relation to gravity's pull, and I remember it being said that if you can do this procedure correctly by reinforcing your primary directions every step of the way you have developed a full command of the Technique that you can apply to all you do in life.

In my own teaching, I've found the whispered "ah" procedure and its accompanying directions to be too complex for many beginning students to carry out until they've first built up a fuller grasp of the various speech and respiratory components involved – particularly an awareness of their NRRB. The instruction for the jaw to drop often presents a problem for many – especially Americans – because they're not accustomed to opening their jaw very far in everyday speech. This tendency makes them have to focus more intently on opening their jaw wide enough to make a full "ah" sound without severely detracting from their head-spine direction, which, of course, needs to remain primary. Therefore, instead of launching right into the full whispered "ah" procedure with students, I like to begin by using an approach to opening the jaw by graduated amounts so that students can ultimately arrive more easily and freely at a full "ah" formation when they attempt to open their jaw relatively quickly while trying to *maintain a smile at the same time* – as Alexander's instructions require.

Before beginning any of the following exercises that I'm going to suggest, it's of utmost importance to be able to assess when your propelled out-breath begins to add excessive abdominal and thoracic tension in speaking, singing, and wind-instrument playing. Even if you may be able to sing or play a very long phrase on one out-breath, there's often a point beyond which you may cease to lengthen and widen for the support of the out-breath and where you begin to shorten, narrow, and squeeze ("pull down") in order to propel every last bit of your breath out for the remainder of the phrase. In all these exercises, you should never pass beyond the point where any squeezing would begin. If you do exceed that point, you'll defeat the main purpose of this graduated progression, and you'll



only tend to further ingrain the faulty habits of breath support that the Technique is attempting to replace.

Also remember that, once you've gone past the limit of a balanced lengthening and widening support of your out-breath as you propel a vocal or instrumental sound, it usually takes a much longer time to regain the free flow of your NRRB than if you stop producing the sound just short of that point where you begin to pull down and become fixed in your abdominal wall, ribs, etc. Therefore, don't try to *finish* a phrase or sound if it's going to cause you to get tight in these main regions of breath support – or anywhere else in yourself, for that matter.

If you begin by simply letting your lips rest together lightly (while breathing in and out through your nose) and then slowly and gently allow a light pressure of your breath to part your lips while drawing upon the least amount of effort from your ribs, abdomen, back, chest, etc., you have an excellent starting point for all the following procedures – including Alexander's more complex whispered "ahs." (I sometimes ask students not to allow their breath to part their lips any more than the amount of space that would be taken up by the tip of a safety pin.) The friction of your breath passing through this very narrow opening between your lips also helps you to experience a form of whispered sound that can be independent from any activity in your throat and laryngeal area. However, if you begin on an open vowel sound (such as: *ooh, oh, ah, uh, ay, eh, or ee*), you're still tempting your tongue, larynx, and pharynx muscles to come into play – if only slightly. Therefore, *to relieve our larynx of all necessary pressure is one of the main goals* (to inhibit any "depressing of the larynx," to use Alexander's terminology),<sup>165</sup> and realizing that a form of whispered sound can also be made so far forward in our oral cavity at the lips is extremely useful as a basis for producing all vowel sounds. Perceiving the friction of your breath parting your lips also helps to bring your focus of attention up and away from your throat (off the laryngeal region, where singers often say the "voice" exists, and which they also sometimes like to call their "instrument"). The sound of your breath parting your lips and escaping through such a small opening could be written something like this – with the italicized letters representing the whispered sound:

p – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo

Then, to move the friction of breath progressively away from your lips toward your throat (or laryngeal) region, you can proceed gently and smoothly to an "h" sound – visualized and placed as far as possible for-



ward and up in your mouth away from the throat. This sound can easily come into play near the middle of the or back of your tongue where you might pronounce the sound “ghoo.” Be aware, too, that if you were to bring a vocal sound (a vibration of the vocal cords) into this procedure, it would automatically pull the “h” sound farther back and down toward your throat/larynx, so it’s still important at this stage to avoid involving that lower vocal region.

Try:

$$\mathbf{p} - oo - oo - oo - oo - oo - h - h - h - m$$

Open your lips slightly at the arrow but continue to make the whispered “oo” sound right at the opening of your lips as you let the “*h – h – h*” also begin to sound slightly farther back. The focus of breath friction changes here from your lips to your tongue (and sides and roof of your mouth) via the vowel sound “ooh” as you open your lips only slightly after you begin the whispered *p – oo – oo* sound at the lips.

Next, go on to make a gentle “h” sound to begin and end the whispered vowel sound:

$$h-h-h-oo-oo-oo-oo-h-h-h$$

However, be sure to remember that you're intending at all times to stay completely away from making a "glottal shock" in the throat and larynx – an, explosive, forceful tightening that usually occurs at the beginning of all vocalizations that start with a vowel. You can get a fairly clear idea of the effect of the glottal shock by placing your thumb and forefinger on either side of your hyoid bone and thyroid cartilage ("Adam's apple") and pronouncing (in a whisper or vocal tone) words that begin on a vowel like: "angry, either, only, ugly, other, in, oops," etc. Starting a sound on a vowel – even a whispered sound – without an *excessive* glottal shock is one of the ultimate goals in this graduated approach. Very little, if any, depressing of the larynx needs to occur with a glottal attack on any vowel.

Now progress gradually from the more closed to the more open whispered vowels. Work on each whispered vowel sound until it becomes clear and easy to produce – always allowing for plenty of time for your NRRB to return by itself after each attempt, even if it means that you need to wait for several breaths to come and go before continuing to make the next sound.

1. *h - h - h - oo - oo - oo - h - h - h* [u: as in “groove”]
2. *h - h - h - ō - ō - ō - ō - h - h - h* [o: as in “only”]
3. *h - h - h - u - u - u - u - h - h - h* [ɜ: as in “undone”]
4. *h - h - h - a - a - a - a - h - h - h* [ɑ: as in “all”]

Now put all the above whispered vowels together on a single out-breath with equal time on each of the different vowel sounds:

*p - oo - oo - h - ō - ō - h - u - u - h - a - a - h - h*

Since this last sequence involves a progressive opening of the jaw rather than several sudden ones, it should prepare you well for doing the more complex whispered “ah” procedure that Alexander devised. Even this preliminary sequence can help a great deal to increase the vitality of your breathing mechanisms and your overall direction in relation to gravity, which, of course, is one of the main purposes of doing Alexander’s traditional whispered “ah” exercise.

#### WHISPERED “AH”

As I wrote earlier, practicing the whispered “ah” procedure requires a specific projection of directions in sequence (“one after the other” and “all together”)<sup>166</sup> that also serves to improve your ability to apply the principles of the Technique to any other activity. At each point in this procedure, the most important thing is to continue to renew your primary directions for your overall lengthening in stature before each specific step in the whispered “ah” to ensure that these directions are all sustained (and, we hope, *improved*) throughout all the steps right into and through the actual sounding of the “ah” whisper. No single aspect of doing the whispered “ah” should be allowed to gain predominance over our primary directions or over any other part of the “ah” procedure. However, as I mentioned earlier, there is one of the whispered “ah” directions that often seems to override the rest of the series of “ah” directions, and that’s the opening (or “dropping”) of the jaw. This action frequently results in a pulling back of the head and a loss of the “smile.” Quite frequently, students automatically tilt their heads back and up off their jaw instead of merely extending their jaw downward from their head without letting their jaw press down on their throat. Using mirrors to check yourself (as Alexander did) to make sure this tilting back of your head doesn’t happen is often better than relying on your own internal sensory perception (interoception, or inward feeling) of what’s happening with your use of

your head. However, I suspect that many people, if not most, usually tilt their head backward in order to open their mouth fairly wide, rather than merely lowering their jaw forward and downward from the upper part of their head (cranium).

#### MY PRELIMINARY INSTRUCTIONS FOR WHISPERED “AH”

Establish your primary directions as a constant basis for the entire procedure:

1. My head to go forward and up  
     My whole spine to lengthen and my back to widen  
     My knees to go forward and away  
     My whole stature to lengthen up out of the contacts of my feet
2. Establish your “natural resting rate of breathing” (NRRB) – the regular tidal flow of air into and out of your lungs – without any interruption or interference from your speech/vocal mechanisms. Allow your in-breaths and out-breaths to come and go through your nose for establishing your NRRB as your main mode of breathing.
3. Resolve *not* to “take” a special preparatory breath to begin the whispered “ah.” Let the “ah” begin at the culmination of a natural, resting in-breath that comes in through your nose. Alexander described the process as *preventing*, or “inhibiting,” the gasping, sniffing, or sucking in of air that’s often quite audible in many speakers, singers, actors, and wind-instrument players as they “take” a breath to begin a sentence or play or sing a phrase of music.
4. Resolve to sustain the direction of your going up and lengthening and widening *all the way to the end* of the whispered “ah” as your main source of “motive power” to produce the sound – even if it’s very short in duration.
5. Resolve to *allow* the air to return through your nose, after closing your mouth at the end of each “ah.”
6. Resolve to sustain your smile, if possible, during your NRRB in-breath even though your mouth is closed to allow air to return through your nose.

At this point I also like to mention to students that their NRRB at its fullest and freest can feel very much like what I described earlier as an

“alpine breath” that may happen by itself in our breathing when we’re in a place where the air quality is suddenly so much fresher than what we may be used to in city living. It seems that the cleaner air suddenly flows into our lungs *by itself* in a much fuller and deeper way.

#### ALEXANDER’S INSTRUCTIONS FOR WHISPERED “AH”

1. Think of something funny to make you smile so that the smile brings your upper lip up off your upper teeth.
2. Let the tip of your tongue come to rest at the inside tips of your lower front teeth.
3. Retain your upper lip up off your upper teeth with the smile as you allow your jaw to (free forward and) drop down.
4. Whisper “ah” on the very beginning of an out-breath for as long as you can sustain it without squeezing (shortening or narrowing in stature).
5. Retain your smile and allow your jaw and lips to close so that your in-breath will return through your nose – because of the natural vacuum created in your lungs.

I’ve found that it’s often helpful to suggest to students that they may be able to maintain a more genuine “smile” by thinking of (or imagining) something delightful or happy throughout the whispered “ah” instead of thinking of something that’s funny. With some people, thinking of something funny often causes them to chuckle or laugh, and that only produces a momentary genuine smile at the beginning of the procedure, whereas continuously imagining something delightful or happy can sometimes work better for supplying the steady energy needed for sustaining a smile that enlivens your entire face and eyes throughout the procedure.

In a *New Yorker* article about dealing with the effects of Bell’s palsy on his ability to smile, Jonathan Kalb’s comments on G. B. Duchenne Boulogne’s 1852 work *The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression* supports Alexander’s use of the smile for doing whispered “ahs”:

Duchenne was the first to observe that a spontaneously joyful smile cannot be faked, because it results from the simultaneous contraction of two muscles, only one of which is ordinarily under conscious control. Most people can voluntarily lift the corners of the mouth, but *authentic joy lives in the eyes* [emphasis added]. It requires contractions of the orbicularis oculi, the sphincter muscle surrounding the eye socket, which, Duchenne wrote, “is

only put in play by the sweet emotions of the soul.” The effect of this muscle is unmistakable: it subtly lifts the lower eyelids and pushes the skin around the eyes inward, and the eyes seem to sparkle.

Certain people, it turns out, do have the ability to activate this muscle voluntarily. Method actors, for instance, can produce radiant smiles by force of imagination, just as they produce hot tears, shrieks of terror, gusts of indignation, and blasts of rage. Watch Meryl Streep laughing in *The Bridges of Madison County*; she later told Oprah Winfrey that she was able to do so convincingly by thinking about the times that Clint Eastwood forgot his lines. In general, the presence or absence of these eye-muscle contractions makes all the difference between a real smile and a forced one – an observation that social scientists today consider to be so fundamental that they refer to the smile of spontaneous joy as the “Duchenne smile.”<sup>167</sup>

#### THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE IN DOING WHISPERED “AHS”

Once you have the basic whispered “ah” procedure fairly well mastered, you can challenge yourself to improve it further by doing a *series* of whispered “ahs” while maintaining the procedure Alexander described in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* for taking the support of the torso with the arms.<sup>168</sup> You can do this either while sitting at an inclined angle behind a straight-backed chair or while standing behind the chair in a particular position of mechanical advantage (nick-named “monkey”) with your knee, hip, and ankle joints equally flexed, your head and upper torso inclined forward over your knees and toes, and your lower torso and hips leading back over your heels.

In this position you can establish a balanced network of subtle, lengthening “pulls” by gently grasping the top rail of the back of the chair, keeping your fingers as straight as possible from their first joints to their tips and quite flat against the wood of the front side of the top rail of the chair while also keeping your thumbs as straight as possible “TO DO DUTY ON THE BACK PORTION OF THE TOP RAIL OF THE CHAIR.”<sup>169</sup> Then you also direct your wrists to curve slightly inward toward each other in a way that allows you to build up a gentle, forearm pull from your finger tips and thumbs to your elbows by directing your elbows outwards and slightly downwards and by directing the upper parts of your arms (from your elbows to your shoulders) away from each other (your right upper arm toward your right, and your left upper arm toward your left) in such a way that you’ll be essentially “supporting” your torso with your arms so that your rib-cage can function more freely in response to your breathing.

As you support your torso with your arms in this way by maintaining these various directional and subtly “antagonistic” pulls, you have a chance to challenge your NRRB to flow in and out more fully and freely. As you continue with the pulls on the back of the chair while doing your whispered “ahs,” your sustaining of these “pulls” will evoke a much more open rib-cage during the “ahs” – particularly as you come closer to the end of each “ah” and allow for a fuller and deeper in-breath to return *by itself* through your nose. This in-breath can also be one that evokes a continuing improvement in your back’s lengthening and widening. The entire combination of these specific directions and the corresponding subtle, antagonistic pulls of your fingers, thumbs, hands, and arms on the chair back can also contribute to an overall improvement in your use of yourself as a whole. This hands-on-the-back-of-a-chair procedure also serves as a basis for learning to use your hands in relation to your entire use of yourself as a vital part of the training to teach the Alexander Technique, as I describe in more detail in Chapter 12 on training teachers.

#### VOCAL RE-EDUCATION

For making a very gradual transition from producing whispered sounds to producing gentle vocal tones, I recommend that you practice the initial vowel sound whispered exercises above by adding a corresponding soft vocal sound to the middle portion of each whispered sound. You can begin this most effectively by using the first whispered exercise and merely “focusing” the vibration of the vocal sound at your lips right where you produce the friction for sounding the whispered “p – oo – oo – oo – oo – h – h,” and if you do it well, you may even feel as if the vibration is happening more at your lips and lower face than in your larynx/throat (vocal cords).

It could be done like this:

p – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – oo – h – h – h  
 (↑whispered sound) oo – oo – oo (↑ whispered sound)  
 (↑vocalized and whispered sound)

The most important thing here is to *maintain* the whispered sound of the breath passing through the lips *at the same time* as gently beginning and ending the vocal sound. This is often difficult for some people to do, and as soon as they attempt to bring the vocal sound into the whispered sound at their lips, their attention subconsciously drops to the throat region where the vocal sound is being produced, and they completely lose the friction of

air that produces the whispered sound at the lips. It's important to achieve full competence in this last exercise before proceeding any further.

Next, practice gently adding a corresponding vocal sound to each of the following whispered vowel sounds:

Whispered: 1. *h - h - h - oo - oo - oo - oo - oo - oo - oo - h - h - h*  
Vocal [u] as in "hoot": oo - oo - oo

Whispered: 2. *h - h - h - o - o - o - o - o - o - o - o - h - h - h*  
Vocal [o] as in "oh": ō - ō - ō

Whispered: 3. *h - h - h - u - u - u - u - u - u - u - u - h - h - h*  
Vocal [ə] as in "huff": u - u - u

Whispered: 4. *h - h - h - a - a - a - a - a - a - a - a - h - h - h*  
Vocal [a] as in "hall": a - a - a

To develop your skill in this procedure, try adding a crescendo and a diminuendo to each of the above while you're making both the whispered and vocal sounds together as you go from soft to fairly loud and back again to soft.

If you're interested in applying these principles to improving your vocal range, you could also try making a change in pitch of a half-step in the middle of each vocal sound in the exercise above. However, remember to connect the changes in pitch with the smoothest possible slide (glissando) between the notes instead of making a sudden, separate tone on each pitch. It's probably also wise to begin in the register or on a note that's nearest the speaking pitch that you produce most spontaneously and naturally without in any way thinking of "singing." Continuing with this procedure, you can gradually work to the top and bottom of your vocal range, moving only a half-step up or down on each out-breath. I think it's also good to begin each successive attempt on the last pitch of your previous attempt (as in the wind-instrument scale exercise I described above: ABC, CDE, EFG, etc.) so that you make the most gradual transitions as you work up and down your entire vocal range.

Then, as a logical next step, apply the same procedure to increasingly larger intervals (minor thirds, major thirds, and arpeggios) still employing the smoothest possible glissando between the pitches. Working on each interval of a song in this same way could be very useful too – especially giving yourself more time on the first note of the wide and difficult inter-

vals – before ever attempting to sing the pitches without sliding from one to the other as is usually required in performance (except where a glissando is indicated in the score).

I urge singers to *exclude all vibrato if possible* (both cultivated and so-called “natural” vibrato)<sup>170</sup> from these vocal exercises, particularly since many modes of producing vibrato involve an undue tension in the larynx and an excessive movement of the lower regions of the throat and base of the tongue (some even involve the jaw). I often think that many classical singers and flute players may have little or no expressive control of vibrato because they’ve subconsciously ingrained a constant mode of vibrato into every note they sing or play. (The singer Nathalie Stutzmann’s performance of Bach’s “*Erbarme dich*” is an exception worth listening to in her youtube performance with this aspect in mind because she often leaves vibrato out of the early part of many long notes and then allows it to come in unobtrusively to add more intensity of feeling.\*)

#### EXTENDING THE REGION OF SUPPORT FOR OUR OUT-BREATH AS A “SECONDARY CONTROL”

All of the foregoing is based on Alexander’s concept of “primary control” that views the way we’re consciously or subconsciously managing the relation between our head, spine, torso, and limbs as fundamental to how we use ourselves as a whole, for better or worse, in relation to gravity’s constant downward pull. But I think it’s also possible to add another element to this essential approach to directing ourselves that may be able to bring an even deeper, richer, and fuller aspect of our breathing into play to enhance the dynamic relation between our legs and our entire spine and torso.

I even think we might call this way of directing a “Secondary Control” because it involves extending the source of support of our outbreath to include our lower abdominal wall and pelvic floor at the same time that we maintain our primary directions for an overall lengthening and widening in our entire torso. I’m not sure if this lower abdominal and pelvic region is what some people refer to these days as our “core,” but I think there may be some commonality between the two areas.<sup>171</sup> Whatever the case, I’d like to suggest that if we may be able to allow an additional support for a prolonged outbreath to come from our lower abdominal wall and pelvic floor regions, and if this support is employed in an unforced and nonmanipulative way as part of our *continual directing of a lengthening and*

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\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jeil9S2exIU>



*widening in our entire torso* for propelling our outbreath, we may be able to elicit a fuller and deeper lengthening and widening of our torso when we “allow the NRRB inbreath to return” on its own in contrast to merely “taking in a deep breath.”

I recommend approaching this fuller animation of our lower abdomen and pelvic floor area by first orienting our main directing focus in our pre-vertebral area just behind our throat and nose as we allow air to come in through our nose. Then, in order to supply a *greater* “motive power” for the following outbreath, if we allow the energy of the lengthening and widening of our lower abdomen and pelvic floor to combine with the *general* lengthening and widening of our back, this can add more overall power to propel the following out-breath to part our lips gently as it passes through the fairly small opening to produce the whispered sound that we used in the very first exercise in this chapter:

*p - o - o - o - o - o - o - o - o - m*

I also suggest attempting to extend this whispered sound for as long as possible without “over-contracting” in *any* of the trunk musculature (including the abdominal wall and pelvic floor). If any over-contracting (“shortening”) comes into play, then the entire musculature of the torso and spine will tend to become fixed or tightened in a way that may need extra time for it to return to its fullest lengthening and widening before a freer and more balanced flow of in-breaths and out-breaths (our NRRB) can resume. But if we sound the whispered *p - o - o - o - o - m* with an additional gentle support coming from our lower abdominal wall and pelvic floor, a more balanced support from our entire torso can be subtly “animated” – as opposed to being more vigorously “activated” – for supporting the whispered sound in an equalized way. Experiencing this extended support means that it’s not just the back/rib-cage/costal arch/diaphragm region of the torso that’s providing the “motive power” for our out-breath, but it also includes this deeper and lower region of support in a more animated way than I think most people usually allow for.

If this equalized and subtle engagement of our entire torso musculature – including the lower abdomen and pelvic floor – is extended to the very end of our outbreath on the whispered *p - o - o - o - o - o - m*, then I find that our reflexively returning in-breath also has the possibility of eliciting a deeper lengthening in all our pelvic and leg musculature (quadratus lumborum, iliacus, psoas, etc.) that connects our upper legs through our

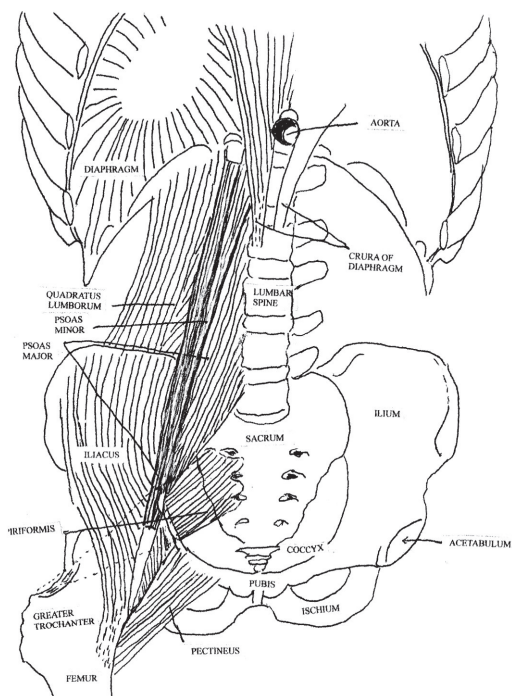


Fig. 2 Leg, pelvic, diaphragm musculature.

pelvis to the front of our lower vertebrae where the back of our diaphragm also attaches, as you can see in figure 2 below.

I find that this procedure can give a considerably stronger base of support for our entire torso as well as a more energized and balanced connection of our spine and torso with our legs and feet – especially in comparison to the more limited and higher-up supported whispered vowel procedures I described above.

In time, the duration of these more fully-propelled outbreaks can be progressively extended so that they'll also produce fuller reflexive in-breaths that can elicit an even fuller supportive lengthening of the legs-pelvis-diaphragm coordination. For me, allowing for this broader range of lengthening and widening evokes a power of overall support that comes closest to what I've experienced at the hands of the most skilled Alexander teachers – especially when they've been able to bring my general balance

back far enough over my heels while I'm standing (or back over my sitting bones while I'm sitting) to elicit the "reflex standing and sitting" co-ordination that we see Alexander facilitating and maintaining in the two people he's shown giving hands-on work to in the short youtube video from the film that was made of him in his later years.\*

Of course, I also find that this deeper, or fuller, lengthening in the torso and legs helps to evoke a fuller source of support in our entire head-spine co-ordination that may make the direction "neck to be free" (or "relax") redundant. After all, "neck" is almost a colloquial expression – like "waist" – even though we do have seven cervical vertebrae and their corresponding very delicate muscles and nerves. However, these cervical muscles are so subordinate to the larger and stronger musculature that connects our head (skull) to places lower down on our spine and torso that, interoceptively or proprioceptively, we can't really detect (feel) where what we might call "neck" begins or ends as any kind of entity in and of itself. In any case – except for when we're lying down with our head fully supported – it doesn't seem to me that we can really consider what we call our "neck" to be truly free – that is, if "freedom" means "no effort." Some degree of muscular effort is necessary to support our head and to keep it from falling or collapsing off the top of our spine when we're functioning in any other dimension in relation to gravity. The basic question then is: how do we best maintain that "support" in all we do when we don't have our head resting on some surface? But even in that resting situation, it still becomes necessary to direct our head in such a way that enhances its relation to our spine and limbs – also in relation to gravity's effect upon us in that resting position.

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\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEmQHUYt404>

## 10 Walking

Because most people's gait is habitual and often reflects deep-seated cultural and personal attitudes about gender and social status, no matter how much lengthening in stature Alexander teachers can elicit in their students through regular table and chair work, a whole host of new challenges can still be encountered as soon as students start to launch into walking on their own. I think that these subconscious and habitual elements are best addressed in students by *first* dealing with how they transfer their entire weight from side to side while standing in one place – *before* they consider making any forward movement through space. Even this sideways shift of weight primarily onto one foot is often accompanied by a certain amount of coming down into that same side's ribs, pelvis, hip, knee, and ankle along with a concomitant shortening and bracing of the whole of that weight-bearing leg that sets the stage for the rest of the walking process to be distorted by that shift of weight alone. Then, on top of that shortening, the lifting of the advancing leg is usually done in a shortening manner too by fixing in its ankle and knee joints and by generally drawing the whole leg up into its hip joint, which no doubt adds even more to the tendency to shorten and brace on the opposite supportive side. Then, whenever someone goes on to advance that raised and shortened leg forward through space and set its foot down to receive the bulk of their weight before that entire advancing leg has had a chance to regain its full length, there's usually very little chance for the person to regain their fullest overall supportive lengthening in that advanced leg before they bring their already over-tightened opposite leg ahead to take the next step.<sup>172</sup>

In general, I see the problem as stemming from the combined actions of making the sideways shift onto the supporting leg and simultaneously picking up the advancing leg so that there are so many shortening factors operating suddenly that it's practically impossible for the student to inhibit any of them or even to distinguish them from each other very clearly. To sort out this issue, I've developed a procedure to *completely* extricate the student's sideways shift of weight from the advancing of their opposite "free" leg forward so that they can totally avoid any need to prepare the advancing, non-weight-bearing leg to take a step by shortening it.

1. For establishing this separation between the side-to-side shifting of weight from advancing a leg to take a step, I try to help students experience first the best upward-going balance on the weight-bearing leg and then have them merely bend the opposite knee in a free way so that this knee is truly *leading* a lengthening of the thigh out of their back/spine and head, and so that its calf, ankle, and foot can basically be freely suspended from that leg's lengthened thigh/knee support – *without* advancing that leg at all yet through space to “take” a step.
2. Next I have the student lower that lengthened thigh and entire leg back down again while it's *still parallel* to the weight-bearing leg and foot that will ultimately be left behind when the step is finally taken.
3. Then, as a completely separate action, led by the student's directing their head forward and up, I have them shift their weight back to being equally distributed over both heels and feet.
4. Next I have them repeat the same shifting of weight over onto the newly-lengthened leg and foot.

Repeating this whole sideways maneuver a number of times back and forth from one foot to the other and balancing equally on both feet in between these shifts of weight seems necessary before students are ever allowed to consider advancing one foot ahead of the other. (I sometimes get them doing this shifting of weight from one foot to the other between a “corridor” of chairs with the chairbacks facing each other and placed far enough apart that students can touch the chairbacks lightly with their fingertips as an added gauge of how much they may be pulling down and over to one side – particularly in their torso – as they prepare to take a step with the advancing leg and foot. They can also use the chair backs as an aid for steadying their balance if they may need to from time to time.

Since the motion of advancing forward through space tends so strongly to bring students more *down and over* the front of the feet and toes, I stress that their *heel* contacts need to be *primary* to their entire lengthening in stature. And I continually remind them with my hands and words to keep coming back and up out of their heels as much as possible, even though their head is continuing to lead their entire lengthening forward and up in a way that will ultimately govern and lead the advancing knee, leg, and foot.

5. After making sure that students are completely familiar with all of the above, I ask them to consider the possibility of going ahead to advance the non-weight-bearing leg as a *completely separate action* from the sideways shift of their weight onto the supportive leg. I go through the same sideways shifting of weight procedure as above; but now, after having them lead with their knee to raise their thigh in order for the foot and toes to clear the floor slightly and “dangle” from the raised knee, I have them lower their knee again so that this foot arrives only *slightly* forward of their other, weight-bearing heel. Here the advancing foot’s distance from the weight-bearing foot may only be as far forward as the weight-bearing foot’s arch – probably a distance of only three or four inches, but certainly not much more than that.
6. Then, as a *completely separate action*, I finally I have them transfer their weight forward over the advanced heel and foot after they’ve first taken plenty of time to be sure that they are going to lengthen mainly up out of its *heel* when their weight finally comes forward onto that leg and foot.

Often it seems that students won’t really let the advanced heel completely touch the floor until I remind them to do so and give extra encouragement and direction with my hands for this to happen. The main tendency for students in this phase of “taking a step” also seems to be to try to advance the forward foot too far, which again tends to draw their entire weight forward, over, and down on that side before they’ve really had a chance to lengthen that advanced leg to serve as a fully up-going source of support. (If a student “takes” only a few of those longer strides that compound the shortening in both legs, it’s much more difficult to guide them back into a balanced walking again because they’ve usually fallen too far into their habitual shortening pattern in both legs by “reaching out” so far ahead with the advancing foot and leg (“endgaining”) that it pulls them off balance in the supporting leg and torso. This pulling forward and down usually provokes more overall tightening that’ll be carried on throughout the rest of the “journey” forward to their destination.

This procedure is easiest to present to students while they’re still in stocking feet after I’ve given them table work and they are standing on a smooth floor where there’s minimal resistance to their feet gliding forward. At this point, instead of lifting the advancing foot completely off the floor, I often ask them only to raise their knee high enough for the tips and tops of their toes to remain in contact with the floor. The bottom of the

advancing foot is therefore “unpeeled” from the floor heel-to-toe-ward so that this foot can achieve its maximum opening from the front of the ankle (thereby lengthening the entire foot and bypassing any locking or contracting in the front of the ankle that most people seem to do so readily when they pick up a foot and leg to “take a step” – almost as if they were raising their leg, foot, and toe to climb a ladder. This lifting of the leg without taking the toes off the floor results in a gliding of the tops of the toes over the floor that also promotes a lengthening of the underside of the foot and toes. At the same time, it also elicits a lengthening of the tops of the toes and foot as the knee is raised up just high enough so that the tops of the toes are “stroked” over the floor – rather like a paintbrush being drawn steadily and evenly across a surface from the beginning to the end of the stroke without its ever leaving contact with that surface being painted.

7. When the knee, thigh, and calf are raised high enough for the heel to come down a bit farther forward than the instep of the weight-bearing foot, I have the student lower that advancing knee until the advanced heel contact is fully established in order to allow the fullest lengthening support needed to eventually take over the shift of weight from the leg and foot that have remained behind.

In many ways a prerequisite for this advancing procedure can be developing the ability to balance in a fully lengthened way on one foot (mainly its heel) while allowing the opposite leg to “dangle freely” from the supporting leg, torso, and head. To help students experience this dangling, I’ve found it useful to have them stand on a low stool or chair next to a wall where they can use their arm and hand closest to the wall to steady them if they need to. And then I have them stand close enough to the side of the stool farthest from the wall so that they can freely dangle their non-supporting leg and foot along the side of the stool – especially so that the dangling leg, ankle, and foot are totally free from any weight bearing and are “suspended” from the head, torso, and the opposite, weight-bearing leg’s foot and heel’s upward-lengthening contact with the stool (fig. 3).

This fullest balancing on one leg, reminds me of the scene in the film of Alexander where he’s shown standing behind a chair and then easily lifting one knee very high in order to swing his foot and entire lower leg over the top rail of the back of the chair. As I remember, he goes slightly off balance the first time he tries this, but when he immediately tries it again, he remains in perfect balance on the supporting foot and leg. (I think the



Fig. 3. Leg suspended.

film was made when he was in his 80s. He also demonstrates going easily into full squat while keeping both heels on the floor.)

In the actual stepping procedure that I'm outlining here, once the lengthened transference of a student's weight from heel to heel can be accomplished without any forward leaning or shortening over and down onto their advanced foot, then consecutive "steps" may be taken slowly – mainly led by their head being directed forward and up out of each heel contact. Speed should only be increased while they're maintaining the fullest lengthening out of each supporting leg and foot. (Failing to maintain this lengthening while walking and running may be one of the main reasons elderly people and runners wear out their knee and hip joints).

With this detailed procedure in mind, the emphasis is placed on gaining and maintaining a lengthening in stature from both heel contacts – particularly in walking, but in running as well, where the tendency is even greater to come forward and down onto – even to *fall* onto – the advancing foot and leg.<sup>173</sup>



I should also mention that I think the implications of this work in balancing and walking are meaningful for helping musicians to get more fully in touch with their “musicality” by cultivating a more naturally flowing gait in themselves as a whole, which can be an underlying experience of the character of a great deal of music. If a musician’s habitual gait is a distorted one, then it seems that their ability to translate fully the semblance of a smooth gait into a musical phrase may also be somehow diminished by their actual gait too. Improving the coordination of a musician’s gait may be able to give them a fuller basis for experiencing the ebb and flow of the essence of western melodic music in what’s sometimes called “the lyrical phrase” that reached its apex in the *bel canto* arias of Donizetti, Bellini, and other composers of that era. The walking experience I’ve described here can also serve as a frame of reference for expressing the rising and falling of phrases in music coming before and after that apex, which makes me recall Pablo Casals saying, “Every phrase is a rainbow! RAINbow! RAINBOW!”<sup>174</sup> So when we can experience every step we take as an even, “full rainbow,” then that feeling may also be able to inspire how we play the arching of a phrase.

## 11 Reliable and Unreliable Sensory Appreciation

“Sensory appreciation” is a central topic underlying all of Alexander’s work, and it mainly has to do with the accuracy of our awareness and interpretation of what we feel inside ourselves (proprioceptively, interoceptively, and kinesthetically) from moment to moment. Ultimately, how we assess this internal perceiving affects our ways of managing ourselves as a whole in relation to our thinking and our environment as we go about our lives. Alexander initially found that his own severe vocal problems were a result of his mistaken perception (faulty sensory appreciation) of how he habitually and subconsciously managed his head-torso-limb coordination not only in relation to when he actually spoke, but even when he merely *thought* of preparing to speak.<sup>175</sup> Eventually he also discovered that other people’s self-perception is also faulty and unreliable too – especially when it comes to learning to do something new or to making changes in a deeply entrenched pattern of thinking or behaving. He discovered that what many of us *feel*, or *think*, is “right and natural” is often merely “habitual” and not necessarily accurate, especially when it comes to assessing the appropriate or necessary amount of effort a particular activity requires for being accomplished in the most effective way – whether it’s an activity such as getting out of a chair, thinking through a problem, speaking to an audience, expressing intimate affection, playing a musical instrument, throwing a ball, or resting constructively.

Often the source of this internal misinterpretation has to do with patterns of muscular tension that we’ve learned or adopted at an early stage of developing a skill or acquiring a behavior pattern that we’ve been taught is socially appropriate or that’s admired or promoted in our family or culture. Or, in some cases, it can be due to adopting a pattern of behavior as part of going *against* what we perceive as the social norm. Many of these patterns of holding have become tightnesses (“conditions of use”) that are lodged more or less permanently in our musculature and other supportive tissue structures as part of our general “way of being in the world,” and they usually feel so “right and natural” to us that we can’t conceive of how they could ever be any different.

However, even when we realize that a different action or response is called for in a particular situation (which may include *not* acting or responding), we often lack the necessary accuracy of neuro-muscular judgment (sensory appreciation) and balanced overall control to carry

out the kind of change that we see is needed. For example, Alexander could see clearly in a front and side set-up of mirrors that he habitually (and subconsciously) altered the carriage of his head in a way that he realized was seriously damaging to his voice when he performed dramatic recitations. However, even though he was able to make a change in his head/torso dynamic as long as he was watching his image in the mirrors while he recited, as soon as he turned away from the mirrors to try to speak without their external visual input, he instantly reverted back to his habitual head carriage (and vocal strain) *without being able to feel the change happening*. This showed him that his internal assessment (sensory appreciation) of what he was doing with his head and other parts was inaccurate (faulty) and therefore unreliable. It wasn't until he developed a particular procedure that interrupted and held at bay his habitual mode of speaking by taking time to give himself several different options to respond (including not responding at all) that he was ultimately able to develop his ability to carry on consciously with the improved head-spine-limb coordination in a way that didn't endanger his voice when he turned away from the mirrors to recite his chosen lines. Of course, he eventually developed his hands-on method to impart this improved and consciously directed head-torso-limb awareness and coordination to others that allowed them to identify and experience in a matter of minutes what it took him a long time to discover and master on his own – a process he describes at great length in “Evolution of a Technique,” the first chapter of his third book, *The Use of the Self*.<sup>176</sup>

Lessons in the Technique usually reveal that when our attention is narrowly focused – either on something we're thinking about intensely, or even in daydreaming, “mind wandering,”<sup>177</sup> or some task we're attempting to perform with so-called “concentration” – we tend to lose touch with our perception of what's going on within the use of ourselves as a whole in relation to gravity. So our overall self-perception (sensory appreciation) either shuts off completely or greatly diminishes in accuracy. For instance, in Chapter 1 described the sudden changes that happened in me near the end of one of my early Alexander lessons when my teacher left me sitting for a few moments in a fairly good upward-flowing condition in relation to gravity's pull while she went to open the cottage door I was facing so that the next student on whom I had a strong crush could enter and pass by me to wait for her lesson in the next room. Then, when my teacher returned to give me a few more minutes of hands-on work to finish the lesson, I was utterly astounded to discover how much I had “lost” in just those few moments from my overall upward-flowing condition in relation

to gravity's pull. (In Alexander jargon we would say that I had "pulled down" intensely – in contrast to "going up.")

However, the main point to emphasize here is that – as with Alexander himself – I hadn't been at all *aware* of this extreme distorting of my head, torso, and limbs *while it was actually happening* – or even immediately *after* it had happened. I only realized what I'd subconsciously done to myself when my teacher returned to give me a few more minutes of upward direction with her hands that quickly restored my conditions of use to what they'd been just before the other student arrived. That single experience of such sudden and striking shifts in self-perception (sensory appreciation) is what led me to realize that the Alexander Technique is much more than just a "physical" method and that it's actually "psychophysical" in nature, as my teacher confirmed when I asked her about it at my next lesson.<sup>178</sup>

If I'd been more experienced at that time in the skills of inhibiting my immediate responses and directing my use of myself as a whole in the most positive, ongoing way on my own, I might've at least been aware of my reaction pattern sooner and might've been able to re-direct myself more quickly into a somewhat better state just after the downward-pulling response happened. Then, when my teacher began directing me again with her hands she might've been able to bring about the return of my total lengthening in stature more quickly and easily. However, after teaching the Technique for many years myself, I've seen over and over that such radical changes in self-awareness and such strong restrictive response patterns can happen instantly with practically everyone, and these can often take a good deal of time to recover from – and return to a more balanced overall state.

That very early experience in my lessons was an example of a short-term change in internal perception (sensory appreciation), but I also describe in the chapter on attending the three-year teacher training course a form of tightness that had been lodged within me in a way that I couldn't perceive at all ("faulty – or even no sensory appreciation") because it had "lived" in me for such a long time. As part of my phobia of certain kinds of birds it was fused with a tightness in my chest musculature that had evidently been lodged there since a sudden startling experience I had in my adolescent years. Then, when this tightness (shortening) suddenly and unexpectedly changed during the teacher training class one day into a vital lengthening that I could immediately perceive, it gradually became quite clear that the phobia and other fears (or even fear in general) had been a basic part of that long-term tightness. Until then I'd considered the phobia to be an essentially "emotional" or "psychological" condition

that had no connection whatsoever to any particular pattern of tightness (conditions of use) in my musculature or other tissue structures – another example of faulty sensory appreciation.

Another striking example of faulty sensory appreciation of my manner of use of myself came through applying what I was learning in my early Alexander lessons to my flute playing. Over the course of the ten years or so before I had lessons in the Technique I'd developed a marked tendency to tilt my head and torso to my right while I played – as I've noted elsewhere that many flutists often do, mainly because the flute requires you to hold it off to your right in a way that also makes you reach far across your chest with your left hand and arm (especially if you begin playing in fourth or fifth grade, long before you've reached your fullest size). Before Alexander lessons I hadn't perceived that I was doing this habitual tilting all the time that I played – or even that I was doing it a good deal of the time when I wasn't playing. The tilt felt to me like I *was* “standing in a balanced way,” and even when my Alexander lessons brought me into a more balanced condition (especially with regard to the relation of my head to the rest of my torso), I could easily slip back into my habitual right-ward tilt without realizing it because at this time, to use Alexander's words, it still felt natural and felt right (faulty sensory appreciation).

More broadly speaking, sensory appreciation can also encompass a great deal of what we've been taught or have grown to believe feels right and natural about our way of perceiving and interpreting our feelings and beliefs about our existence in many dimensions of life. This is an aspect of the Alexander lesson experience that can sometimes cause resistance in those who study the Technique – particularly if they bring with them certain fixed prejudices, beliefs, unduly excited fear reflexes, incorrect conceptions, pre-conceived ideas,<sup>179</sup> etc. about life and human nature that they consider to be fundamentally true and an unquestionable part of who they are. They may have adopted these attitudes and dispositions so far back in their growth and development that they don't even realize that they've actually *learned* them or developed them through a process of subconscious imitation or cultural conditioning. (For example, the belief or idea of what it feels like – or *should* feel like – to behave in or comport oneself in a “masculine” or “feminine” way in a particular culture.) Most people would never dream that their beliefs or attitudes about life could be so closely bound up with specific conditions in their supportive musculature and other tissue structures, so when someone's general use of the self as a whole begins to change or improve through Alexander lessons – or when they begin to perceive that this aspect *may*

*be able to* change into a different and more improved condition from what they're accustomed to feeling (faulty sensory appreciation) – they're often reluctant to pursue the Technique any further as a means for achieving full psychophysical unity because they sense that doing so may mean that they may need to examine and question the nature and the validity of some of their cherished ideas and ideals about their very nature – and even about human nature in general. Some people are just not prepared to entertain this possibility – at least not at that particular time in their life, so they may be content to regard the Technique merely as a means for managing “posture” and “movement.” Others might not feel anything happening at all in their musculature and supportive tissue in their lessons (faulty sensory appreciation), even when a teacher can perceive a significant change taking place while giving them hands-on work. This reminds me of what I've heard that Alexander said about people's “availability” to learn the Technique: sometimes people are harder to teach who are used to focusing more exclusively on their “thinking” processes than being aware of what may be going on in the rest of themselves at any given moment through their interoception, proprioception, and kinesthesia. But on the opposite end of this thinking-feeling “awareness spectrum,” it seems that people involved in the performing arts – as Alexander himself was – are often more receptive than others to what the Technique teaches us to do in order to become more balanced and whole. Performers are actually required by their profession to remain more open to broad ranges of feeling than most people usually are on a day-to-day basis. In fact, I've sometimes heard actors and acting teachers speak of making oneself a “neutral vessel” in order to “receive or become” open in their entire being to the emotion of a particular character or action they're portraying at a given moment, and this condition of openness seems to bear a strong resemblance to what the Alexander Technique cultivates as part of inhibiting our habitual responses to life's stimuli and doing what we sometimes call “leaving ourselves alone” instead of meddling with our overall balance and coordination in any nervous or fidgety ways.

Whether or not someone's difficulty in learning the Technique may be due to their particular beliefs or pre-conceived ideas, Alexander found that much of our fundamental self-assessment is often inaccurate, if not entirely mistaken, about how much effort it should take to accomplish many activities – beginning with the simple act of moving from sitting to standing. Of course, as I've explained, this is the matrix used in traditional Alexander lessons to help us experience, understand, and revise our sense of general effort in accomplishing all other tasks – including how we deal

with interpersonal situations and all our other reactions to the stimulus of living.<sup>180</sup> When our overall coordination is working in a balanced way, the effort to move from sitting to standing can be radically different in terms of the degree of energy and strength that most people believe (usually subconsciously) that they need to make when they stand up or sit down in their habitual way. Once they experience and fully understand this difference through having lessons, the more this coordinated relation to gravity can become a new “standard” (improved sensory appreciation) by which they can assess all their other actions and responses in life – especially ones that may have the tendency to throw them into an unbalanced or distorted condition, whether they’re attempting to make a movement through space in the best possible way or trying to manage their response to a particularly challenging life-situation or topic of thinking.

One of the most important things that an improved sensory appreciation allows us to do – along with enhancing our powers of consciously inhibiting our habitual response patterns and directing an integration of our musculature and other tissue structures – is to help us discover what the beliefs, habits, or motivations underlying a demanding situation may be. This information can aid us in assessing whether or not we are actually capable – in the present moment, or sometime later – of responding in the best possible way to whatever the situation may require. More often than not we may find that we aren’t actually ready to respond as immediately as we may have felt necessary in the past out of habit or convention. Therefore, the extra time that an improved use of ourselves as a whole enables us to take (inhibiting) can allow us to stay “in tune with” our overall, balanced relation to gravity so that we may be more able to ensure that our response is more accurate and effective – and even more genuine – than it may otherwise have been if we were automatically guided by subconscious habit. Sometimes this “choice” of response (which may be a choice *not* to respond at all) can happen in a split second – especially if our sensory appreciation is functioning accurately and our overall directing remains our basic standard of use of ourselves from moment to moment as part of what Alexander called “the universal constant in living.”<sup>181</sup>

Marcel Danesi, professor of semiotics and linguistic anthropology, says in an interview: “Research shows that people under the influence of ‘big lies’ develop more rigid neural pathways, showing signs of difficulty in rethinking situations. As it is almost impossible to turn the switch off, this means that when we accept a big lie or conspiracy theory, it can reshape our perception of reality without us being aware of it”<sup>182</sup> (faulty sensory appreciation). If Professor Danesi’s research is accurate, then it seems

even more important for us to consider the possibility of improving our self-perception – including our perception of the neuro-muscular aspect of our fixed beliefs, prejudices, and pre-conceived ideas – as a basic part of improving the use of ourselves as a whole. I think that those with an extensive experience of the Alexander Technique would also agree that there can be a neuro-muscular component (or aspect) to these “rigid neural pathways” cited by Professor Danesi that may also need to be taken into consideration before any fully valid assessment of facts and concepts can be examined in a constructive way. In fact, if this neuro-muscular component can become fully integrated, it seems that it may also be able to serve as a basis for and a part of a means for “re-routing” some of these “rigid neural pathways.” Alexander actually wrote very early in his career (1910) on the subject:

We are all aware that a conservative is rarely converted to the liberal viewpoint or vice versa in a day, or a month or even a year. Such mental changes, in the subconsciously controlled person, should, with rare exceptions, be made gradually and slowly; for the demands of readjustment in the psychophysical self are great, and depend on the conditions present in the particular person. It is conceivable that with certain conditions present, the process of readjustment may bring about such disorganization as may cause a serious crisis. During an experience of this kind the person would for a period be in greater danger than ever, and the length of this period would vary in different people. The process of readjustment in all spheres means immediate interference with forces of strength and weakness . . . .<sup>183</sup>



## 12 Training Teachers, Using the Hands in Teaching, and Exchanging Hands-on Work with Other Teachers 1978–1988

### CONDUCTING A TRAINING COURSE

In 1978 I decided to attempt a trial year of training Alexander teachers because I had three students who were serious about learning to teach the Technique and wanted to train specifically with me. Otherwise, I wouldn't have considered training teachers at that time in my life – if ever – since I was still primarily interested in developing a musical collaboration with local professionals who wanted to incorporate the Technique into their performing. I also wasn't at all sure then that I would be able to train teachers in the full and rich way that I had experienced with first-generation teachers on the London training course I attended, but this first trial year was so successful and rewarding that it was easy to decide to continue with the course indefinitely. We eventually included others who had studied privately with me for some time before entering the course, and for the most part all the subsequent trainees were involved in the performing arts, so the whole training process also seemed to fit in well with my ideas for building a performing arts collaborative.

The major factor that influenced my decision to embark on training these first three trainees was their individual characters and the nature of their life experience that made me feel that all of them would make excellent teachers and that they would be extremely receptive to Alexander's perspectives on the importance of the Technique to a positive growth of society. One trainee was chair of a university psychology department where he was engaged in research that led him to examine the Technique as a means of dealing with habit; the second was a cellist who had graduated with honors in literature; and the third was a dedicated actor in an experimental theatre company that focused on important social issues. Since all three were extremely industrious and articulate people, their contribution to our discussions about Alexander principles – particularly as we studied Alexander's books together – fostered a process full of mutual insight and discovery as we carefully considered the nature and vast scope of the Technique. Essentially, this turned out to be an adventure that we were

all embarking on together, discovering more as equals as we moved along from day to day, even though I was the one in the group who possessed the experience for helping us to stay rooted in the basic principles of the Technique as I had understood and experienced them through my own initial private lessons, my teacher training, and my exchanges with first- and second-generation colleagues.

Unfortunately, due to his wife's health, the psychology professor had to accept a teaching position in another state after our first year, so we didn't have the chance to discover what more his expertise and wisdom would bring to a longer collaboration. However, he was replaced by two other enthusiastic students of mine who contributed an equal amount of curiosity and intelligence from their backgrounds and experience; so the entire training process continued to be one of deep and exciting discovery. It was clear by the end of that first year that we could continue effectively and thoroughly with a training program that would uphold the essence of the Technique as I had experienced it in my own training. This was confirmed when our course eventually had teaching visits from some of my experienced colleagues who readily agreed that we were on a good path.

Even though our course didn't have the advantage of three or four full-time experienced teachers and ten to fifteen trainees to stimulate us as I had in my own training, I think we gained something valuable in other ways by having a smaller class of such capable and enthusiastic people who communicated so well and so creatively as a group. After these first two years, I generally made the compatibility factor a prerequisite for bringing in any future trainees by accepting only those who had worked with me fairly extensively in private lessons first.

#### CURRICULUM

Our daily class work followed the same basic pattern throughout the years that I was involved with training teachers. Each day consisted essentially of my giving one of the trainees a half-hour private lesson at the beginning of the class time, in which they would eventually begin to use their hands on me so that they could receive fullest feedback from my experience to be absolutely sure that they were "working to principle" and not merely using their hands to make local manipulations disconnected from their use of themselves as a whole. The private lesson time also helped to give trainees an awareness of what they would eventually be looking for as a high standard of use of use in their students. (Later, after one of my original trainees received his teacher's certificate, he joined me in teaching the class, and he would work with the trainees while I was giving one of

them a private lesson.) Then during the next half hour or so I would give shorter bouts of hands-on work (“turns,” as they’re traditionally called) to the other students, during which time the whole class would often discuss various topics relevant to the Technique. This period would be followed every other day by my reading aloud from one of Alexander’s four books and by taking time to discuss and clarify these passages as we went along – a process that usually took a full three years to complete. I would always go carefully over the readings ahead of time so that I could be sure to bring out the essence of Alexander’s phrases in a way that I hoped would have a fuller meaning to the trainees than if they’d merely studied the passages on their own for us to discuss later in the class. Often, we would also uncover points of greater depth and greater significance to life in the readings than I had gleaned from my previous study of the books or from listening to the head of my training course read and comment extensively on them.

On alternate days, we would go carefully through one of the anatomy lessons that were transcribed from an excellent course of lectures given by the anatomy instructor from my training course in London whom I mentioned earlier. These lectures were especially interesting and enlightening because he had composed them and illustrated them with his own drawings specifically to show the coordinated and equalized working of our skeletal, muscular, ligamental, and tendinous structures as a whole that’s fostered by the Technique – particularly with regard to the interaction between our head, spine/torso, and limbs. He also made it clear from an anatomical perspective that Alexander probably wouldn’t have discovered the Technique if he hadn’t been attempting to solve the problem he had with losing his voice while reciting because he found that depressing his larynx as part of his habit of distorting the carriage of his head in relation to his spine and torso was the key to addressing the way he managed his entire coordination in relation to gravity’s downward pull. In contrast, I suspect that academic approaches to studying anatomy don’t take the head-spine relation into account as being *central* to our coordination *as a whole* in all we do and in the way we maintain the healthiest use of ourselves from moment to moment.

The remainder of our class time was given over to my demonstrating on a trainee a particular aspect of using the hands in giving either table or chair work and then helping each trainee to go carefully through the process of transmitting the intention and experience of that aspect of directing to another trainee. However, the *main point* that we focused on at every step of this part of the training was, of course, that the use of our hands in

teaching and working on a student is *only* a reflection of, or manifestation of, our use of ourselves *as a whole*, rather than the result of any local, or specific skill in using our hands themselves. In fact, the most important – and often most difficult – thing to learn in Alexander teacher training (as most well-trained teachers know) is how to *leave your hands alone*, and *not do* anything with them specifically except to allow them (especially your palms) to function as “channels” or “vehicles” for transmitting the overall direction from yourself *as a whole* to the student’s overall relation to gravity from moment to moment, regardless of the specific points of contact you may be making with your hands at any given moment. Also, I hoped that trainees would realize that this direction can actually be transmitted by a contact from any part of us – even an elbow, knee, head, or toe, although hands are the most convenient part of us to use for transmitting direction most of the time.

Of course, it’s also important to mention that this non-endgaining (non-aggressive and non-manipulative) approach to using our hands is usually the hardest thing for trainees to learn because most, if not all, people are so used to achieving results with their hands and arms by specifically controlling the musculature of those parts in a “local” way instead of letting their palms, thumbs, fingers, and arms function as an extension of their use of themselves as a whole. Our main guideline, of course, was Alexander’s specific procedure for using our hands and arms on the top of a chair rail in relation to the whole of ourselves that he carefully outlines in *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*.<sup>184</sup> However, I’ve also added an indirect preliminary “step” to his procedure that I find helps to keep trainees even further away from any “grasping” (endgaining) with the hands, fingers, and thumbs than if they initially manage their arms, hands, fingers, and thumbs in the more immediate grasping sequence that Alexander describes.

#### THE EXTRA PRELIMINARY STEP

Instead of initially taking hold of the top rail of a chair with fingers and thumbs opposing each other as Alexander describes, this extra step involves first resting the *backs* of the hands on the top of the chair rail with our palms essentially facing the ceiling and the undersides of our fingers and thumbs opening gently out from our palms (fig. 4).

I always introduce this arms and hands portion of the procedure while trainees (and private students) remain standing at their full height behind the chair, rather than first guiding them into the customary position of mechanical advantage (“monkey,” as Alexander teachers sometimes call

it) that involves an equal bending at the hip, knee, and ankle joints used as the basis for the entire process of facilitating the overall dynamic relation between fingers, thumbs, palms, arms, head, torso, and legs.<sup>185</sup> I find it's useful to postpone the hip, knee, and ankle flexion element until there's first a clearer experience and understanding of the subtle antagonistic action, or "pulls" that need to happen in the fingers, hands, and arms in relation to the head and torso while standing fully upright. For establishing this hands-torso dynamic, it helps to have a chair with a high back rail such as you often find on older dining room chairs, but we also discovered that using a pine board about twenty-five inches long, eleven inches wide, and three-quarters of an inch thick that can rest on the seat of the chair and against its back rail served our purpose even better than most tall chair backs do – especially because this size of board also provides a longer and more even surface for lengthening the fingers and thumbs along in a fully supported way. The effectiveness of using a board with these dimensions should be clearer as I go on to describe the next steps, but the main point at this stage is to have a sturdy surface that's high enough for trainees to touch easily without needing to lower themselves in any way in order to make contacts on it with their hands. If anything, at this stage it's probably better to have a surface that's too high than too low, but having several different lengths of boards to accommodate trainees/students of different heights is also a good idea.

The first stage of this preliminary process is for the teacher to direct, support, and lift the trainees' arms and hands, one at a time, and place the *backs* of their hands on the top of the board at least eight or ten inches apart with their palms facing *upward* toward the ceiling (fig. 4). Resting the backs of the hands on the board in this way invites the fingers and thumbs to open out and lengthen, especially if they are contracted toward the palms even in the slightest, grasping way – as many people's fingers and thumbs often are if they've done a lot of work that requires any degree of gripping.<sup>186</sup>

While the backs of the trainee's hands are resting on the chair back or board, the main intention should be to allow both of their arms to lengthen away from that contact of the hands on the board as part of directing their whole self to lengthen up from the contact of their feet on the floor. This lengthening direction in the hands and arms should enhance the hands' overall condition or texture so that they aren't functioning merely as "weights" suspended from the torso but are acting as *extensions* of the head, spine/torso, legs, and feet as these all flow upward from the contacts of the feet on the floor.



Fig. 4. Hands on top of chair rail, palms facing up.

After having trainees allow me to place the backs of their hands for them on the chair back in this way with palms facing up toward the ceiling, the next step is for the trainees to slowly *roll* their hands over the top of the chair rail – with thumbs directed to lengthen out from the palms to lead this rolling inward of the hands toward each other – until their palms *and* thumbs are ultimately resting *on the top* of the chair back (fig. 5). This rolling operation should only be done by *continuing to maintain* a steady “grounded” contact of the hands with the chair back while gradually transferring these hand contacts from their backs to their sides and then continuing on over to ultimately arriving with palms and thumbs resting on the top of the chair back with fingers freely suspended over the front of the chair back rather than being extended downward at this stage to touch the surface of the front of the chair back in any effortful way.

In this position, the central parts of the palms that are resting on the chair back should be “filled with” their contact on the top rail of the chair while the fingers and thumbs are still merely flowing out from the palms in as free a way as they possibly can – without being “held” in any particular position. Then, from here I have trainees *slowly and fluidly* glide their thumbs, first one and then the other, over the top of the chair back so that each thumb will end up extending down along the back of the chair



Fig. 5. Hands rolled onto palms, with thumbs still resting and lengthening on top rail of chair.



Fig. 6. Thumbs extending down back of chair rail.



rail (or board) – while *never* at any time letting the thumb contacts leave the chair back or give up their freedom and lengthening in relation to the chair and the rest of their hands and arms (fig. 6).

In other words, the thumbs are never shortening or tightening in any way that would tend to set off a “grasping” effort against the board. If anything is to change at all in the dynamic relation of the thumbs to the palms and fingers, it’s merely an opening out and an extending of the thumbs that allows them to become even freer from any tendency to shorten and grasp inwardly toward the fingers and palms – a function that I think has been called “cortical opposition.”

While the trainees’ palms are still resting and lengthening and widening on the top of the board or rail and their thumbs are still resting and lengthening down along the back of it, I have them *slowly* lengthen their fingers to extend down along the front of the board from their knuckles closest to their palms until the undersides of their fingers are in contact with the board or chair back as much as possible without forcing them in any way to “straighten” in order to make that contact (fig. 7).

Even at this point the *entire* hands/fingers/thumbs contacts are still “grounded” by their lengthening along the board in a way that can fully join with the lengthening in the arms, the lengthening and widening of the back and torso, and the lengthening of the trainee’s whole stature from the contact of their feet on the floor. This more complete contact of the palms, fingers, and thumbs with the chair’s back also allows for the region of the palms between the base of the index fingers and the base of the thumbs to be fully supported and “open” so that the sensation of these contacts’ openness can be experienced as fully as possible, even though both hands appear to be “closed” around their contact with the back of the chair. In a way, you could say that the trainee is in a relationship to the back of the chair that resembles to the onlooker as a “taking hold of the back of the chair” with fingers and thumbs although this relationship is still a “resting” one and not in any way an actively “grasping” one. This quality of a supported, resting “openness” – even when the hands are in so much of a “closed” formation – is the “baseline” of experience for using the hands in teaching the Technique and for providing the “channel” for the lengthening in stature of a teacher’s entire supportive musculature to affect a student’s or trainee’s entire musculature from whatever specific local point of contact is being made on the student or trainee at any given moment, whether the teacher is directing students while they’re in a stationary position or guiding them in a movement through space. (The same “open” and “equalized quality in the hand in relation to the arms





Fig. 7. Fingers extending down front of chair rail.



Fig. 8. Fingers and thumbs slide up the chair rail; palms parallel to floor.

and torso can be vitally important for anyone using their hands to do other tasks too – particularly tasks that require an extremely subtle and flexible control like playing a musical instrument expressively).

In this configuration with palms, fingers, and thumbs lengthening onto the board, we are very close to the ultimate hands/arms/torso relationship that Alexander recommended for establishing and improving a balanced and subtle antagonistic action that allows the palms, fingers, and thumbs to draw upon the torso's lengthening and widening out of the contact of the feet on the floor to become the main source for transmitting a lengthening stimulus of direction to another person. The only thing that needs to happen next is for the fingers and thumbs to slide up an inch or so along the board toward the ceiling (fig. 8) while: (1) keeping the fingers and thumbs lengthening and in contact with the board; (2) keeping the backs of the hands flat and parallel to the floor; and (3) keeping the wrists slightly curved inward toward each other as they already would have been



Fig. 9. Full position of mechanical advantage.

(in fig. 7) when the hands were turned over from palms facing the ceiling to palms resting on the top of the board.

At this point I continue by giving trainees Alexander's specific directions for the use of the hands and arms in relation to the chair rail or board, even though I still haven't brought the trainees into the ultimate mechanical advantage of an equalized bending at the hip, knee, and ankle joints that combines with an *equalized* demand on ankle, knee, hip, elbow, and wrists joints and on the first joints of the fingers and thumbs closest to the palms (fig. 9).

Then the essential directions to the hands and arms for communicating an integrated direction through to a student are:

Directing your head to go forward and up in order to lead the lengthening of your spine, widening of your torso, and the lengthening of your whole stature up from the contact of your feet on the floor in order to:

1. Maintain the contacts of your fingers and thumbs extending straight along the front and back of the chair rail.
2. Maintain the backs of your hands parallel to the floor.
3. Direct your wrists to curve slightly inward toward each other.
4. Direct a slight ("gentle") forearm "pull" (a lengthening) from your fingertips and thumb tips to your elbows – *without* curving your wrists outwards to either side of you and *without* raising your elbows up toward the ceiling.
5. Direct your upper arms away from each other (to "widen") toward the walls on either side of you.
6. *Think of* gently pulling the back of the chair apart as if it has an elastic seam down the middle of it that could stretch apart by directing your back and whole torso to lengthen and widen in order to become your *main* source of "power" – or energy – for pulling the chair back apart – *instead of* pulling locally from your hands or arms in isolation from the rest of you.<sup>187</sup>

If these instructions and directions are followed carefully, they should help trainees come to a more subtle experience and understanding of truly "leaving the hands alone" to serve best as vehicles for transmitting an overall direction to a student and for bringing about the changes needed in the student's musculature and other supportive tissue that leads to an overall unity of lengthening in stature. Conversely, if this procedure isn't

followed exactly, there can be a tendency for the trainee (or teacher) to “do” something locally with their fingers, thumbs, palms, and arms when trying to transmit direction to a student. Then this “doing,” even if it’s subtle and light, is still likely to have more of a localized or isolated effect on a student than it would influence the student’s direction as a whole through every contact – wherever a contact may be made at any given moment. It’s not until trainees have been guided through this complete procedure many times by an experienced teacher over the course of several years – and not until they have become quite accomplished at it on their own – that they are ready to begin using their hands on another person in an unsupervised way. To this end then, trainees should also be guided carefully by the teacher in the placing of their hands on another trainee (or another teacher) with the teacher’s constant intent to promote in the trainee the very same dynamics within the trainee’s use of the self as a whole as the trainee should have experienced while using the hands on the back of the chair or board.

Once this process of directing the hands, fingers, thumbs, and arms in relation to the back of a chair or board while the trainee is standing with hips, knees, and ankles bent has become familiar and well-coordinated, then the trainee is ready to “apply” it to another trainee while the trainer guides the trainee through the process in a very careful way – often at first only allowing the trainee to leave their hands on the fellow trainee for a few moments before taking their hands off and returning to a fully upright stance. This is the beginning of a lengthy process of being taken through the procedure countless times before ever being ready to use their hands on another person in any extensive or prolonged unsupervised way. This is also the reason the training takes so long – because we’re learning *not to do* something to another person but merely to *direct it* to happen through directing our use of ourselves as a whole in order to affect the students’ own use of themselves as a whole – even if it’s only through a contact with a student’s finger or toe.

A good starting point for introducing trainees in beginning to use their hands on another trainee is for the trainee to stand behind a seated trainee (or teacher) and then for the trainee to allow the guiding teacher-trainer to pick up the trainee’s arms and hands one at a time and place their palms, fingers, and thumbs together on the seated trainee’s shoulders – just as the trainee’s palms, fingers and thumbs were resting on the top of the chair back or board in figure 2. Then the teacher can reiterate for the trainee the

same sequence of directing that was used when they had their fingers and thumbs on the board or chair rail – mainly:

1. Wrists free to curve in toward each other,
2. A gentle forearm pull from the fingertips and thumbs to the elbows,
3. A widening of the upper parts of the arms from the directing of their head forward and up,
4. Their back lengthening and widening,
5. Their knees going forward and away,
6. Their whole stature lengthening up from the contact of their feet on the floor.
7. To direct the chair person's shoulders to widen as part of their overall going up and lengthening and widening from their feet on the floor and their sitting bones on the chair.

Spending only a few minutes at a time on this procedure initially is probably all that should be allowed in the beginning so as not to challenge the trainee's *overall*, balanced direction too much at this stage because it's very likely to be fleeting. Of course, as trainees' use of themselves improves through receiving daily hands-on work from the training teacher(s) and from the trainees' ongoing work on themselves through inhibiting and directing as a constant in their daily lives, their skill at effectively and sensitively using their hands should improve accordingly. Usually a teacher's (or trainee's) skill in using their hands improves only as a reflection of an improvement in their use of themselves as a whole, which also helps them realize "that there is an endless process of growth initiated"<sup>188</sup> that goes on progressively revealing to them what they may need to look for as an improvement in their students' standard of use of themselves as a whole.

To carry this graduated approach further for the purposes of building up the trainee's ultimate ability to give another person regular hands-on "chair work," there are several smaller "steps" that, if well-guided by an experienced teacher, can provide a broader experience of an improved use of the self as a whole for teaching. Here are a few procedures – all to be guided by the teacher trainer and, if possible, to be carried out initially with the trainee putting their hands on an experienced teacher or an advanced trainee:

1. The trainee is guided to put hands on a seated chair person's shoulders from behind, then the chair person moves a few inches forward at the hip joints and slowly returns to sitting fully upright.
2. The trainee stands in the position of mechanical advantage with hips, knees, and ankles flexed at the side of the seated chair person with one hand spanning the chair person's upper chest and collar-bone region and the other hand at the chair person's upper back. Then the chair person moves forward slightly and slowly from the hip joints and then back again to balanced sitting. All the while the trainee is being directed and monitored by the teacher/trainer to be sure that the trainee isn't resorting to any endgaining use of their hands or arms or losing their overall lengthening in stature.
3. The chair person stands and sits slowly while the trainee follows at their side with hands on the chair person's chest and upper back.
4. The chair person turns right and left from their sitting bones while seated with the trainee's hands on their chest and upper back.
5. The chair person turns right and left from the ankles while standing with the trainee's hands on their chest and upper back.
6. The trainee keeps hands at the back of the seated chair person's head and at their chin/jaw while the chair person slowly stands and sits.
7. The trainee keeps hands at the back of the chair person's head and at their chin/jaw while the chair person is standing and turns slowly to the right and left.

All these variations, and others, are useful to do before trainee's are ever allowed to move a chair person from the trainee's own directional power. Therefore, feedback from both the teacher/trainer and the chair person (especially if they are another teacher or an experienced trainee) is very important in all these steps – just as it is throughout the entire training process – in order to cultivate in trainees the most constant reliance on their direction of their use of themselves as a whole instead of relying on any form of local manipulative (“endgaining”) strength – or even relying on an “imitation” of a “light use of the hands” as I described doing with my Army bandmates in Chapter 5 before I entered the three-year teacher training course.

AN ACCOMPANIMENTAL APPROACH TO EXCHANGING HANDS-ON WORK BETWEEN TEACHERS<sup>189</sup>

Next, I'd like to offer a description of and suggestions for an equalized approach to exchanging hands-on Alexander work between fully trained Alexander teachers – especially between those with different training backgrounds or different degrees of teaching experience. I realize that others may have already thought of and tried this – or some version of it – but I hope my own experience might encourage other teachers to focus even more on the essence of using their hands that I've described above than allowing themselves to be governed by any need or expectation to produce results – through “endgaining means.”

*First Experience*

My essential idea – which I'll describe in more detail later – stems from a revealing exchange of hands-on work I did in the 1990s with an experienced teacher trained in a different “style” from my own. She was visiting from London and had invited me to meet for us to give each other some Alexander hands-on work, and I had accepted her invitation with some degree of reservation because of the differences in our styles of training and general approach to teaching – even though our training course directors were both trained by Alexander himself.

Since she and I were also accomplished musicians and shared a keen interest in applying the Alexander Technique to musical performance, we were eager to see how things would go. However, as I had suspected, we quickly found ourselves at odds when we started to give each other our differing versions of hands-on “chair work.” Even though it was confounding to both of us at first, we were determined to persist in trying to find some common ground because we believed so much in the Technique's intrinsic value that we thought we should at least be able to discover a lowest common denominator between us.

Eventually, we saw that our difficulties lay chiefly in the contrasting approaches that we were trained to use in the sitting-to-standing-to-sitting format, so we thought that if we could somehow set those approaches completely aside, we might be able to come to a positive exchange that would still enhance each other's overall quality of integration in some basic way and perhaps even get closer to the essence of what hands-on work in the Technique consists of. Eventually we found that each of us, when acting as the hands-on person, could best direct the chair person's head-torso-limb coordination – and move the chair person into standing or sitting – by *only* directing our own head-torso-limb coordination



instead of intending to direct an improvement in the chair person in any way. To do this, we only allowed ourselves a light contact with one hand at the juncture of the chair person's head and upper spine and the other hand spanning their chin/jaw-line. Then the hands-on person would do *nothing more than that* while focusing entirely on enhancing their own primary directions in order to move the chair person into standing or sitting while *only intending not to interfere* with the possibility of a fuller or deeper integration coming about and being maintained in the chair person's conditions of use in conjunction with those head and chin contacts alone.

My colleague and I mainly relied on the chair person to assess and comment about whether or not the direction from the hands-on person was giving the chair person a stimulus that really fostered an improved head-torso-limbs integration. Often, we found that this wasn't the case until the hands-on person took greater time and care to attend much more fully to their own primary directions in order to best influence the chair person's integration. In this portion of our exchange of hands-on work, the chair person was actually more "in charge" of what was transpiring than the hands-on person, since the chair person was obligated to say immediately whether or not the hands-on person was really giving the best, non-endgaining and integrating contact *before, during, and after* conducting the movement from sitting to standing or from standing to sitting. Of course, this echoes the dynamics in a training course when teachers may have a trainee put hands on them for instructional purposes, but there was much more of an equality about this exchange with my colleague than you usually find in a training course.

That equality was fostered mainly, I think, by the fact that we constantly switched roles after each standing-to-sitting-to-standing "evolution." This frequent switching usually also meant that we only had our hands at the other person's head and jaw for a few moments at a time to move them between sitting and standing. I don't remember exactly how much total time we spent working in this frequently alternating way, but I think it may have been at least half an hour.

The outcome of the entire session was that both of us found that we actually experienced a more powerful and profound improvement in our overall integration than we usually would when we had hands-on work administered to us in the traditional half-hour "lesson" format – even with a highly experienced teacher in our own respective styles. For me, the integrating effect of this equalized alternating work seemed to reach far more deeply into my torso and spine than other hands-on work I'd received up to that time. My colleague also found that this way of working together



had a profound effect on her use of herself as a whole too, and we were both surprised by the fact that we could so accurately assess whether the hands-on person was directing their own integration fully enough to affect our own integration on such a deep level. If we hadn't lived in different countries, I think we probably would have gone on working together regularly with this approach because it seemed to be full of such profound potential.

### *Second Experience*

Several months later I had the chance to try out a version of this same accompanimental idea with a teacher whom I had trained, and that experience leads me to my main suggestion for teachers with different styles of training and different levels of experience to exchange hands-on work on a more equal and less endgaining basis. This teacher and I used to meet occasionally to exchange hands-on work and discuss aspects of the Technique, but this time when we got together I suggested that we use our hands on each other for a while in this intermittent and alternating way that I just described doing with my more experienced colleague from abroad.

However, instead of “assessing” each other's hand contacts as we made them on each other, and instead of giving more or less constant verbal feedback on the effectiveness of the contacts as I described above, we decided merely to take turns putting our hands on each other for a few minutes at a time and directing ourselves *only* to improve our own individual use – leaving the chair person *to draw upon* that contact as much as possible to improve his own conditions of use. We also decided that these hands-on contacts could be anywhere we chose to place them even though we mainly used contacts at the upper back, upper chest, and shoulders – rather than at the usual head-spine juncture typically used in an Alexander lesson – and we would only leave our hands in those places for a short time before moving them to another place on the chair person. However, in this working situation we decided that the chair person, instead of the hands-on person, would be in charge of deciding *when* to move himself, and he would also decide *when* and *how* he would move – either by standing up, sitting down, twisting, squatting, singing a phrase, moving backward or forward from the hips while seated, raising an arm, walking around, or doing other actions as he pleased in a well-directed way with his main intent being to go on improving his own conditions and manner of use and using the hands-on contacts as an aid to his improvement every moment. Of course, we did all these motions at a reasonable speed so that

the hands-on person could maintain a more or less continual contact no matter how the chair person moved. The main thing to emphasize here, though, is that there was no “taking” each other from sitting to standing or from standing to sitting as would normally happen in a regular period of Alexander hands-on work – even though standing up and sitting down were happening from time to time in this case too. Again, these actions were taking place entirely at the chair person’s discretion as opposed to being guided by the hands-on person in the conventional way.

As when working with my colleague from abroad, my former trainee and I maintained the hands-on and chair-person roles only for a little while before we would change places, and we continued in this alternating way for half an hour to forty-five minutes. Then, when we stopped working with our hands, we took some time to reflect on and discuss what we’d just experienced, and we were both surprised to find how much improvement had been made in our respective conditions of use. We agreed that this improvement also seemed even *greater* than the improvement we would usually experience when we merely gave each other a full bout of regular chair-table-chair work for half an hour or so apiece.

However, the most striking thing we noted about this improvement in our conditions was that it seemed not to be due to any *specific* aspect of the hands-on work, nor was it due to any particular time segment of the hands-on contacts. Instead, the overall improvement seemed much more to be a result of the “sum total” of the *entire work session* that was constantly dedicated to focusing exclusively on, and wishing to improve, our *own* conditions and manner of use instead of focusing in any way on improving the other person’s conditions and manner of use. We merely trusted that our hand contacts would be essentially positive because we were attempting to direct ourselves as well as we could at every moment. (Of course, if the hands-on contacts *hadn’t* been essentially positive – for instance, if one or both of us had been very tired or distracted by some life event that day – we may have decided to discontinue working in this way for that period of time and then have gone back to the format where whichever teacher who was going fairly well would give the other teacher a longer bout of traditional chair and/or table work first.)

Eventually, as I thought more about how this approach to exchanging work between teachers bypasses the traditional roles that most Alexander teachers adhere to, I decided to call it “accompanimental work,” since the hands-on person is merely following, or accompanying, the chair person while the chair person moves of their own volition and at their own speed.

*Future Possibilities*

The few times I've suggested or actually tried exploring this accompanimental approach with other colleagues, some of them have seemed reluctant to give up "being in charge" of the use and movement of the person they're using their hands on. Therefore, those earlier positive accompanimental experiences I described above have made me wonder if the conventional Alexander teaching and teacher training format inadvertently cultivates a social dynamic with an element of power and role-formation that can eventually hamper our individual freedom and responsibility to be masters of our own selves in relation to each other – as it seems Alexander challenged us to be, and as he himself apparently was. If traditionally trained teachers find ways such as I've described here to leave behind – at least temporarily – the standard lesson format of one person being in charge of improving the other person's integration and movement for an extended period of time, then maybe a more equalized exchange of direction can be established as a basis for working together. It also seems that such an exchange could eventually merge into the form that my overseas colleague and I discovered together – one in which the hands-on person is in charge of moving the chair person by solely directing the chair person through contacts with the chair person's head, which perhaps has the greatest potential to improve the chair person's overall integration. Then this traditional way of directing another person might be based more on the equality previously fostered by the approach where the chair person is in charge of moving him/her self. Likewise, a frequent alternation between the two forms of being in charge of the movement component might also have its value in enhancing and perpetuating the equality of roles when two teachers are working together on each other.

If teachers are interested in trying out this accompanimental approach to working with each other, I suggest that they also decide beforehand in what places the hands-on person will mainly offer hand contacts on the chair person. It might be a good idea too – at first, at least – to avoid placing hands at the chair person's head (as we decided to avoid doing when my former trainee and I worked together) because there's such a tendency, I think, to "take control" of the chair person from that head contact in the way that most of us are usually taught to do in our training.<sup>190</sup>

Also, it would probably be a good idea to decide together at the outset how long each hands-on segment should last, and even to go as far as setting a (non-ticking) timer to signal the regular change-over points so that neither person has to be concerned about remembering when to switch places. Three minutes – or maybe even less – could be a good

amount of time for each hands-on period, and the total duration of the session should probably also be agreed upon at the outset. I'd recommend no more than half an hour, but maybe a longer period should be optional if both teachers feel they want to go on working in that way. The main characteristic of the session, though, is that both teachers would spend an *equal* amount of time in the hands-on and chair-person roles.

Then maybe, as with my former trainee, after the whole hands-on exchange is over, it would be good for both teachers to take some time to discuss what they received from the entire period of work – particularly in comparison to receiving a traditional turn or lesson. This period of general reflection on the effect of the *entire* hands-on period should especially replace either person's *evaluating* the other's specific hands-on contacts at any given moment *during* the hands-on period – a type of evaluating that can also contribute to a competitive dynamic that this equalized way of working helps to dispel.

If both teachers are fairly experienced in directing themselves, it should be possible for the chair person to “use” the contact from the hands-on person to improve their conditions without the hands-on person taking any special responsibility to achieve an improvement in the chair person's use, or without the hands-on person even intending an improvement to happen in any particular way or place in the chair person. If the hands-on person's direction is good – and especially if it's continuing to improve as the working together in this way goes on, it should be sufficient to offer the chair person a basic degree of direction that's useful as an aid to the chair-person's directing. Once, after I stopped teaching full time, I invited a longtime private student to try some of this hands-on exchange with me. He had no training at all in using his hands to teach, but I was able to show him how to place his hands on the back rail of a chair as I described above while mainly continuing with his best going up and lengthening and widening. Then I had him stand behind me while I was seated facing away from him on the chair in front of him and I had him place his hands lightly on my shoulders (in that same left-alone way as he'd rested them on the chair back) and to simply go on directing himself as he usually would from moment to moment while I went on to stand up, sit down again, walk around, etc. We also switched places every couple of minutes as I'd done with my former trainee, and it all seemed to go very well and easily as each hands-on person maintained the same contacts with shoulders, upper back, and chest while following the chair person's choice of motions. The experience seemed quite a positive one for this former student, and I think it may have been at least a good deal better

for him than receiving no Alexander hands-on work at all that day because he was *at least* receiving *some* upward-flowing direction from me through his hand contacts, whereas otherwise, he wouldn't have been receiving *any* direction from an "outside source" at that time. The lengthening and widening in my own torso and my overall upward energy was markedly improved for the rest of the day too because I had *used* my student's hand contacts to improve my own direction beyond what I could normally muster on my own in that short amount of time. I was able to "take" something from his many years of self-direction and "up" even though he didn't have much of any idea how to direct someone else with his hands in order to encourage an improvement in their overall integration. However, it also occurs to me to add here that this example of allowing an untrained student to put their hands on a teacher might seem to mean that I would also condone untrained people experimenting with using their hands on each other in this way. Of course, I absolutely do not. I would never have attempted this kind of exchange with a student who hadn't worked with me for a very long time, and even then I would be very careful to emphasize to them that, by doing this, we are in *no way* engaging in "training" them to become an Alexander teacher. It obviously may have a value, though, if used in the right way. And it may also provide a non-manipulative and compassionate "pathway" to the use of touch between friends and intimate partners that I allude to in the last chapter.

#### SUB-STANDARD USE OF THE HANDS

A striking example of the effect of a minimal and sub-standard use of the hands-on aspect of the Technique happened during the early 1980s when our Boston teacher training course hosted a master class for singers given by the Russian soprano Olga Averino.<sup>191</sup> Our class had recently visited her studio because one of our trainees was studying singing with her and found her approach to singing much in keeping with Alexander principles. Therefore, having her come to teach during our class time felt quite natural.

On the day of the singing class I was unusually tired and quite distracted by a difficult conversation I'd had shortly before people arrived, so I certainly didn't feel up to giving anyone a useful and integrating Alexander experience then without taking a good amount of time alone to work on myself first. I was grateful just to be sitting at the back of the room with the other onlookers – more as an appreciative musician than as an Alexander teacher – and have the pleasure of observing Olga teaching.

Several accomplished singers performed first, and Olga worked expertly with them to enhance various aspects of their singing. Then one young man was to perform next who I don't believe had any experience of the Alexander Technique, but when he came to his entrance at the end of the piano introduction, he could only produce a light squeak of sound that lasted just a second or two. This situation could probably be considered an example of what "stage fright" – or "unduly excited fear reflexes,"<sup>192</sup> as Alexander called them – can do to a performer. Olga used various approaches for getting him to "relax" or feel more at ease, but whatever she suggested he do or think didn't help him produce any kind of sustained sound.

Just as she seemed about give up on working with him and move on to the next singer, though, one of our trainees spoke up from across the room and said, "Joe, why don't you try doing some Alexander work with him?" Of course, that was the last thing I wanted to do that morning because of the very tired and distracted state I was still in, and I was very reluctant to do anything that would detract in any way from Olga's teaching or presence. However, I couldn't think of any way to decline on the spur of the moment, and doing whatever I could to help seemed pretty clearly expected of me as the main "Alexander representative" present. The young man agreed to let us see what would happen, so I went over to where he was still standing by the piano and started working on him with light contacts of my hands in the customary way at the junction of his head and upper spine, around his shoulders, chest, and back – while he went on watching Olga speaking to the class about various aspects of singing.

A few minutes later, Olga turned to us and asked the young man if he might want to try again to sing. He said he would, so I went back to my seat, the pianist played the introduction, and lo and behold, he could sing quite well! However, the most interesting thing to me was that this change had happened even though I'd given him no verbal instruction at all and had only worked on him lightly with my hands as he remained standing next to the piano and focused mainly on Olga speaking to the class.

I was actually somewhat embarrassed by this outcome because what I'd done had kind of "stolen the show," and I had far too much respect for Olga and her mastery ever to do anything to detract from her presence or teaching. Nevertheless, when the class was over and she was saying goodbye to me, she seemed glad to be able to acknowledge that there may be more of value for singers in the Alexander Technique than she'd previously thought.

In truth, I was a bit baffled by what had transpired with this young man because of the minimal amount of hands-on work I'd given him. I felt that it otherwise may have taken me nearly a whole private lesson in order to make enough change in his conditions and manner of use to allow him to sing in any passable way well at all. I also thought that it may have been very lucky that his attention was directed more away from himself toward Olga's talking while I was working on him. If I had needed to engage him directly with suggestions or instructions while everyone went on focusing directly on him as the performer, we may not have succeeded so well – if at all. In fact, I suspect it may have made him even more self-conscious and anxious.

I should also acknowledge that there may have been something of a “comforting element” in operation just from the mere fact that he was receiving some basically quiet, gentle, and reassuring hands-on contacts that seemed simply to “calm him down.” However, what I was doing with my hands in directing him was nothing like what I would've done with my hands to reassure or comfort someone who is in an overwhelmed or troubled state even though that contact would also have been one that was totally informed by my use of myself as a whole that I had spent a great deal of time cultivating as part of my entire being in everything I do. I had only focused on giving this singer basic Alexander direction, in spite of the fact that I wasn't in top form just then. Therefore, those contacts were certainly different from any of the contacts used by various manipulative methods like massage or physical therapy, even though I certainly wouldn't consider mine full-fledged Alexander teaching – by any means. It's situations like this that can give an impression that there's very little involved in learning to teach the Alexander Technique except using “light hand contacts” while someone is executing a certain action and that, basically, “anyone can do it,” which, according to my experience and training, is entirely mis-leading.



## 13 Artistic Vision:

### Using the Alexander Technique To Deal with Stress and Enhance Expressiveness in The Performing Arts

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1975, when I completed my master's thesis experiment that examined how the Alexander Technique may be able to help musicians deal with stress in performing<sup>193</sup> – just as it may be able to help other performers in the same way – I realized that my research and writing on the subject couldn't be more than a sketch of the widespread problem and its solution from Alexander's psychophysical point of view. I only hoped it would pave the way for doing more elaborate study and research in the future. As expected, the experimental study of a college piano repertoire class supported the idea that the Technique could be used by players to stay more integrated and more in control when performing, thereby giving them fuller access to whatever degree of musicianship and musicality they might possess – no small achievement to anyone who suffers from nervousness or stage fright. Therefore, this window onto the inner life of musicians was opened a little more than it had been previously – but not much.

One of the most interesting things for me about conducting the entire study was finding out how impressed the music faculty on the thesis review committee was when I played them the final split-screen videotaped performances of the four pianists in the experiment that were made before and after I gave each of them six weekly Alexander lessons. I should add that none of these lessons were given to the players while they were at their instrument, and the lessons only consisted of the traditional chair and table work that's normally given to Alexander students of all professions and backgrounds. (The four other pianists in the control group from the same piano repertoire class received no Alexander lessons during the six-week period.) I think the photographs below (fig. 10) show a marked difference in the players between their first performance on the left of the same piece they played six weeks later that's shown on the right (both views are taken at approximately the same point in the music).

The thesis committee had no previous acquaintance with these four pianists who were enrolled at another school music department, so they only had the video's visual and audio results to judge by. These profes-





Figs. 10 a, b, c. Still photos of split-screen video performances before and after six Alexander lessons.<sup>194</sup>

sors' enthusiastic response was quite surprising to me because they had no personal experience of the Alexander Technique, even though it had been taught and researched in the psychology department of the university by that time. They were mainly responding from a musical perspective, rather than from a more mechanistic, anatomical one. Since I'd been working so

closely with these pianists and had become so accustomed to the changes in them that happened gradually over their six weeks of private lessons, the difference in their overall use of themselves as they played for the final video didn't seem so striking to me as to warrant the faculty's praises. However, the students also confirmed in the final questionnaire I gave them that they definitely felt they had learned how to deal better with performance stress through their six Alexander lessons, whereas the four pianists in the control group reported that they didn't feel they were able to deal any better with stress in their performances at the end of the six weeks than when they were video-taped playing the same pieces they had played at the beginning of the experiment.

One of the most significant and inspiring parts of the thesis for me comes from a letter in the appendix of testimonials submitted by professional musicians who had studied the Alexander Technique. Here's an excerpt from that letter written by a colleague who studied extensively with Pablo Casals and later trained to become an Alexander teacher to incorporate its skills and understandings into her cello teaching:

It is clear to me now that Casals was one of the rare people who retain beyond childhood a near-perfect 'use of the self'; and that this had allowed him to see cello problems in a new and truer light, and to solve them in a new and supremely simple way. Certainly his teaching was quite different from, and even in some respects contrary to, anything I had before. In his playing too, apart from the uniqueness of his conceptions, there was a marvellous absence of interference – (almost of the man himself) – between the conception and its realization. . . .

If I were to list some of the benefits I can attribute to my improving use of myself through the Alexander Technique, I should say that on occasion I have been able, in a solo performance, to shed anxiety completely as if it were a cloak – a most exhilarating experience. I increasingly enjoy a sense of adventure in playing (which surely communicates itself to an audience), and am able to have greater confidence in the deeper awarenesses on which true ensemble is built, besides having a foundation of certainty on which to build in practicing. I am certain, too, that doors will continue to open.

It follows, I think, that if you have a means of dealing with anxiety on the concert platform, you also have one in any other situation; if you have a sense of adventure in playing, you can have one at other times, too, and that deeper awareness will surely not be limited to music.<sup>195</sup>

All my years of specializing in teaching the Alexander Technique to student and professional musicians since that thesis experiment in 1975 have continued to confirm to me the Technique's value in dealing with "nerves" and in promoting superlative control. However, this early experimental study, along with my own evolving use of the Technique as a musician to cultivate and maintain a performing standard that's ever more whole, alive, and fully communicative, made me want to go on seeing if I could probe more deeply into the barriers to fullest music making – and into the roots of excellence in the performing arts in general. In my searching I've come up with some ideas and observations that I hope can be useful to anyone who's working at incorporating Alexander's discoveries into their instrumental playing or other modes of performing. As I write about these ideas here, I'll also include some other writers' reflections and statements I've collected over the years that I hope will enhance my own thoughts on the subject.

#### THE DILEMMA

Whenever the musicians I give Alexander lessons to discuss their experiences of performance anxiety with me, what they say usually reveals that they fall into a particular type of *thinking* in relation to playing a concert that sets them up for being nervous. This kind of thinking clearly distracts them from what I've come to believe needs to be a performer's most important focus in presenting a piece of music to its listeners – especially including the performer as a crucial listener too. I often get the strong impression that, during these times of nervousness, they're preoccupied with everything *but* what the piece they're playing might be conveying as a work of art. Or, even if they do focus some on what the piece might be expressing, other inner reckonings crowd that focus so far into the background that it really doesn't have much of a chance to influence their actual playing in any substantial way from moment to moment. I also suspect that they may be dominated by these non-musical aspects not only while they're practicing and performing a piece, but even when they're playing through it in their imagination – a time that I think may be far more crucial than many performers realize.

What performers seem to get distracted by the most is their concern with the technical side of executing the music, ranging anywhere from "just getting all the notes" and "producing a good sound" all the way to "bringing off a passage brilliantly." Then, going on from there, to worrying about how they might be evaluated as players by their listeners – somewhere along a scale from "poor" to "genius" seems to follow directly.

Sooner or later, all these issues can get tangled up with the players' feelings about their worth as human beings and about how well they might be liked or admired for their performing ability by friends, family, colleagues, or the public in general. When this preoccupation is the case, it's easy for many musicians to feel that any performance they give that's less than excellent technically also makes them something of a social failure.

Thomas Moore captures the essence of the dilemma well:

Anxiety is nothing but fear inspired by an imagined future collapse. It is the failure of trust.<sup>196</sup>

Considering Moore's statement from an Alexander perspective, it seems that what promotes anxiety and distraction most when we perform is our failing to trust our ability to direct our integration of ourselves as a whole so that every cell of our being can be imbued with the life-experience embodied in each particular piece we play. However, as soon as we start worrying about what Moore calls "an imagined future collapse," or as soon as we get too caught up in focusing on specifics at the expense of our overall integrating, we start to rob our musical vision of its power to illuminate our playing. This situation usually results in tightening or stiffening in some way so that the pathways from our imagination to our musculature are hampered or blocked. Alexander's term for this condition was "unduly excited fear reflexes."<sup>197</sup>

In 2005, pianist Joyce Hatto expressed well the attitude I hope to reinforce here. Due to a long battle with cancer, she hadn't performed in public for 25 years, but in a telephone interview with *Boston Globe* music critic Richard Dyer, she said:

What it really takes to be a pianist is courage, character, and the capacity to work. Shakespeare understood the entire human condition and so did the great composers. As interpreters, we are not important; we are just vehicles. When somebody says, 'What a marvelous piece,' that's the thing, the true compliment. Our job is to communicate the spiritual content of life as it is presented in the music. Nothing belongs to us; all you can do is pass it along. That's the way it is.<sup>198</sup>

#### TECHNOLOGY AND TRAINING

Modern recording techniques also add to the problem of stress by producing a technically flawless rendition of a piece from a fusion of the "best," or most exact segments, of as many repetitions of it as they wish to make.

More and more, the public expects to hear this superhuman kind of playing at a concert too, which is virtually impossible to duplicate in a single, non-stop performance of a piece without compromising the freedom that needs to be at the heart of a fully spontaneous and expressive rendering. I also think that many music schools may add to the pressure to achieve such an ideal of technical “perfection” by gearing their requirements to meet this commercially engineered recording standard.

Echoing that point, American flutist Claudia Walker, playing in the Orquesta Sinfonica de Galicia in Spain, contrasts American perfectionism with Spanish attitudes about performing:

My flute playing and approach to music have changed by working with Spanish musicians, who are very expressive and are more willing to take performance risks than most Americans. Their focus is more soloistic, and they find Americans musically boring. Spaniards enjoy themselves so much in a concert that they play with abandon, while I sometimes play carefully, petrified I will make a mistake. A flute section colleague said, “all you will communicate is fear with that attitude.” I realize he is correct. As Americans emphasize technical prowess and discipline they lose sight of the emotional aspects of music. . . . A Spanish audition is the perfect moment to take musical risks. I think of it as a performance, not an audition. Unlike the States with large numbers of people in the first round, fewer people attend Spanish auditions and Spanish committees want to like you. Freedom from the note-perfect performance requirement is a new and welcome experience.<sup>199</sup>

Added to these issues, we often see performers making “extraneous” movements so that they’ll *appear* to be “more expressive” to an audience. Somehow this extra “choreography” makes it seem as if they’re trying to dance to or move to the music at the same time they’re playing, and then this extra activity gets equated with “fullest musicality” when, in actuality, it’s only an encumbrance that interferes, or at least works against, the chances for the expressive character of a piece coming through the actual sound. Of course, I don’t mean to be implying that “holding still” while playing should be cultivated either, but it can seem as if some players are trying to make up for a lack of expression in the actual sounds they’re producing by adding extra gesturing. In these cases, there are actually *two* activities going on at the same time: producing the music’s sound and producing a gestural *accompaniment* to that sound.

Performers can also be steered away from music's essential nature as an art form by studying theory, form and analysis, music history, etc. if this academic work isn't kept in proper perspective. It often seems to me that many music educators forget that these more academic subjects are only the equivalent for the composer of what the learning of grammar is to the poet or novelist, or what the study of color theory is to the painter. It's so important to remember that knowing the elements of the craft of composing or the details of a composer's life and times aren't really necessary for either performer or listener to immediately and successfully grasp the essence of a piece of music as a work of art. (I'll say more about this "intuitive" process later.) Therefore, finding out how to keep this academic knowledge at the service of the fullest expression of a piece often needs to become a much greater concern for performers and music educators than it seems to be. However, as far as I've been able to tell, few music school curricula are set up to foster a conscious fusing of all the elements they teach into an understanding of the main function of music as an art form, and students are very lucky if they have private teachers, coaches, and conductors who can help them maintain this fusion in both practicing and performing. Generally, the attitude of many music school faculties seems to me to be: you either have enough discipline and "talent" or "innate musicality" to balance out the effect of your theoretical studies on your performing, or you don't. Nevertheless, I hope the day will come when the most valued course in conservatories will be on musicality itself – particularly by exploring and developing an understanding of what musicality might mean in terms of the kind of psychophysical freedom that allows us to experience pulse and melodic flow in a way that's directed by the fullest imaginative involvement.

One powerful idea about creating a music curriculum based on expressivity in performing occurred to me while I was translating André Pirro's 1917 book *The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach* (*L'Ésthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach*).<sup>200</sup> Pirro gives us a vast compendium of examples of how Bach formed every aspect of his composing around the feelings portrayed in the texts he chose for his vocal works. Then, on that basis, he reveals how Bach carried that process over into the purely instrumental works too. I think the use of this book as a solid basis for studying the essence of the elements of music in general could greatly transcend – or at least complement – more modern texts for fostering performers' understandings and experience of all music. Pirro's introduction expresses well this basic attitude:

Music has the power to fill our whole soul – awakening it at the same time as charming it. We need only hear a few bars before the delight they bring begins to move our spirits and enliven our minds. Even the faintest murmur of notes can inspire a response from our senses, and, as long as these notes remain organized, they can captivate our intellects as well.<sup>201</sup>

Music, in fact, has never lacked expressive potential. The forms of the art have varied, but the feelings that inspire it have remained immutable. The same world of ideas and impressions – however it manifests itself outwardly – is always described in these forms. At all times, music has contained images of human feelings, and it has never stopped being the profound and faithful mirror of our souls, just as lakes and ponds have always contained reflections of the changing sky. Each epoch has had composers who have tried to interpret in sound what they have experienced – or what they would like us to feel – and it is up to us to discover and unravel in their works the feelings that have informed them, alongside and sometimes underlying their technical considerations. To do this, we must go directly to the source of the composer’s inspiration.<sup>202</sup>

As many more live recordings of older performances are becoming available in video and sound formats, you don’t have to search very far to find examples of a life and vibrancy, albeit “imperfect,” that’s not often found in more recent recordings and performances of the same works that have been carefully engineered from many “takes.”

In 2002 Jennifer Homans illustrated well the effects of a competitive, perfectionist attitude in the field of dance:

The ballet dancers of today are amazing. They can turn, jump, and lift their legs higher, better, farther, faster . . . with dizzying displays of technical prowess. [In the recent American Ballet Theatre season] the performers were energetic, technically impeccable, and eager to please. The audience cheered them on and shouted bravos. But all of this effort only made the truth more glaring: we were wowed, but rarely moved; impressed, but almost never inspired. Where was the edge, the exhilaration, the sense of having been part of something larger than a masterful pirouette? Has ballet been reduced to a series of athletic moves, a gymnastics of turns, jumps and splits, and are audiences content to be cheerleaders? Are we so seduced by pyrotechnics that we have forgotten that ballet might also offer something more complex and daring? . . . In the course of the past twenty years, we have watched dancers retreat into tight technical perfection, petrified beauty, and contrived imitations of past glories. We have seen a

vibrant, complicated, and playful art form lose its inner life and settle into a glamorous complacency.<sup>203</sup>

While Homans feels that some of the newer male dancers hold promise, she mainly focuses on the plight of the women:

Will there ever be great classical ballerinas again? Perhaps not. To become such a ballerina these days a woman would need more than mere talent: she would need the courage to throw the weight of her career against an entrenched cultural preference for slick perfection and packaging. Given the number of flawlessly trained ballerinas in the pipeline, it is hard to imagine a dancer having such audacity. Judging from the women rewarded by ABT's [American Ballet Theatre] directors, there is little incentive to be different. If a young dancer took a risk and failed, a more reliable substitute would always be waiting in the wings. . . . If they stick to the barren path of perfection, classical ballet may perish. But if they have the courage to establish a complex physical and theatrical agenda, great things may still await us.<sup>204</sup>

I should also mention here a book I co-wrote with the cellist/Alexander teacher colleague whose letter I quoted above. The book gives details of her intensive study with Pablo Casals and its resonance with her later experience teaching the Alexander Technique to professional musicians. It also goes a long way toward establishing guidelines for Alexander teachers and students alike in making a deep connection with the essence of a musical work.<sup>205</sup>

To witness Casals' teaching in action, a youtube video gives a good example of him working with a cellist in a master class.\*

#### THE PUBLIC

Audiences may also contribute to the degree of stress performers feel because advertising and the media often cultivate a very misdirected attitude in the public as listeners. The strong emphasis of the "star system" on performers' virtuosity, their personalities, and their instruments often seduces many listeners away from paying attention to the expressive essence of the pieces musicians play – particularly if the flashy elements of a piece are emphasized more than the essential life-experience embodied in it.

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\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiCwFuuEILg>



Corporate marketing – sometimes called “the music business” – also tends to foster the same type of focus on famous classical musicians that’s often given to popular musicians and to film, TV, and sports stars. In fact, it often seems to me that the highly competitive attitude encouraged by American sports from a very early age influences the approach to the performing arts in the U.S. in a very powerful (though largely subconscious) way, right from earliest music and dance lessons on through to the highest professional levels. Performing well can often become more a matter of “winning” by playing perfectly or brilliantly than of being the successful messenger, the communicator, of each piece we play. I’m also recalling here something a student remarked to me when we were talking about this subject. He told me that a woman he knew once said to him when they were comparing their musical backgrounds, “Yes. I used to play flute competitively in high school” – as if playing music were the same thing as being in a tennis match or a basketball tournament. This kind of attitude certainly seems fostered by the various talent competitions we see on television where fans are heard and seen cheering wildly when a musical contestant reaches and holds a high note at the climax of a song or when a dancer does a difficult leap or unusual move.

In December of 2001, PBS [the American Public Broadcast System] presented a program on famous violinists that focused almost entirely on the abilities of the performers.<sup>206</sup> One of the most thought-provoking examples could be seen in some footage from the 1950s of Jascha Heifetz. The segment opens showing Heifetz playing Wieniawski’s *Polonaise* in D in an auditorium on a college campus. After a little while the camera shifts to one of the students in the audience who suddenly bolts out of his seat while Heifetz is playing, runs outside, and shouts to classmates passing by, “Heifetz is giving a free concert! Hey guys! Heifetz is giving a free concert!” You see the students rushing into the auditorium, and then the camera shifts back to Heifetz still playing the *Polonaise* – brilliantly and impeccably, of course. Even astonishingly so. However, especially because of this visual diversion of the students going and coming while the music’s still playing in the background, viewers of the program could hardly avoid thinking much more about Heifetz’s virtuosity than letting themselves respond to what the *Polonaise* might be portraying as a work of art in and of itself. This whole segment made me wish that, if the program had to show someone interrupting the performance of the piece at all, the student had at least called out, “Heifetz is playing the Wieniawski *Polonaise*!” or, even better, “There’s a free performance of the Wieniawski *Polonaise*!” This example brings to mind what Frank R. Wilson suggests in

his book *The Hand*: that this emphasis on the performer of classical music might have begun quite early by Franz Liszt when he was said to have proclaimed, “Le Concert, c’est moi!”<sup>207</sup>

Sometimes some of the greatest communicators of music, because they are often so unassuming as people, go largely unrecognized by the general public and even by many professional musicians too because these players aren’t particularly outgoing or flamboyant. I witnessed a striking example of this blind spot in the public’s awareness about thirty years ago when the ninety-seven-year-old pianist Mieczyslaw Horszowski gave a recital at the Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I knew of him chiefly from the remarkable recordings he had made many years ago with Pablo Casals, but most of the professional musicians around Boston – even experienced pianists – had never heard of him because he hadn’t concertized or recorded much in recent years. However, a few days before this concert there was an announcement in the newspaper that gave a glowing account of his early career that prompted many pianists in the area to turn up to hear him. I’ll never forget the astonishment I saw on many of their faces as I looked around the hall after the recital. As with Casals, Horszowski’s playing was without excessive gestures or mannerisms, and he let the music flow through him so completely that you were hardly aware of him as a person sitting there playing. The next year – the last before he died – he was, of course, brought back with great acclaim to a larger hall that accommodated the much bigger crowd who eagerly came to hear him. I think these concerts showed that there’s obviously a hunger for this deeper and more total kind of music-making when people become aware that it does exist, but we so rarely hear it in person these days that whole generations seem to grow up never experiencing it. However, now that we have the internet, some of these outstanding and legendary performances are much more available for us hear and see.

A good example of Horszowski’s playing when he was ninety-seven can be seen in his 1990 Carnegie Hall performance posted on youtube.\*

Another remarkable pianist of that generation whose identification with the music is also total is Menahem Pressler. He also appears on youtube playing at his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday concert in 2013.†

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\* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bgaj8w9yeg>

† <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKHL8XPeLpE>

## INSTRUMENTS

Some performers may even get distracted by a preoccupation with their instrument's construction, history, and value – particularly if they're playing a very expensive one exquisitely crafted by a famous maker. Pablo Casals describes the problem well in *Conversations with Casals* when his friend José Corredor asks him: "How is it that you never played on a Stradivarius?" Casals replies:

I have never been tempted by a Stradivarius. These superb instruments have too much personality in my opinion; if I play on one, I cannot forget that I have a Stradivarius in my hands, and it disturbs me considerably. I said to a friend one day, talking of these instruments, "Their Majesties mind very much how one plays on them!"<sup>208</sup>

Of course, Alexander lessons often reveal that this "disturbance" Casals speaks of can also take the form of a subconscious fear of dropping or damaging such an expensive or irreplaceable instrument, and this fear can evoke a protective veneer of tension in us that restrains us (especially in our arms and hands) from the freedom and balanced integration we need for fullest expressiveness.

All these elements then, especially when they get combined together, can set us up big time to become diverted from the focus that I believe should be the guiding force of every performance. So these and other non-musical concerns need to be kept as secondary in importance if we want to have the best chance to ward off nervousness and to play with access to fullest musicality, and this is what our use of inhibiting and directing through our experience in the Alexander Technique allows us to do.

## THE GUIDING FORCE

To build up our ability to keep all these secondary aspects in their proper place, I think it helps to look closely at what makes up this central organizing power that allows our listeners to enter most completely into a piece's unique sphere of life-feeling, as distinct from any other facet in the listener's life that might be happening at that particular moment. I like to call this power our *vision* of the kind of "time that's passing" in the music, which includes our sense of the life-feeling that's happening within that musical time. I think that focusing on this vision of the kind of time that's passing in the piece as each phrase goes by is what must dominate any thoughts about our instrument, our listeners' opinions, or the theoretical aspects of the work that might attempt to come forward to divert or

rule our attention. As performers, this also means that we almost need to set aside our personalities as much as possible too so that a piece can be presented, experienced, contemplated, and understood most fully by its listeners – not only while they’re actually listening to the piece, but also as they remember and reflect on it afterward. As I implied before, if we as performers aren’t also among the work’s most receptive and appreciative listeners, then we probably aren’t giving its other listeners the best opportunity to experience their own vision of the life-experience it may contain.

For defining more fully what I mean by “our vision of the kind of time that’s passing in the music” I’d like to turn to one of my main sources of thought about the nature and functioning of art in general. It’s Susanne Langer’s extensive research and writing on the philosophy of aesthetics, in which she carefully identifies what she calls the “primary illusion” of each major mode of art in terms of the main kind of life-experience it resembles: music (time passing), painting and drawing (space), sculpture (volume), dance (power over gravity), novels and dramas (comic and tragic rhythms), poetry (memory of events) and film (dream). From that broad perspective, she goes on to show how works of art (both good and poor) actually can and do contribute (for better or worse) to the education of our emotions, whether or not we’re aware of this influence happening. She says:

... our picture books and stories and the music we hear – actually form our emotive experience.<sup>209</sup>

A wide neglect of artistic education is a neglect in the education of feeling. ... Wherever art takes a motif from actuality – a flowering branch, a bit of landscape, a historic event or a personal memory, any model or theme from life – it transforms it into a piece of imagination, and imbues its image with artistic vitality.<sup>210</sup>

I realize that the phrase “philosophy of aesthetics” might have so much of an intellectual and academic ring to it for many performers that they could find it hard to imagine the subject has much to offer them. However, I think some of Langer’s main ideas on the nature of art can be so valuable to our way of thinking about the pieces we play and listen to that I’d like to highlight these ideas here briefly. I also think her writings may be more accessible to us than those of other writers on the subject because she developed her insights largely by having in-depth conversations with many different artists about their own sense of what they do when they create a work; then she linked up this “studio talk” with her earlier study

of the major philosophical understandings of our essential symbol-making and symbol-perceiving capacities that are based mainly on the writings of her mentor, Ernst Cassirer.<sup>211</sup> Langer's first two books, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942)<sup>212</sup> and *Feeling and Form* (1953),<sup>213</sup> as well as her collection of lectures in *Problems of Art* (1957),<sup>214</sup> lay out her ideas about how each work of art is actually a *single symbol* that functions for us very differently from the way a *symbolism* such as language does when we use it to construct propositions about facts, or as mathematics does when we use it to construct formulas and equations. To some, she is one of America's most important philosophers.<sup>215</sup>

As performers, taking a close and serious look at our own *individual* philosophy of art is something I believe we may also need to do if we want to understand how the Alexander Technique can help us in reckoning fully enough with nervousness and stage fright to give our listeners the best chance to experience the essence of whatever we play – no matter how virtuosic or frivolous the piece. If we start with Langer's overview of the role of the arts in society, as well as her specific understandings of the main function of each art form – even if we don't agree with everything she says – I think it can be enormously valuable in aligning our performing priorities with ever greater conviction and clarity. Here's one of her most succinct statements about works of art:

The relevant facts are

- 1) that a picture, a statue, a building, a poem or novel or play, or a musical composition, is a *single symbol* of complex vital and emotive import;
- 2) that there are no conventional meaningful units which compose that symbol, and build up its import stepwise for the percipient;
- 3) that artistic perception, therefore, always starts with an intuition of total import, and increases by contemplation as the expressive articulations of the form become apparent;
- 4) that the import of an art symbol cannot be paraphrased in discourse.<sup>216</sup>

Camille Paglia, in her book *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*,<sup>217</sup> does a lot to amplify and extend Langer's conviction by writing so vividly of her "visions" from encountering not only works of so-called "fine art" but also works from everyday popular culture like television soap opera, pop and rock music, advertising, etc.

This idea can also be extended into the possibility of one art form being inspired by motifs from another. A wonderful example of this appears in Joan Acocella's *New Yorker* article that tells how the famous

dancer Suzanne Farrell passes on to a young dancer, Susan Jaffe, how she learned from choreographer George Balanchine:

A constant theme of [Suzanne Farrell's] teaching is symbol-making. Susan Jaffe . . . told me about working with Farrell on the first section of the ballet *Mozartiana* when, as the curtain opens, the lead woman, dressed in black, comes forward in bouree – the sliding-on-point-step – meanwhile raising her arms very slowly. In learning the ballet, Jaffe was having trouble with the arms, so Farrell . . . told her that Balanchine had taken these arms from a statue of the Virgin Mary in a church a few blocks from where he lived [in New York City]. Jaffe, who also lived near there, knew the statue, which is actually a rather ordinary marble Madonna, but with lovely arms, which she holds out to us softly, as if she were giving us something nice. Jaffe said to me later, “In that arm movement you bring your fingers together, and then open your arms. So this movement opens up into art and history – the neighborhood Balanchine lived in, and what he saw, and the history of the world.” What Jaffe got from Farrell, it seems, was not so much a description as a suggestion, an idea: of something small, and one's own, opening out into something great, which then becomes one's own, too. With Farrell, Jaffe says, you work “from pictures in your mind,” rather than “Is this a good fifth position?”<sup>218</sup>

Acocella's account of Farrell's and Balanchine's teaching brings to mind a similar example from a lesson I gave to a professional woodwind player who had been having Alexander lessons to recover from a neuromuscular condition that forced her to stop playing because of the effect that it had on the coordination of her hands and arms. We had first worked for some weeks building up her basic experience and understanding of the use of herself as a whole in relation to gravity's constant pull, and after her conditions of use in her hands and arms began working more in conjunction with her head, torso, and limbs, we eventually started to explore the basic aspects of how she supported her instrument from that more overall power, rather than relying so much on her local hand and arm musculature.

Then, one day when it seemed we were ready for her to try briefly supporting her instrument long enough to play a single note, we suddenly noticed a beautiful shadow being cast on the back wall of my studio that was created by a beam of afternoon sun reflecting off the windshield of a car parked on the street in front of my apartment. The double windows of my teaching room were usually shaded from direct sunlight by the tall

and dense pine tree that grew in front of them, but this quite unexpected image of some branches of the pine tree was projected so clearly onto the white wall at the back of my room that even its needles were amazingly distinct. Since there was no breeze blowing just then, this image was completely still – almost as if it had been drawn on the wall with pen and ink.

Then, just as we were ready for my student to play that single note, it suddenly occurred to me to say to her, “I wonder if you could play this note to express the feeling of seeing that shadow of the pine tree branch on the wall – just one ‘Zen note’?” She tried it, and the long, soft note that came forth was incredibly beautiful in a serene and magical way that obviously involved the whole of her psychophysically – and it was totally different, we felt, from what would have happened if we’d simply decided that she’d “gently play a long, soft note.” We were both quite astonished – and moved – because the note was so imbued with the feeling that the image of the pine branch on the wall evoked just at that time of the day. I think this was a good example of how the Technique can allow us the possibility of transmitting – psychophysically – a pure and deep feeling through the musical sounds we make, even though in this instance it only came through a single note.

I should also add that in subsequent Alexander lessons as we continued to build up this musician’s overall power for supporting and playing her instrument, this Zen note experience became a “base line standard” that we continued to refer back to as an example of the essence of fully expressive playing.

#### FOCUS

If we apply Langer’s general points about a work of art to our personal relationship with music, both in playing a piece and when we’re just listening to one, I think this can help us in being more openly *receptive* to the essence of each piece we encounter. Also, by turning her points into questions, we may be able to awaken more of our receptivity to a work by merely asking ourselves: What life-feeling is the time that’s passing in this movement or phrase about? Is it an action with a climax, or is it more of an extended, steady mood? What’s the setting? What’s happening in the setting? What time of day is it? Does it involve a landscape that we’re viewing from a distance, or are we right in the midst of it? Am I the only person there, or are there many people there, or are there none? If there are others there, what are *they* doing? What are they feeling? And even if no *specific* answers come to us right away (or ever, for that matter), remaining



available to insights revealing themselves at any moment in both playing and listening is still just as important.

In *Problems of Art*, Langer calls the expressive content of a work its “vital import.” Here’s how she contrasts it with an “intellectual” focus on the components of a work, such as “chords, words, shapes, pleasant or harsh sensory effects,” etc:

I call it “vital,” because it is always some mode of feeling, emotion, consciousness, that is conveyed by a successful work of art; “import,” because it is conveyed. . . . This sort of feeling, which is not represented, but composed and articulated by the entire apparition, the art symbol, is found there directly, or not at all.<sup>219</sup>

Most forms of poetry, dance, drama, the novel, painting, sculpture, film, as well as song and opera – unless they are extremely abstract or complex – often provide us with fairly direct and immediate answers to the question of their vital import. However, instrumental music usually requires us to search more actively for insight into the particular life-feeling of each work as we listen to or play it – even if a composer gives us a clue in its title: “Romance,” “Burlesque,” “Pastorale,” “Allemande,” “Les Adieux,” “Pathétique,” “New World,” etc. Of course, in the case of so-called “program music,” a written scenario for a piece is already given for us to contemplate; but even then, I don’t see that this should necessarily chain us to an exclusive way of envisioning what life-experience might be reflected in the work. Why should it mean that we’re experiencing the work any less completely if we never know the scenario the composer claimed to be inspired by when creating the piece – or if we simply decide to set that scenario aside to see if the actual music can bring us to deeper insights of feeling?

Langer uses the tricky word “intuition,” to describe what helps us realize the import of a particular work, but her definition of it steers clear of signifying anything mystical that might require “special powers” to access:

What I mean by intuition . . . comprises all acts of insight or recognition of formal properties, of relations, of significance, and of abstraction and exemplification.

The act of intuition whereby we recognize the idea of “felt life” embodied in a good work of art is the same sort of insight that makes language more than a stream of little squeaks or an arabesque of serried ink spots.<sup>220</sup>



When helping singers and instrumentalists apply the Alexander Technique to their performing, one of my favorite ways of prompting them to be more in touch with their intuition about a piece – their “musical vision” – is to read them this passage from *Conversations with Casals*, when José Corredor points out:

There are some artists who only feel inspired by reading or performing a piece when, at a given time, they recollect a landscape, or remember reading something which has helped them to penetrate the musical sense of the work in question.

Casals answers:

That seems natural to me. When my pupils play, I sometimes ask them: what do you feel, what do you see? An artist has imagination and fantasy, and when he gives himself to the music ought to feel and see things, however vague and indefinite the vision.

Then Corredor also goes on to ask:

What about his preoccupation with technical difficulties?

And Casals says:

It all depends on his technical potentialities, and on the work he has done to overcome his difficulties. In any case, preoccupation with the instrument ought not to interfere with the performance or be noticed by the listener.<sup>221</sup>

I think that Casals’s phrase “however vague and indefinite the vision” is the most compelling one here, especially because it leaves open the possibility that we may never come to any specific vision about the feeling of time passing in a particular piece. Yet we can still be open to the overall expressive realm and effect on us of the life-experience involved in it; and that receptivity, in and of itself, can keep us from getting pulled too far into any of the secondary concerns I mentioned earlier that can so easily divide us and provoke nervousness. Also, Casals’s asking “what do you feel?” clearly shows that “vision” doesn’t always have to mean “visualizing.” In fact, many people seem to be able to intuit the essence of a piece of music without any imaginary pictures at all. Of course, if you do choose to be open to “seeing or feeling things” in music, as Casals suggests,

you should probably allow for the likelihood that any images or sensations that might come forth will be unique to you and are not necessarily ones that can or should be shared with anyone else – except as they inform your own playing at that particular time in your life. I think it's also very important to remember that our individual vision of a piece can change, deepen, and grow from performance to performance (or from hearing to hearing) just as all our other life-experience may deepen and grow as we assimilate it and reflect upon it from time to time. It seems obvious, too, that the greater the work of art, the greater is its potential to bring us infinitely deeper and richer life-revealing insight at each encounter with it.

Casals' remark about "vision" is illustrated well in a "60 Minutes" interview by Mike Wallace of the Broadway singer Barbara Cook. It includes some video clips of her giving a master class for acting students at the Juilliard School, where one young man, Daniel, seemed to be doing quite well as he began a song for the class; but Ms Cook soon stopped him and said, "OK. The message [that you're conveying to your imaginary partner] is more about, 'I can sing,' than about what you're trying to tell her."

The program shifts back to the TV studio where Ms Cook says to Mike Wallace, "Young people who are just starting off somehow need to let you know they know how to sing. So the message becomes, 'Look, I can sing.' And [then I want to say to them] – 'Fine. OK. So you can sing. What are you going to do with it?'"

Shifting back to the video, Daniel begins the song again: "When you're in my arms and I feel you so close to me . . ." Then Ms Cook says to him: "Can we stop, Daniel? [She pauses a bit.] Do you know what this song is about?"

Daniel: How – how [her] being close to me just puts this feeling inside me.

Ms Cook: It's about sex, Daniel.

Back in the studio Ms Cook says to Mike Wallace: "I do that partially for shock value." Then we see her again with Daniel in the video:

Daniel: "Whew!"

Ms Cook: Think of it, if you can get inside the power of a moment like that, and really be inside of the moment and not worry about what you're looking like and what you're sounding like . . . we'll know something's going on. And it'll be authentic. It'll be real.

Daniel starts the song again, but she quickly stops him and says,

You know, I just don't *believe* it. I just don't believe it. You know, you – you really don't have – honest to God, you do not have the life experience to really, really sing this song. But I think you have enough so that we can get past this singing thing a bit.

She goes on helping him, almost like a therapist, to reach the deep, genuine feelings behind the lyrics, talking about what the feelings in the song are, coaxing him into a posture that also reflects the life-situation of the song, etc. – all bringing him closer to a vision of the import of the piece. And it's astounding what a difference all this makes in every aspect of how Daniel sings the rest of the song. The interview ends with Ms Cook saying to Mike Wallace, "The very place where safety lies for us is the thing that seems most dangerous, and that – [in performing a song] – is having the courage to let people really, really into what life has done to us."<sup>222</sup>

Here's a passage from one of Langer's chapters on music in *Feeling and Form* that I've used as a basis for some of the questions I suggested above that performers ask themselves:

All music creates an order of virtual time, in which its sonorous forms move in relation to each other – always and only for each other, for nothing else exists there. Virtual time is as separate from the sequence of actual happenings as virtual space in visual art is separate from actual space.

Inward tensions and outward changes, heartbeats and clocks, daylight and routines and weariness furnish various incoherent temporal data, which we coordinate for practical purposes by letting the clock predominate. But music spreads out time for our direct and complete apprehension, by letting our hearing monopolize it – organize, fill, and shape it, all alone. It creates an image of time measured by the motion of forms that seem to give it substance, yet a substance that consists entirely of sound, so it is transitoriness itself. *Music makes time audible, and its form and continuity sensible.*<sup>223</sup>

In Langer's lecture "Artistic Perception and Natural Light" she makes another relevant point: that what she calls "aesthetic sensibility" is often mistaken for the insight that comes through artistic perception.<sup>224</sup> Aesthetic sensibility can be nothing more than the thrill of hearing the sound of a symphony orchestra in a fine concert hall (no matter what pieces are on the program), just walking into a museum and seeing

many fine things (including the museum building itself), or being at a theater where great acting is happening even if it's only a mediocre play. I remember a colleague telling me that her husband, who was an orchestral conductor, once said that he felt most people come to concerts just to "bathe in sound," rather than to listen to the music for its vital import. Of course, there's nothing wrong with bathing in sound – as many people are probably doing when they leave a music radio station turned on all day while they work – but acknowledging that this is essentially what many people do even when they go to a concert of classical music makes it seem all the more unfortunate that we don't have more help from our education system in guiding us to listen more deeply and imaginatively.

Another powerful experience I had illustrates the existence of musical vision independently from technical and other secondary concerns – even without being able to hear the exact notes of the piece being played. In the early 1970s, as part of my master's thesis program, I took some thought-provoking courses in a new European approach to music education that began with the teachers helping the class learn to improvise by using anything in the classroom that we could make sound with. Then we learned how to build up gradually from there to more structured formats that could also include conventional instruments, notation, etc. However, the highlight of these courses for me came when one of the teachers showed us how we could merge this improvisational approach with studying and playing classical music. He began by asking if there was anyone in the class who had studied piano fairly seriously. All the students in the class except me were early childhood education majors, so it didn't seem likely that anyone there would be able to play the piano at a full performance level; however, one woman raised her hand and said that she had studied piano through high school but hadn't played much at all since she'd been in college. Then the teacher asked her what pieces she had studied, and she said she had mostly worked on Mozart and Beethoven sonatas.

Next he asked her if there was a particular Beethoven sonata that she had especially liked to play; and when she said which one it was, he asked if she could play some of it for the class. She said she didn't think that she could remember it well enough to play it for us, and since there wasn't a copy of the music available then, I assumed he'd just pass on to another subject. Instead, he said to her, "Do you think you could come to the piano and just play us something of what this sonata is *about*? We understand that you don't remember the exact notes; so we won't mind at all if you make some 'mistakes.' It won't really matter to us if you can't remember it fully or accurately, because we just want to get an *idea* of what this sonata

is like.” She seemed hesitant but agreed to try it anyway, so she began by playing just a few sustained chords, leaving plenty of time around each of them to bring in some strands of melody – obviously not exactly as they were written in the printed score. She would also pause from time to time to see if she could allow some more portions of the music to come back to her. However, every note that she did play was still *amazingly* Beethoven. You could see that she was letting her general “vision” of the sonata pervade every note; and I felt sure that her feeling of it was there more powerfully in her playing those inexact fragments than it ever would have been if she’d been trying to play the piece accurately from the score.

The rest of the class was obviously very moved by what she played for us, but I was actually astonished by it – especially because it went against every ingrained belief that I’d held from all my years of “serious” professional musical training. The fact that someone could achieve such a full and sincere musical communication of a composed classical piece without even playing the exact notes at the right tempo was a complete revelation to me, and it suddenly released me from a kind of straightjacket that my thinking and playing had been bound up in for a long time because of the ways some of my teachers had demanded that I work on technical accuracy separately from expressiveness and musical vision. This experience also marked a big turning point in the way I worked on my own playing as well as in the way I helped my musician Alexander students liberate themselves from the constraints of excessive technical discipline and the need to be “perfect” each time they play a phrase.

This anecdote brings up a point that some psychologists have suggested about there possibly being different modes for processing, thinking about, and communicating our experience and understanding of life. Some of these writers claim that the predominant mode may vary from person to person, and that this difference in processing may also have profound effects on our ways of relating to or communicating with each other – especially if we’re trying to communicate with someone whose dominant mode is different from ours. If this discrepancy is real, it could explain a great deal about differences in how we experience, perform, and need to be taught how to play music in a fully expressive way. For instance, to a visually or kinesthetically dominant person, theoretical knowledge (which is chiefly verbal) might be very disruptive to their flow of attention while listening or playing. But on the other hand, suggestive imagery might distract the verbally dominant players from the focus that helps them be most musical, and so on.<sup>225</sup>

This possibility of there being varying dominant modes of processing artistic experience reminds me of a puzzling and frustrating time I had trying to complete a written “exercise” that my eighth-grade choral music teacher gave our class one day. First, she played us a recording of a classical music piece – I think it was a movement from a symphony – and then she asked us to write in words what the piece made us feel or think. There must have been about forty students in the class, and as soon as the music finished everyone except me began writing diligently. However, I couldn’t think of any words *at all* to describe what I experienced when I listened to the piece, even though I know that I had a deep and powerful reaction to hearing it – as I always did to any great music that I heard or played. The most interesting thing for me about our being asked to do that written exercise was that I was the only student in the class who was serious about pursuing a career in music. I know that I practiced more diligently than anyone else in the class, and I participated in every possible ensemble and musical event that was available. I can’t remember if we were actually graded on that written exercise, but if we were, I surely failed completely! Now, in light of what the psychologists I referred to above think about there being differing “modes” of processing information from person to person, I can see that maybe I just processed musical experience differently from others in my class. I certainly wasn’t good at all with words in those days, and my main focus in daily life was on music and the visual arts (particularly drawing and painting) rather than on literature, math, science, history, etc.

#### ALEXANDER AND MUSICAL VISION

Worrisome thinking often lays the groundwork for nervousness far in advance of a performance, sometimes even as soon as you set the date of a concert – especially if you know the program will include pieces you find difficult and demanding. Making this very first scheduling decision can be what Alexander called the “critical moment”<sup>226</sup> when you need to start seriously applying your skills of inhibiting, directing, and envisioning in relation to any given piece on a program, both in practicing and in thinking about playing it. Of course, you need to extend these conscious, positive processes all the way up to walking out on stage and on through playing or singing every phrase of a piece; but if you haven’t established and maintained them well from that very earliest moment of committing to the performance date and choosing the program, you may run more risk of reverting back to the subconscious habits of worrisome thinking that

keep you from letting your musical vision reign over the use of yourself as a whole in all you do on stage.

In fact, as you gain more experience with the Technique<sup>227</sup> you'll find that your musical vision and your directing and ordering can reinforce each other more and more profoundly all along this route from practicing to full performance. A logical way to work at it is to first make sure you're lengthening, widening, and going up as well as you know how to, and then using that expansive condition as your main pathway to opening yourself to the vital import of a piece. I think you'll find, then, that the more you go up and lengthen and widen to open yourself to musical vision, the more you can fuse your imagination with your entire state of being so that it also helps you keep a proper perspective on all the secondary concerns and the worries that otherwise may divide you and foster nervousness and loss of control. Also, when you're more fully going up, you can often be much more available to receiving intuitions and insights about a piece's vital import – even during an actual performance. These “revelations” seem to come through much more readily, clearly, and profoundly than when you're “pulled down” or when you're more overtly trying to *find* them. Therefore, helping us to be more fully available to intuition and insight may be one of the greatest gifts the Alexander Technique has to offer us as performers and listeners, along with a deepening of our life-experience itself from moment to moment so that there can be a continual enhancing of the interplay between art and life, life and art.

Only you can be the judge of how much time and what kind of surroundings you need for bringing your use of yourself to this maximum condition of going up in relation to gravity's constant pull; but providing for extra time before you play, just in case you need it, is always a good idea. Sometimes it's a matter of avoiding the activities, people, and ways of thinking that tend to distract you and pull you down. Or it may mean leaving just a few free minutes to reinforce your direction right before you have to play. At other times you might need all day to work on yourself so that you can be going up as fully as possible. Some performers even try to schedule an Alexander lesson as close to a performance as possible – even up to half an hour before they go on stage. Others even invite their Alexander teacher to come to the concert hall and give them some hands-on Alexander work in the wings or green room just before they play or during intermission. So it can be important to provide for all these alternatives just in case you need them; but I know that if I've prepared for a performance adequately music-wise, it's more important on the day of the concert to do everything I can to make sure my head-torso-



limb relationship is working well than it is to do any more practicing or even any playing through of a piece. The quality of my overall integration (combined with my musical vision) governs the ultimate performance outcome at that point far more than anything else.

Langer sums things up well at this point:

Sign and symbol are knotted together in the production of those fixed realities that we call “facts.” . . . But *between the facts* run the threads of unrecorded reality, momentarily recognized, wherever they come to the surface, in our tacit adaptation to signs; and the bright, twisted threads of symbolic envisagement, imagination, thought, memory and reconstructed memory, belief beyond experience, dream, make-believe, hypothesis, philosophy, the whole creative process of ideation, metaphor, and abstraction that makes human life an adventure in understanding.<sup>228</sup>

#### USING THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE TO CARRY OUT THESE IDEAS

In giving Alexander hands-on work to musicians for helping them to incorporate an improved use of themselves while performing, I’ve found it important to avoid working on them in the traditional Alexander lesson approach while they’re actually playing or singing a piece of music. By “the traditional Alexander lesson approach” I mean the format in which students essentially allow the teacher to give them hands-on direction while they’re still. I think that unless Alexander teachers are fully honoring the import of *all* music throughout their whole self, then any hands-on contact made with musicians while they’re actually playing or singing a piece is likely to have some degree of a restricting or dampening effect, even though various technical aspects of the musicians’ performance may seem to improve – such as tone quality, intonation, finger dexterity, breath control, degree of anxiety, instrument balance, etc. However, playing long-tones, scales, singing vocalises, etc. may provide a good opportunity for Alexander teachers to use hands-on work as a transitional phase in helping performers carry out these improvements on their own into a full-fledged performance. The following experiences from my work with musicians may help to illustrate this view.

#### THE POWER OF INHIBITING IN MUSICAL PERFORMANCE

I think this account demonstrates well the effectiveness of inhibiting in unmasking fullest expressivity in musical performance. It happened when a violinist who’d been having lessons with me for several years asked me if she and a pianist who was also my student could come to my studio



and play a Mozart violin sonata for me that they were scheduled to perform soon. They didn't ask me to give them any hands-on Alexander work because they only wanted to play through the sonata and have me comment on anything that I might notice about their performance that could help them improve it from both a musical and an Alexander point of view. I was happy to do this, but I didn't have any thoughts ahead of time about what I could offer them.

They were both very experienced players – especially in chamber music – but the violinist seemed to play with a rather forced quality that I didn't think represented what I sensed to be her full understanding of music in general and her passion for playing it in the most expressive way. I think other musicians I knew had that same general impression of her playing from having heard her perform in some of the string players' Alexander classes that I had organized for my cellist colleague from the UK to give. Although this violinist had taken a substantial number of Alexander lessons from me up to that day, I don't recall that I ever actually worked with her on any aspect of actual violin playing. However, I'd done some trio playing with both of these players several years earlier, so I think that had made them feel that I might have something useful to offer – beyond merely being a “pair of ears” that they could play a practice run-through of the piece for.

They came and played through the first movement of the sonata, and it sounded pretty much as I expected it to – kind of choppy and not nearly as full and rich and vibrant as I felt it should and could be. I was a little in doubt about what I could say specifically to help them make any changes that would bring about the fullness and richness that needed to be there in their playing of the piece, but I could see that there was a lot of extra “getting ready” activity that the violinist was doing just before she began to play that seemed to make all her actions – bowing, phrasing, etc. – quite stiff and forced. Then I asked them to think of starting to play the movement again, but just as they were about to begin, I said to them, “Wait. Don't start yet. Just wait.” I could see that, as they waited, there was more of a chance for the violinist to think about just being free and fluid and allowing the music to flow through her in a fuller way, so when it seemed that this had happened, I said, “OK. Go ahead and start.”

They started the first phrase, and it went much better than when they'd originally played it, but very soon after that everything else the violinist went on to play became stiff and choppy again. It was easy to see that she'd lapsed back into her earlier patterns and that they would last throughout

the rest of the movement if I'd let them continue, so after they played a few more phrases I asked them to stop and wait again.

As we took that extra time, I didn't say anything at all to them about giving their Alexander directions because at that point in their Alexander study I assumed that they knew I was expecting them to do that as best they could anyway. However, something beyond that aspect of directing themselves was still missing from their approach, so when enough time had passed for them to completely leave behind the previous attempt at playing the piece, I said that I thought maybe they were ready to begin again. This time, though, *just* as they were getting ready to play, I said "Wait, wait, wait, wait . . ." until I could see that they were free from all their usual and habitual "getting set" to dive right into the music. I even raised my hands and arms very much like an orchestra conductor does to bring the players together in the spirit of a piece before they actually play the first notes.<sup>229</sup> In doing this I was basically trying to give with my hands and arms a sense of upward flow and expansiveness to encourage them to have a feeling of the music filling up the whole room just as they were about to start. Then, when I thought they were allowing for this flow and spaciousness as part of their readiness to begin playing, I said, "OK. Go ahead." They started the first phrase, and it was really nice. However, instead of letting them continue, I immediately raised my arms again and said "Wait" right at the end of the phrase so that they wouldn't be tempted to go right ahead and build up the same kind of jagged energy that had quickly accumulated when they played through more than a single phrase before.

When they stopped, I went on saying "Wait, wait, wait" in a voice that somehow matched the spirit of the Mozart as best I could. Then, after a few seconds, when I thought I saw that they had let go of that pushing forward energy, I finally said, "OK, go ahead," and they went on with the next phrase and played it beautifully too.

I kept doing the same thing with them with each phrase for some time, until they were about half way through the movement and I could tell that they were finally "getting the hang of" the new and more expansive and expressive energy. Even though we'd broken up that movement so much by pausing between the phrases, *all* those phrases – after the players' "waiting" – were so much fuller and richer that the contrast with the earlier playing of them was really quite remarkable to hear. It's also important to say that all this happened even though we hadn't spoken at all about violin playing technique or applying Alexander principles to "how to play the violin better," etc.

I can't recall how long we took with this waiting approach, but I do remember that at the end of the session the violinist seemed to feel that she'd experienced something quite different in performing from what she was used to. She also seemed somewhat puzzled about it, even though I think she sensed that an "opening" to her fuller musicality had somehow been made by what we'd done and that whatever we'd brought about also made it a lot more enjoyable and rewarding to play – even if it hadn't happened in the context of playing straight through the piece. I should also add that I never mentioned anything to them about playing more "expressively" or thinking about the "feeling" of the movement, etc. I knew that *they* knew how it was supposed to sound at its finest and I think they sensed that I knew that too and that I had confidence in their ability to play in that way right on the spot. We didn't discuss what we'd done, they thanked me, packed up their things, and left in a congenial way, and I had no idea if what we'd done would have any long-term value for them – or even for their upcoming concert.

After that day, I didn't think much more about that session, except to wonder if it would've been hard for them to incorporate this experience into their actual performance with so little time left before their concert. However, when the violinist came for her next Alexander lesson after their they'd performed the sonata she said to me, "You know, Joe, I couldn't figure out what it was that you wanted me to stop when you had us stop and wait so often. Then I finally realized that it was *myself* that I had to stop!" It was clear to her that when she could stop doing whatever it was that she had been doing in her whole self in preparation for "violin playing in general" – probably "trying too hard to be right," or "trying hard to be the best violinist she could be" – then the *real* musician that she was entitled to be from all her years of experience and love of playing could simply come through each note she played.

There's another interesting component to this whole tale too because the violinist brought me a recording of their performance of the Mozart when she came to that next Alexander lesson. When we listened to it together, I was delighted to hear that it was truly beautiful in every way that it deserved to be. Then, when my teachers' training class met the following day, I decided to play some of the recording for them – especially so that an experienced violinist in the class could hear it. This trainee also knew the Mozart sonata's violinist and had heard her perform in the Alexander string classes we'd given in recent years, and as soon as my trainee violinist heard the recording she exclaimed, "*That's* (the violinist's name)? I can't

believe that's really her playing so beautifully!" You never know what great things can happen with a little bit of stopping and waiting (inhibiting).

Of course, a lot of my reason for approaching their Mozart playing with so much stopping and waiting comes from my conviction that one of the biggest issues that a musician has to reckon with is music's own inherent demand to move on ahead from beginning to end – except maybe for some actual rests that that may be written into a piece here and there. As I think I've said elsewhere, music has endgaining built into it – the requirement of continuing to the end of a piece without ever stopping. Therefore, one of the main things I've tried to encourage in teaching musicians and in applying Alexander principles to my own practicing is to *take time* between phrases – even between some figures that make up a phrase, especially if the figures are difficult ones to play technically or difficult to manage breath-wise. Giving each phrase (or figure) its *best* chance to be fully expressive can only contribute to a richer ultimate performance – especially because you're not "building in" to the phrases the pushing on ahead (overly "endgaining") energy that so easily gets going when you're working hard just to keep the phrases rolling along one after the other without stopping. Sometimes it takes a *lot* of stopping and waiting before you're really ready to continue in the fullest expressive way. Eventually, with this approach, it can take less and less time for the "refreshing" or "renewal" to happen, and the rewards can then feel truly great and ultimately well worthwhile – even if it may seem rather tedious when you first begin to work in this way. Of course, your general conditions of use of yourself during your practice time may also have a big influence on how much time you need to take between phrases while working on a piece.

I think it's worth adding that, of course, the excitement and possible stress of performing before an audience can add an extra degree of pressure on the player or singer to "perform beautifully" from the beginning to the end of a piece. This added pressure can easily evoke more tension that causes the phrases to become more pushed together – especially if the piece hasn't been prepared by cultivating the fullest possible freedom of each phrase: "Wait, wait, WAIT. Then play!" And "Wait, wait, WAIT. And then play again!"

## FROM FROG TO TIP: A PROFESSIONAL CELLIST'S ALEXANDER LESSON

*This section is an annotated version of a lesson I gave to a professional cellist in the early stage of their learning to apply Alexander principles and experience to playing. I thought that commenting on parts of the transcript might add to a fuller understanding of what the Alexander Technique has to offer most musicians.<sup>230</sup> Even though this particular session only deals with the elements of bowing, I think parallels can be made to the basic playing demands of other instruments.*

After we'd done the usual amount of traditional table and chair work in the lesson, we went on to examine together how this experience and understanding could best be carried over into cello playing. Seated at the cello, the cellist began by saying:

Cellist: My cello teacher always said, "Feel your musical impulses in your wrist." But it never ever made sense to me. I'll never forget it. I've been doing the bowing more from here, just above my wrist, and it feels pretty much effortless to do that. But maybe he really meant here, on the outside of my right forearm. However, he always said wrist.

And he would also often say, "Your wrist is too low." So another thing that seems to help is if I think of my forearm as always balanced and level with the floor. Then it feels sort of like the waiter with a towel over his arm. If that's intact – that keeping my forearm level with the floor – then my upper arm seems willing to be passive. It just kind of dangles behind my forearm and "wrist."

But the piece of information that I feel like I was always missing was: where the energy to move the bow is coming from.

Joe Armstrong: . . . what the main source of the energy should be?

Cellist: Yes, especially when you have to make a very strong or forceful attack on a note. I think it helps to think of it coming from here, on the outside of the right forearm – even though maybe it should come from over here [pointing to somewhere else on the arm]. But keeping my forearm level with the floor seems to give me the balance that makes me ready for the quickest impulse to move. That's what it feels like to me.

JA: Yes, but I think the thing that you probably need very much to consider is that the specific, local control can really be very much of an *individual* thing that's different from person to person, and maybe even different *within you* at different times. Because you probably have certain built-in conditions of tightness that come from your years of using your hands and arms and your whole self, really, in playing a certain way, for instance, that might be very different from someone else's built-in tightnesses that they've cultivated with their particular way of using these parts and the whole of themselves in their own, unique way of playing. But often we aren't even aware of these habits and the built-up tightnesses [conditions of use] that come with them until they're unmasked and unraveled after we have a lot of work from a skilled Alexander teacher's hands in regular chair and table work, as well as from the teacher's hands-on guidance in working with us at our instrument. . .

Cellist: Yes.

JA: . . . so that merely thinking of the impulse to draw a bow coming from your wrist might not work best for you right now – or even at any other time either, for that matter.

Cellist: It might work for somebody else.

JA: Yes. It might work for somebody else – depending on their level of overall integration and how they *interpret* the words “feel your musical impulses in your wrist.” And it might also be that thinking of the impulse coming from that place on your forearm is where you feel it works best for you *now*. But if your use of your shoulders changes, for instance, as it often does after having more Alexander lessons, and your shoulders become more open and widening – along with all the rest of your back and torso, which usually allows your arms and hands to work in a much more integrated way with all the rest of you – then maybe the impulse to move the bow would need to originate from somewhere else more central. I think it will – considering what we're looking for as the most ideal use of yourself as a whole when everything in you is going up and lengthening and widening in relation to gravity's pull and when you're really using your head-spine-limb relationship as your main

source of power for everything you do. When that's all working beautifully, then your arms and hands just become sort of "invisible."

Cellist: Right. I've had the feeling in the past.

JA: So, as we try to look at playing any instrument from an Alexander point of view though, the *main thing* we say that you want is the maximum amount of freedom and spaciousness in your joints – the joints of your shoulders, elbows, wrists, and fingers, as well as your hips, knees, ankles, the joint between your head and your spine, and the joints between all the other vertebrae of your spine – so that those junctures stay as open and as available as possible for the musical impulses to get through to your arms, hands, fingers, and thumbs from the sources in your imagination and expressive intention that create the fullest realization of the music. And we find that you can't really have all those joints open and free unless you're fully going up and lengthening and widening in the *whole* of you, especially as your forward and up head direction leads the lengthening of your spine and widening of your torso.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: So it really behooves you to think of the main source of energy in playing as coming from somewhere that wouldn't tend to get you into any kind of tightening or locking in your joints. But when you only think of the source of energy coming from your wrist or forearm, I think there's very much of a tendency with that idea to *do* something with the specific, local muscles in and around your wrist joint and to fix it in a certain way, to stiffen or hold it in a certain way or in a certain position. Whereas your wrist, as a joint, needs utmost freedom and spaciousness in order for the messages from your imagination to get through to your hands, fingers, and thumb so that they can manage to do all the many subtleties of fully expressive playing. And by freedom, we don't mean just a floppy looseness. Because, from the Alexander point of view, floppy looseness isn't *real* freedom – although to most people floppy looseness probably seems a lot more desirable than stiffness and tension. But with floppy looseness going on in any one particular place, you usually have to be holding or tensing

somewhere else to provide support for the heaviness that the looseness produces.

That's why we don't use the words "relax" and "relaxation" in teaching the Alexander Technique. Those words usually lead to what we call "collapse," which is a heavy, floppy state of muscle tonus. What we really think works best for performing is an alive, lengthening, elastic tonus in the whole of you – sort of like a beautifully strung spider's web that's equally springy wherever you touch it. My friend and colleague who studied with Casals often quotes him as saying to her "Everything is elastic! *Everything!*"<sup>231</sup>

[Note: I've taught a number of experienced pianists with serious neck and shoulder problems, for instance, who've studied some of the piano methods that involve having the teacher lift the pianist's arm and move it all around and gently shake it *while the pianist is supposed to leave it "relaxed" enough so that when the teacher finally drops their arm it just flops down at the pianist's side.* These approaches assume that when the pianist can allow the teacher to drop either arm at any random moment like this, then it's believed that the pianist truly understands "relaxation in the arms and hands" and is ready to play in the most free and natural way. However, the pianists I've taught who had diligently cultivated this approach unfortunately ended up with neck and shoulder troubles simply because they'd been letting their arms hang like dead weights from their neck and torso as well as from the keyboard, and this "hanging" required them to make all kinds of extra, subconscious effort in their neck, shoulder, and torso areas in order to support all of that collapsed, dead weight that came from their arms dragging downward. It was also startling to me that it had never occurred to them before they came for Alexander lessons that this arm "relaxation" concept might have been the source of the neck and shoulder problems that they were hoping to resolve by taking lessons with me. They were equally startled to realize that the relaxation *concept* was the root of the problem when they began to experience a fully integrated use of their head, torso, arms, hands, and legs from having regular Alexander work. They had no idea that their arms and hands had anything to do with their head and torso – and even with the contacts of their feet on the floor (or piano pedals)!]

So the general idea is that if you work from the very basic bowing<sup>232</sup> that we started to do in your last lesson when we



brought the bow up and just “rested” it on a string from simply having had it there in your hand while the back of your hand was resting on your lap . . . when you can bring your hand and the bow successfully from resting on your lap to resting on the strings without extra local effort in your wrist and arm, then it’s as if *everything* in you – your wrist, your hand and fingers, your forearm, your upper arm, your shoulder, and all the rest of you – *needs* to go up, to come up off that place where you’re resting the bow hair on the string, just as it’s *already* been coming up from where the contact of the back of your hand with the bow in it was resting there on your leg.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: . . . and the more you can achieve that coming up and lengthening in an *equalized* way in your whole arm and shoulder and back – particularly your *whole* arm, including your hand and fingers – *then, maybe*, on the basis of that whole, equalized coming up you might try to let your impulse to move the bow come from whatever specific place you think you need it to come from at any given moment. That would probably serve you best. And remember: “coming up” doesn’t mean “lifting.” Coming up happens mainly by leaving out any downward tendencies – any collapsings, pressings, tightenings, or holdings – and then just *intending* for every cell of you to be going up from whatever surfaces they’re contacting.

Cellist: Yes, that makes perfect sense, because there have been a lot of times when I’ve felt like it was completely effortless to play, when my attention seemed like it was completely above my body.

JA: That sounds very much like what the experience of having your total anti-gravity response working well gives you, which is what comes as a result of employing Alexander’s concept of directing and maintaining the integration of your head-spine-limb relationship that he called our “primary control” [ – “primary” in the sense that it needs to be considered and dealt with *first*, before you start to do whatever specific action you’ve decided to do, whether it’s getting out of a chair or playing a phrase].

Cellist: In those instances of complete effortlessness I wasn't even thinking of my arms. I didn't even have to think of them.

JA: Yes! And that's also what happens when you get more and more of the integrated overall upness and expansiveness – the going up and lengthening and widening – that we're looking for with the Alexander Technique.

But I think if you still want to investigate and analyze the way you use the bow, you've got to see that the power for the movement *does* come from some place. It's something you're doing with your hand on the bow. It *is* your arm that you're moving, and your arm needs to be "directed" to move in the best, most appropriate way for the sound to happen just as the music needs it to. So, if you stay just as you are right now with the bow resting on the string and I come over to you and supply your arm with just enough energy to set your bow into motion across the string while you *only* concern yourself with just going on leaving the bow resting on the string, the logical place for me to move your arm from is here, on the outside of your right forearm for an upbow, and on the inside of your forearm for a downbow.

[JA demonstrates by moving C's arm to produce a very slow downbow that eventually comes to a complete stop at the tip before he goes on to build up the opposite direction of energy to begin moving C's arm to produce a similarly slow upbow that eventually comes back to rest at the frog.]

So it seems to me that you've got two lines of approach to consider. First of all, just from the few Alexander lessons you've had so far, I think you'd probably agree that getting this total going up of your anti-gravity response working as well as possible is a good *general* condition in and of itself for playing. And this general condition is going to be of immense value, and maybe even *the most* valuable thing you can do for every aspect of your playing to be at its best at any given moment.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: And you've seen how it's important to have Alexander lessons to learn how to be going up [and lengthening and widening] to the best of your ability, and you also see that this might take quite a few lessons to achieve, considering the number of years you

may have cultivated all sorts of habits of tensing and fixing, and considering the many tightnesses you may have accrued because of repeating those habitual patterns over and over in playing the cello for so long. A skilled Alexander teacher can usually help you improve those elements much more quickly and reliably than you usually can by yourself, because if you try to change those patterns and conditions on your own you're very like to do it on the basis of your old habits of tensing without really realizing that this is what you're doing. So, first, there's this long-range possibility of improvement to consider and allow for that can bring with it all kinds of potential for change and growth over time.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: But then you've got the more immediate, short-term side of the situation to consider too when you have to admit to yourself, "O.K. So I don't quite know yet how to get my total going up and lengthening and widening working on my own as well as I'd like to in order for me to play at my best standard every time I practice or perform; so, what's the best way to manage myself when I have to play anyway – *right now*? How can I approach the use of my arms and hands in the best way now . . . so that however I'm using them will at least not detract from the whole going up process and maybe even contribute to going up *more* and contribute to helping me free my shoulders and the rest of me even more as I go on playing?" To do this *right now* you really need to pay attention to how the way you're using your arm might be affecting your whole head-spine-limb distribution of energy, for better or worse, as the whole of you flows upward from the contacts of your sitting bones on the chair and from the contacts of your feet on the floor and from the contact of your fingers and thumb on the bow and from the contact of the bow on the strings. And through your attention to all of that, you're hoping to leave out any effort that isn't absolutely necessary – remembering, of course, that this doesn't mean "stay relaxed." It even allows for the fact that you might ultimately have to make quite a lot of effort for doing certain things. Often you do, but that greater effort needs to come from the whole of you in order for it to be as balanced and as equalized as possible.

So the more you can think of returning to "nothing," "zero effort," as it were, and trying to find your way to the instrument

from just naïvely resting your hand, with the bow in it, on your leg without *any preconceived ideas* of “impulses” – or anything else very specific needing to happen in your fingers, hand, wrist, or arm – and then go *directly* from resting it all on your leg to resting the bow hair on the string where it would need to be to begin a note . . . the more you can develop that naïve action first, then you can get your whole general use of yourself organized into going up from that grounded contact of the bow hair on the strings because the strings also, literally, connect to the ground or floor through their attachments to the tailpiece, through the tail piece’s attachment to the bottom of the cello, and through the bottom of the cello’s connection to the end pin that rests on the floor.<sup>233</sup> So from that grounded contact of the hair resting on the strings you have the best chance to proceed to uncover, or discover, what it means to draw the bow in the most balanced and least effortful way. That’s why I like to call it “basic bowing” or “nothing bowing.” And from this simple operation you can produce your most basic cello sound, which actually offers you a lot of scope for improving and refining before you actually go on to try any more complicated or demanding bowing. So if you just take it one bowing at a time, coming to rest on the string at the end of each down bow or up bow, and then re-directing the whole of yourself again to go up and lengthen and widen from that *new* grounded contact at the tip before you begin to call forth the energy you need from the whole of you to start back in the opposite direction toward the frog,<sup>234</sup> I think you’ll find your way to the most basic understanding and experience of what it means to play in a balanced way. And for working on this balanced relation to a contact of the bow on the strings, I also think it could be best to begin with the bow contacting the two middle strings (G and D) fairly equally so that you don’t feel that your arm and hand needs to be in any way tilted in one direction or another just to accommodate a single string – especially one of the single “outside” strings (A or C).

Cellist: Yes, doing that “nothing bowing” in the last lesson was very useful.

JA: So what you’re essentially dealing with is this: you know the direction that the bow needs to move along the string in order to make the kind of sound you want – for whatever expressive quality the

note or phrase demands. You know that you need the bow to go *somehow* to the right across the strings, or *somehow* to the left, and sometimes maybe it slants more toward you, and sometimes maybe it slants more away from you. So these are your primary cellistic requirements, your primary *directions* that are guiding you in terms of managing the bow for musical reasons. And if you know clearly enough which of these directions is needed, you should be able to manage to get the bow to begin to move into action from a purely intentional source, rather than getting all involved in trying to feel out or manipulate any specific, local muscular areas themselves. Your intention *alone* can direct the bow, because you know so well that, for whatever sound it is you need to make, you've got to have the bow hairs moving along the string *in a certain way*.

Cellist: I've had that idea before, but I've never been able to maintain any "track" at all with the bow. All I've been able to do is to think "straight bow, straight bow."

JA: Well, suppose you don't think "straight bow, straight bow," but just look down and *see* where you are right now with the bow resting on the string there in front of you. Don't think about your arm or hand or fingers for the moment, but just leave your hand, forearm, and upper arm resting there with this still contact of the bow on the string. Then just decide you're *only* going to intend for the bow hairs to start to go *slowly* where they need to go to begin to produce a tone; and, in order to do this, see if you can make a connection between the contact of the bow hair on the string and your back lengthening and widening and from all of you going up from the contact of your feet on the floor and your sitting bones on the chair. Don't be concerned about doing anything specific with your arm or wrist, hand, or fingers. All you're going to do is, *from your whole going up*, get those bow hairs to go where they need to go to make the most basic sound. *That's all you need right now*. You can completely forget about your fingers, thumb, wrist, forearm, elbow, and upper arm – except to be aware if you're leaving them free and lengthening – and just get the bow hairs to go wherever they need to go. You know where they need to go from all your years of experience playing and listening. Your ears and your eyes can tell you whether or not they're going where they need to.

Cellist: If I have an image of the bow being weightless, that seems to help.

JA: Yes, it probably would, but what we're looking for here is a purely *intentional* activity that ultimately won't need to rely on any particular imagery like that. I think you need to save your image-making function for the kind of imagery the music itself evokes and not let your imagination be engaged in specific "technical elements." So you've got certain "raw facts." You've got *the hair on the string*, and that's what is making the sound. *That's* what you've got. And the hair has to go in a *certain way in a certain direction* along the string in order to make the sound.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: O.K. So, try to set aside everything else you've learned about how it should happen or what you think you should do in order "to bow" by using images, wrist theories, and all that kind of stuff, and just be with that raw fact of what the hair on the string needs to do to produce the most basic sound. But be aware of all the rest of yourself enough to be sure you're not getting focused on making any specific local efforts, and then just see if you can *will* – from your thinking, from your intending – the bow hair on the string to make the kind of sound you need to hear it make.

Cellist: Should I try it?

JA: Yes, go ahead. But remember to start out fairly slowly. Only think of building up your overall energy gradually to make one, long, single journey from the frog to the tip – because if you jump right into action quickly, you'll probably just do it in your original, habitual way of "correct, professional bowing." In fact, if you even think of "drawing a bow" or of "playing a downbow" it could easily take you right back into your old habits of tightening and fixing in specific local muscles in your wrist, fingers, arm, and shoulder. Maybe this whole journey from frog to tip will take quite a long time.

[C. sets the bow in motion on the string and goes from the frog to the tip.]

JA: O.K. That was fairly good, but I think I still see more extra, local muscular activity in your fingers, wrist, and arm than you really need for that simple journey. It looked to me like your “professional bowing” habits were still kicking in a little. So let’s see if you can let the energy to start the bow vibrating the string come *even more* from your thinking, from your intending alone. Leave your arm out of it. This only needs to be the most gradual possible setting of the bow in motion.

And even if, at the beginning, you get the most grating, awful sound that you’ve ever heard, remember that it actually might have the potential to materialize into a much fuller and richer tone than you could ever imagine making in one single bow with so little extra effort coming from your fingers, wrist, and arm. But you’ve got to be willing to accept at first what you might usually consider a very ugly and totally unacceptable sound in order to arrive at something new and maybe even extraordinarily beautiful – especially if you’re truly interested in finding the greatest freedom and ease in producing it.

[JA demonstrates with his voice the kind of sound that C. might get from the cello, starting out in a very guttural, raucous tone and gradually merging into a clear, steady note.]: “eh.eh.eh.eh.eh.eh.eh.eh.e.e.e.e.e.e.e.EEEEEEEEEEEEE.”

The key is going to be in how you *start* the bow in motion so that you’re only increasing the energy from the *whole of you* just enough to empower the bow stroke. So the power isn’t coming only from your arm, though it includes your arm, of course. Increasing the energy in an equalized way from you head, torso, and limbs – from everything in you going up *in order to* gradually, gradually, gradually set the string vibrating . . . finally. But, again, you probably won’t find out what we’re looking for if you try to start it quickly, suddenly. Your old habits are bound to kick in.

[C. tries another down bow.]

JA: That looked and sounded even better to me, but I don’t think you’re completely there yet. So then ask yourself even more ardently. “How much does it take from my going up and lengthening and widening, from my feet, my knees, my hips, my back, my shoulders, my head, and my arms and hands – *all* of them, *concerted*, together – to get the string starting to vibrate in the simplest way?” This is basically what you need to be asking yourself all the

time. And you could also ask, “What does the string *itself* require from the bow and from all of me, as one whole being, to vibrate?”  
[C. tries another down bow.]

JA: Good! I think that was it! It looked like a completely equalized and integrated action. *Then*, to go on and develop your sound from this as a basis, you might say, “*Well!* That still isn’t quite the sound I want. I need the sound to be a certain *special* way. The phrase of music that this note is a part of needs it to sound a certain special way. So, *from* and *on* this basis, what else do I need to add to this fundamental, balanced operation for getting that further refined quality of sound? Maybe I *do* now need to think of my arm or wrist being motivated in a certain direction in a more specific way – but not at the exclusion of my equalized, total source of energy coming from the whole of myself that I’ve just got going in this basic bowing.” And it may be that you *only* even need to *think* of the particular sound you want to make for that particular note’s expression in a piece. If you’ve got everything working in this *overall* way, it all should respond to your essential musical intention.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: Of course, you might want to spend a lot more time at first just getting used to this more naïve sound-making operation until it’s really fully in your system as part of your basis for playing so that you can go on and build on it effectively. So you might just need to continue basking in these “non-endgaining” downbows and upbows separately from each other before you ever even think of doing a downbow and an upbow together. Putting a downbow and an upbow together at this stage could still set off your old “professional bowing” habits, because they’re probably so deeply ingrained and ready to jump right back in at the slightest temptation.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: But that’s basically the source of power that Alexander is looking for in *whatever* you need for doing something that requires effort, whether it’s lifting a mountain or just lifting a feather. Maybe you



only use one finger to lift a feather, but you *still* want to think of lifting it from the whole of you. Because probably if you don't lift it from the whole of you, you'll just be using your finger in an isolated way, and you'll very likely be doing some kind of holding somewhere else to accomplish that isolated finger action. You can use all sorts of special tactics like thinking of playing from your back or from your feet; but I think you should only resort to them if they help you get everything working more and more from the whole of you . . . *that's* what you're after.

Cellist: But, even to lift my hand with the bow in it from resting on my leg to a playing position on the string . . . if I don't lift my hand from my wrist, then it seems like I'm already wrong. So is that O.K. – for *me* – to think of lifting from my wrist? Although, I guess if I think of moving the bow to the string as the crow flies it won't go wrong.

JA: Yes! “As the crow flies” is a much better idea than thinking of lifting from some special *place* on your wrist or arm. If you only think of taking the bow hairs to where you want them to be resting on the string, then your wrist and arm will go where they need to. Your wrist and arm will follow your hand along from where it was resting on your leg as your hand and the bow go up to the string as the crow flies, provided you're truly leaving your wrist, elbow, and shoulder free and lengthening so that they *can* follow along. Your wrist, elbow and shoulder can't follow your hand and the bow if they're already involved in some special activity of their own!

Cellist: It *still* feels like I have to tell my wrist something though, because it just doesn't know what to do.

JA: Maybe that's the best way *for* it to be! *Not* knowing! [As Alexander teachers, we think that's what *real freedom* is all about: “not knowing,” or not operating from some fixed, preconceived idea that never allows for any alternative possibilities because you have this attitude that there's only one *right* way that something can or should be done.]

Let's see what happens if you just leave your arm and your hand with the bow in it resting at your side, and let me gently bring them up for you and place the bow hair on the string. Maybe I can *give* you something of the actual experience of “as the crow flies”

and “not knowing” without you having to do any preconceiving or helping at all.

[JA places everything for C.]

Cellist: That still isn’t playing position; so, therefore . . .

JA: . . . *therefore*, ask yourself “What do I need to do to add to it?”

Cellist: I think I need to “hang” my hand from the contact of the bow hair on the string. Although, maybe I really don’t. But it’s just that I have this idea that I need to do something like that the moment I get to the string.

JA: Yes, I think many other players would think something like that too. But first of all, the *main* thing is to get everything to that “grounded,” resting condition on the string in this totally left-alone way to the best of your ability. And then, *only* proceed as gradually as you can to transform that grounded resting condition into whatever you think you need for playing. Try to leave out the idea of getting straight into what you consider to be the best, or “correct,” playing position – *especially* when you’re merely on the way through space to the place where you’ll be resting the bow on the string. I can pretty much give you that not-knowing feeling when I move your arm for you so that your arm and hand can stay “naïve” [and lengthening] while getting there. But can you get your arm and hand and bow up to the string by yourself in that naïve way? That’s really the question.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: The problem, you see, is that as soon as you *immediately* jump from resting on the string to your *idea* of “right playing position,” then it’s so visibly obvious to me that there’s a certain, subtle fixing or holding that you do on the way there in your arm, shoulder, wrist, and fingers that, to a certain extent, blocks your overall freedom and your ability to draw on your whole self for your source of power and energy to play a phrase or even produce one full, rich sound . . . on a single bow. And this extra fixing that you do on the “journey” comes in because you make the adjustments so soon

and so suddenly. So, because of that speed of adjusting, there's no *chance* to find your way through to something new or different.

Cellist: Yes.

JA: So although you'll be building it up more slowly and naively, you might still arrive at something that resembles your idea of playing position. And you might even find that it produces the exact sound you want much better – just because it doesn't have so many of your old, habitual tensions behind it, and because it's so much more connected to a basic freedom and going-up and lengthening and widening energy in the whole of you.

Cellist: . . .but, "get there," first.

JA: Yes. *How* to get freely from the bow resting on the string to being ready to begin moving the bow is the challenge. From "zero" to whatever it is you need for full playing.

*There's also tremendous expressive potential to be uncovered in this subtle range of activity too, because it opens up a greater flexibility and freedom that's often unavailable to a lot of players since there's so much blocking of it going on right in the act of getting the bow to the string and putting it into "playing position" even before they actually arrive there. You see so much of this kind of preparatory "fixing" in so many other instrumentalists too as part of their assuming the "right playing position." But as soon as you have a concept of "right position" you're almost always bound to get into some kind of fixing or holding, no matter how much you believe in staying, or trying to stay, free. Freedom and a balanced used of power should be your guiding motto – not correct position – for both of your hands and arms and for the whole of you.<sup>235</sup> Alexander wrote, "A correct position or posture indicates a fixed position, and a person held to a fixed position cannot grow, as we understand growth. The correct position today cannot be the correct position a week later for any person who is advancing in the work of re-education and co-ordination."<sup>236</sup>*

Cellist: So, without *any* thought at all, just go there. Without any intention, except to get the hair on the string. And then if it's not comfortable, just adjust . . .

JA: Yes. Just do the minimum amount you need to do to adjust, even though it might not fit with your preconception of how much you thought you needed to do before you started. That more gradual adjustment process should lead you to uncover the most natural way of being ready to start a note or phrase – however soft or powerful – in the way that’s most balanced within the whole of you.

Cellist: Yes, that’s clear. It seems like we’re really zeroing in on it.

JA: I *do* think that your intuition about the issue is right though – about the need to discover the best source of energy for playing. But I don’t think the source is in the specific – in the wrist or arm. I think it’s in the whole, in the overall use of yourself as a whole, which most people still don’t have an understanding of these days, no matter how expert they’ve become in their own specific field of accomplishment.

*But gaining fuller access to that central source of expressive power is a big reason why Alexander lessons are so valuable for almost all musicians.*<sup>237</sup>

Cellist: Yes.

JA: Then, that general, that “whole of you,” is what you also go on to fill more and more with expressive intention or musical character. If your whole is working in the best way, then the intention, the thought, is all you need to carry it out through the cello. But it’s very scary for most people to entrust their playing to that intentional activity alone. And it often won’t work when they try it because their whole is not working in a well-integrated enough way to serve as a clear “channel” for the intention to be transmitted through them to the instrument, so they feel much more safe and secure by resorting to postures and positions and to manipulating specific local muscular areas. Alexander often warned, “Beware of specifics!” And specifics are what we’ve been coaxing you away from today.

Cellist: It’s just that there was always a confusion in my mind about it.

JA: Yes, it seems like we’ve really cleared things up a lot.

## CODA

There's a good example of the pitfalls of working with specific positions in Otto Friedrich's biography of Glenn Gould. Quite late in his career, just after a very trying emotional time in his personal life, Gould started to lose control in his playing. Then he decided to experiment to see if he could solve the problem by trying all sorts of different positionings of his head, shoulders, wrists, fingers, etc. He kept a careful journal of the exact details of what he tried each day, and it's quite poignant to read that each time he'd feel he'd discovered the perfect solution he'd start having problems all over again in a day or two, compelling him to search again and again for yet another right position. One day he wrote: "Day before yesterday, I concentrated on wrist control . . . Wrist pain was largely alleviated . . . Nevertheless, it, too, appeared a one-day wonder . . . Nothing prevented the gradual (!) deterioration of image . . ." <sup>238</sup>

He kept at this for quite some time, but eventually gave it up because the trouble went away by itself as he gained more distance from the emotional difficulties that foreshadowed it. But when you look at the photos of him playing at that age, and even earlier, it's easy to see that his overall use of himself was probably not working at its best anyway. You see him very scrunched down, with his shoulders nearly up to his ears, etc. It's not at all surprising, then, from the Alexander point of view that he would get into some kind of trouble as a result of the emotional stress and strain, which so often adds to the degree of overall crunch of our pulling ourselves down in a general way. However, the most interesting thing is that Gould said he felt that these difficulties with control actually began when he started to lose touch with his magical ability to "see" himself playing any given passage in his visual imagination, which he had always depended on for playing well. Therefore, the question for him should really have been: "What's standing in the way of my visual imagination getting through to my arms, hands, and fingers?" not: "What's the best position – for my wrists, hands, arms, head, etc.?" From the Alexander point of view, we would say that a more immediate solution could probably have been found by improving his use of himself as a whole rather than from trying to meddle with various parts – an improvement that, to some degree, is probably what happened subconsciously as he gained more distance from the trying emotional time and his use of his imagination began working for him again as it had earlier because his "inner world" wasn't taken up so much by the emotional problem.

## SINGING EXAMPLE I

This example of using the Alexander Technique's hands-on approach happened while I was visiting Vivien Mackie after we both had taught for a number of years. She had asked me to work on her with my hands while she was taking a voice lesson from a singing teacher with whom she gave classes in London for the trainees on an Alexander teacher training course there.

Before Vivien began her singing lesson that day, I had no specific idea about what or how I might be able to contribute through the use of my hands – except that I was certain that I shouldn't leave her standing still to sing in one spot while I directed her head, torso, and limbs in the conventional way. Therefore, I was mainly leaving myself open to discovering what might be useful right during her singing of the song as it flowed along its course – particularly so that my hands-on directing might help to deepen the expressive import of the music in a way that might also bring with it improvements in the quality of her voice. Since our instrumental musical collaboration had been a strong one for over ten years, that previous experience alone assured a certain base-line of allegiance on both our parts to the music's import, and I think this factor may also be mainly why she asked me to work on her with my hands at that singing lesson rather than asking any other Alexander colleague who didn't share that same long-term collaborative musical background.

As luck would have it, the song Vivien chose to sing that day was Mahler's "Ging heut' morgen über's Feld" (loosely translated: "This morning I walked out across the field"), which is the second of his four *Songs of a Wayfarer*. I knew and loved this song from listening to it often on a favorite recording as well as from playing its piano accompaniment many times for a professional tenor friend. Therefore, it was very easy for me to be fully transported by its feeling in my whole being – including my hands when I placed them on Vivien as her teacher began the piano introduction.

I can't remember exactly what I did with my hands throughout the course of the song, but I know that I began by putting them on Vivien in a steady, quiet, upward-flowing way as I continued to maintain my own over-all direction filled with the essence of the song's long, soaring phrases. However, I think I first put my right hand gently at the top of her upper back and my left hand at her upper chest spanning her collarbones. Then I merely left them there lightly in an upwardly-directed way so that they might enhance her total lengthening in stature. I know that I certainly didn't do what Alexander teachers sometimes refer to as "taking" or "directing" a person's head by making contacts at the base of the

back of their skull and along their chin and jaw area in order to direct their head forward and up out of their spine, torso, and legs – a procedure usually done in preparation for moving someone into or out of a chair. Then I soon began to move Vivien with these initial contacts at her upper back and collar bone so that I could turn her slowly from her ankles and eventually lead her into taking a step in the direction I was turning her. Of course, this step and the direction I was giving her with my hands to take it were entirely in keeping with the overall flow of energy in the song, and because I'd turned her so far to the side, it was soon necessary for her to move her other foot to be more parallel with the advanced foot in order to equalize her balance.

As we continued with these intermittent “*Wayfarer* steps,” they became a baseline of overall functioning that we kept a constant availability to, and from time to time I would move Vivien to take another set of steps spiraling to the right or left in keeping with the music's flow. However, it's also important to add that what we were doing was certainly never a matter of stepping continuously to the beats of each measure as we would do when marching to music in a parade or when moving according to some previously created choreography.

Another way I also moved Vivien as she sang was by raising one or both of her arms from the contact of my hands at the back of an elbow. As before, I would lead her with this elbow/arm contact into taking a step by drawing her torso far enough forward or to one side to make it necessary for her to pick up a foot and place it in a spot that would keep her from falling. I may have also used my hands to encourage her to bend at the hips and knees from time to time, but I can't remember for sure if we did that since this all happened over forty years ago, although it certainly would have been a possibility. Otherwise, we pretty much continued with that approach of going from standing still to turning and taking a step so that we eventually traversed a sizeable area of the performing space during the entire song. This intermittent stepping made it almost seem as if we were doing some kind of dance – though not a dance with any choreographed steps and gestures, but an improvisational one that was totally infused with both the import of that particular Mahler song and the flow of direction of the use of ourselves as a whole in relation to gravity's pull from the center of the earth. The entire song turned out to be just as much a musical experience for both of us as it was an Alexander experience – even though Vivien happened to be the “musician-dance partner” producing the actual vocal phrases of the song.

I remember that there were also some Alexander trainees watching us from the sidelines, and it was heartening that they made sounds of appreciation for what we had just done as we finished. Vivien's singing teacher didn't make any comments though, so I hoped this meant that she approved of what we'd done. Later, Vivien told me that she'd experienced a big improvement in the overall sonorousness of her voice as well as a greater general ease in singing the song compared to how she'd been singing it before that day, so those changes alone may have made her teacher feel there was little need for any additional comments. Of course, I couldn't evaluate the extent of any possible improvement because that was the first time I'd ever heard Vivien sing, but my main sense of the whole event was that no amount of focusing on "vocal specifics," "breath support," or "interpretation" would have brought about the overall change that she felt had happened for her as a result of our joining together in the creation of the music along with my hands-on direction that led me into moving her in a way that was totally inspired by the music.

#### SINGING EXAMPLE II

My second example dates from several years later, and it involves a similar experience I had when a local professional singer who was having Alexander lessons with me asked me to give a presentation on the Alexander Technique to a group of her singing students. She and I had developed a very good musical communication through performing with a pianist and other musicians I'd taught and collaborated with for a long time, so there was a sense that her students would also be attuned to that same orientation to performing.

I don't recall exactly what I may have said first in presenting the Technique to this group of singers, but I know that I wanted to be sure not to add to the common misunderstanding that it's a form of posture discipline or movement training – especially because it's often wrongly categorized as "body work." I also knew that I wanted to emphasize the power of the Alexander work to help musicians access their fullest musicality in a performance by transcending any obstacles that may be hampering their playing or singing.

To illustrate what I meant by "fullest musicality," I brought along two contrasting videotaped performances to play for the class: one was of "The Three Tenors" (Plácido Domingo, José Carreras, and Luciano Pavarotti) as they took turns singing phrases of various arias in a rather off-hand and jocular manner – making the music's message seem subservient to



entertaining the audience. This performance can be also be found on youtube.\*

Then, in marked contrast, the second video was from Maria Callas's 1962 Hamburg concert where she comes on stage and stands in front of the orchestra while it plays the first part of the overture to *Carmen* as a prelude to her singing the "Habañera" aria. The main thing I wanted the class to see is how Callas responds throughout the whole of herself as she merely stands in front of the orchestra *listening* to the overture. She doesn't actually gesture, but you can clearly *see* each of the orchestral themes, in turn, fill her entire presence as she's standing there – long before it's time for her to begin the aria. This concert is available on youtube as well.†

After playing these contrasting videos – which seemed to impress the whole class in the way I'd hoped – I described how I think the Technique can help us as performers to manifest this total psychophysical response to music's import. Then I went around briefly to each of the singers to give them a little of the experience of how we use our hands to convey the upward-flowing direction of our whole selves in relation to gravity's pull. This included stressing the importance of not interfering with the dynamics of their head-spine integration by asking them to leave their heads free for me to turn or nod them in order to allow the best chance for their total upward flow of lengthening to come about in collaboration with my hands.

The highlight of the class came when one young woman volunteered to let me work with her while she performed an entire song. Of course, considering what I described above when I worked with my colleague Vivien as she sang Mahler's "Wayfarer" song, I also knew that I wouldn't leave this young woman standing still while she sang as I worked with her with my hands. However, luck was with us because she had chosen to sing "A Simple Song" from Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* that was also a song I'd liked for a long time, so I could immediately "tune in" through my whole self to its feeling and flow.

As the young woman sang, I soon began doing pretty much the same thing with her that I'd done with Vivien singing the Mahler. Again, it seemed more as if a duet was happening for both of us than if someone was merely singing a song while an Alexander teacher was giving them hands-on direction. There was a good deal of my gently turning, gently guiding her to step, pause, raise an arm, etc. as we gradually traversed the

\* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8-vZJNY10k&list=RDEMZP7ZhcFE1PJd5A6Zypd8IA&start\\_radio=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8-vZJNY10k&list=RDEMZP7ZhcFE1PJd5A6Zypd8IA&start_radio=1)

† <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EseMHR6VEM0>

space in front of the class. The Bernstein song was even better suited to this way of proceeding than the Mahler had been because it frequently changes meter in unusual ways that invite taking more time in one spot before moving on to another until the next phrase is ready to begin flowing along its course. Especially because she'd never had any Alexander lessons, I was astounded at how well she was able to pick up right away on the essence of what I was adding through my hands in response to the song as it flowed through my whole self. I think this happened on her part because she quickly realized that I wasn't trying to impose any of my own ideas about the music on her as she sang and that all I wanted to do was tune in to how she felt it in herself as she sang so that I could go along with and enhance that feeling in the most balanced way possible. It was as though she immediately realized she could allow each phrase to evoke its own unique way of moving through space – whether it was by allowing me to guide her into taking a step or allowing me to raise her arm and hand in an arching flow.

As in the earlier example with the violinist and pianist where I thought that my orchestral conducting classes may have had some influence on the way I raised my arms and hands up in the air to encourage the players to “wait” and take more time between their playing phrases of the Mozart violin sonata, both of the above instances of working with singers may have been influenced by my early experiences in moving to music during high school years when I spent a good deal of time during winter months ice skating to recordings of classical music on a rink my father and I built in the vacant lot beside our house. That sweeping sense of flow also carried over into skating across the wonderfully smooth ice of the lake in the nearby state park, and I think that both of these experiences from my youth may have contributed to a sense of how so many musical phrases need to soar as they move along one by one – very much as in the “rainbow, RAINbow, RAINBOW!” example I mentioned in Chapter 10 that Casals used when giving a master class for string players that can be heard on the recording *Pablo Casals – Musician of the Century* (Columbia Records, MS 30069).

With these two singers, I certainly hadn't been thinking that what we were doing was any kind of performance for an audience to witness, but when the song ended and we came to standing quietly, the whole class burst into applause as if something quite exciting and dramatic had just taken place – not only musically, but also visually as a deep human experience. This entire event further validated my conviction that there needs to be a distinctly unique approach developed for Alexander teachers

who want to work with their hands on singers, instrumentalists, and actors while they're actually performing. However, it's also obvious that a good deal of further consideration needs to be given to working in this way with those players who don't have much availability to move through space because their instruments – such as the cello, string bass, bassoon, piano, harp, etc. – require them to remain fairly stationary while playing.

It's also important to mention that I was responding to the music as the singers sang it – rather than merely “moving them *to* the music” – or worse, suggesting movements for them to make for “matching” the music's feeling as it sounded. This is also why this way of moving musicians as they sing or play should never be “choreographed” to be reproduced in the same way on another occasion.

#### THEATRE EXAMPLE I

Both of the above examples of working with singers bring to mind an experience I had a number of years earlier when I introduced the Technique to the professional theatre company I mentioned before. On the evening that I arrived, one of the leading actors who had also been a student of mine for some time was directing an early rehearsal of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, and he invited me to come to watch their work. Of course, I hadn't actually met and worked with any of the actors yet and didn't know the play, so I was mainly absorbed by how the whole production was being put together – rather than thinking about what the Alexander Technique might have to contribute to any of the actors in it.

Later, though, after I'd been teaching those same actors for nearly three weeks, my student invited me to sit in again on one of their final rehearsals of the play. Of course, by this time the whole production flowed forth fairly seamlessly with very little need for input from my student as director. However, while I was watching the play unfold, I began to realize that since I'd worked with all the actors in the play by then it could be quite easy for me simply to go on stage into their midst and put my hands on them from time to time to enhance their overall Alexander direction in keeping with the feeling of the scene or action without in any way distracting from what needed to happen from moment to moment in the play. Much like what I'd done with the two singers I described above, I could be like an “invisible presence” who was merely heightening the feeling of a scene by helping the actors allow their words and actions to flow from the deepest source of feeling within them.

I also remember having discussions about this idea with my actor-director student, and it was exciting to know that he too thought it

would be a great thing to try. We even speculated about forming an entire Shakespearean company that would include an intensive experience and full understanding of the Alexander Technique at its core. I still think this would be an important project to try – especially because the hands-on experiences with the two singers that I described above flow over very naturally into the idea of bringing the Technique fully into theatre work too. Maybe some of the acting schools that now employ Alexander teachers and require their acting students to have lessons in the Technique have already discovered something like what my student and I envisioned those many years ago. Of course, it's also interesting to remember that Alexander himself used *The Merchant of Venice* as a project for his trainees to perform during their third year of his first teacher's course. He also hired a professional theatre director to supervise the production at the Old Vic theatre, and this man was quite impressed by the trainees' unusual ability to alter their habitual patterns of use of themselves in order to carry out his directions so effectively even though they had no prior acting experience.<sup>239</sup>

## 14 Scientific Research and the Alexander Technique

As I mentioned earlier, during my first three years of teaching I had frequent contact with first-generation Alexander teacher and researcher Frank Pierce Jones<sup>240</sup> who had conducted and published numerous laboratory experiments on aspects of Alexander's claims and with whom I had also taken some private lessons before going to do the three-year teacher's training course in London. Since I had little background in the sciences, it took a considerable amount of study for me to understand the procedures and terminologies he used for conducting these experiments and publishing his team's findings. Often I felt that much of the language used in reporting and discussing scientific procedures seemed so removed from the actual experience and concepts involved in the Technique that it was hard for me to feel that this experimental work was actually accomplishing anything very significant – at least in a way that could ultimately lead to a recognition and acknowledgment of the importance of the Technique by the medical and academic professions. I thought often then – as I still do – of John Dewey's statement in his introduction to Alexander's third book, *The Use of the Self*:

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.<sup>241</sup>

I also found Dewey's words fortified later by those of Susanne Langer in her final three-volume work *Mind: An Essay in Human Feeling*, where she writes in the chapter "Idols of the Laboratory":

To speak of "hominid individuals" instead of "persons" and of "verbal behavior" instead of "speech," or a clinical interview as a "stimulus to verbal behavior," and so on, is to translate ordinary thinking into a jargon for literary presentation. Jargon is language which is more technical than the

ideas it serves to express. Genuine scientific language grows up with the increasing abstractness or extraordinary precision of concepts used in a special field of work, and is therefore always just adequate to express those concepts. It is not deliberately fixed (with the exception of Latin nomenclature in taxonomy), but may become completely technical if scientific thought moves very far away from ordinary thought. . . .

According to its [science's prescriptive methodology] canons all laboratory procedures must be isolated, controllable, repeatable and above all "objective." The first three requirements only restrict experimentation to simple responses, more significant in animal psychology than in human contexts; but the fourth is a demon. *The Idol of Objectivity requires its servitors to distort the data of human psychology into an animal image in order to handle them by the methods that fit speechless mentality* [emphasis added]: It requires the omission of all activities of central origin, which are felt as such, and are normally accessible to research in human psychology through the powerful instrument of language. The result is a laboratory exhibit of "behavior" that is much more artificial than any instrumentally deformed object, because its deformation is not calculated and discounted as the effect of an instrument. Here, indeed, is a central spot where *haste to become scientific destroys the most valuable material for investigation*.<sup>242</sup> [emphasis added].

In spite of my reservations, and since my background was mainly in the arts and I was so unfamiliar with research vocabulary and procedure, I decided that I should set aside any reluctance I had to embracing the experimental work and its findings that I was coming into contact with – especially because I was required to conduct some formal research of my own into how the Alexander Technique may help musicians deal with the effects of stress in performance as part of the masters' program that I was enrolled in from 1973 to 1975.<sup>243</sup> All this was done under the guidance of the faculty researcher who was also an experienced first-generation Alexander teacher.

Following this kind of formal approach also challenged a good deal of what I'd come to understand over the preceding seven years that was required for learning and teaching the Alexander Technique. However, after I completed the research project and went on with my own teaching of the Technique and eventual training of teachers, I still found that most of what I'd experienced and understood from my prior study of and training in the Technique was the most useful way of looking at what it consists of and intends to pass on to others. I also felt that further "laboratory" research along the lines that I'd just conducted would still remain far from

revealing the essence of what the Technique has to offer humanity in the broadest sense, and I came to the conclusion that Alexander himself was wise to turn down offers to subject his own use of the Technique to rigorous examination by scientists. It was also easy to think that he must have felt such experimental studies didn't merit his time and attention because his findings had already been praised by esteemed medical and scientific experts, such as the neurophysiologist Charles Sherrington – a Nobel laureate – and the biologist George Coghill.

However, there's one area of this early research that I think could be worth investigating in a more detailed way as a basis for any further experimentation, and this would involve examining the nature of all human reaction in light of the main features of the startle pattern.<sup>244</sup> A 1965 study revealed through electromyographic readings that this seemingly universal reaction pattern to an unexpected, sudden stimulus – even a very mild one – begins with a tensional distortion of the juncture between the head and the upper spine and proceeds down the trunk and limbs in a fraction of a second. Since Alexander essentially claimed that his technique was a means of helping people “to improve their reaction to the stimulus of living,”<sup>245</sup> I thought further study of this arena of startle could more usefully reveal the essence of what the Technique has to offer than other laboratory procedures that merely examine locomotory movement patterns, vocal production, and various aspects of balance and carriage. Certainly, the most dramatic and revealing example of startle that I saw in the research material I studied was a slow-motion film of several people – “subjects” – separately, one after another, reacting to a surprise gunshot. The extreme and sudden force with which they all retracted their head backward and downward onto their spine in a way that initiated a contraction of their entire stature (apparently an instinctive protective reaction) was impossible to miss – along with the striking sameness of the response pattern from person to person.

With these perspectives on research closely in mind over my following years of teaching and training teachers, I eventually began to develop a sequence of hypotheses that I thought would need to be addressed in a progressive order for the most accurate and useful evidence of the Technique's nature and effectiveness to be established and recognized. For compiling this sequence I drew mainly on Alexander's chapter “Physiology and Physiologists” in his last book, *The Universal Constant in Living*<sup>246</sup> where he refers to “the normal or abnormal working of the postural mechanisms.”<sup>247</sup> He claims there that until the opportunity for acquiring the knowledge of the normal or abnormal working of the

postural mechanisms “is given by orthodox medical training . . . the body of knowledge hitherto known as physiology cannot be said to constitute a ‘clinical physiology of the human being.’”<sup>248</sup>

Even though Alexander makes his position quite clear by using the particular terms “normal or abnormal working of the postural mechanism,” it seems to me that he missed an important opportunity to acknowledge and emphasize that our supportive tissue structures function *primarily* in relation to gravity’s constant downward pull on us. This omission more readily allows the phrase “normal working of the postural mechanisms” to get mis-construed by readers as “right posture” or “position.” Therefore, I think any study of the supportive function of our tissue structures must include a clear reference to the gravitational element influencing us *at all times*, no matter what position we may be in and no matter if we’re engaged in making a movement through space, remaining still in one place, or even travelling in an orbiting space craft and experiencing what physiologist Tristan Roberts calls “zero-g” – to replace the words “zero gravity” – in his book *Understanding Balance* where he points out that there is still, in fact, a gravitational force acting upon us even when we’re in that zero-g situation.<sup>249</sup> (I was recently told that sometimes “zero-g” is now referred to as “near zero” or “near-zero.”)

Most of the more recent studies of the Alexander Technique that I’ve looked into seem to focus mainly on examining our “uprightness” – that is, how we’re managing ourselves primarily in a vertical relation to gravity’s pull while we’re standing, sitting, or walking. However, in *Understanding Balance*, Roberts makes a clear distinction between what he calls the “gravitational vertical” and the “behavioral vertical,”<sup>250</sup> and this distinction seems to be missing from most of the general writing on and teaching of the Technique that only looks at the human being from the standpoint of either standing or sitting upright at those times when the behavioral vertical is essentially identical with, or closely corresponds to, the gravitational vertical. Consequently, as a basis for exploring the essence of the Technique, I think this “vertical” perspective ceases to be valid – or at least may easily remain extremely misleading. For as soon as a person departs from the gravitational vertical by the slightest degree, such as inclining their head and torso slightly forward from the sitting bones (ischial tuberosities) while seated – no matter how well coordinated the sitting may be – we ultimately need to acknowledge that their behavioral vertical no longer corresponds to the gravitational vertical. This is because our use of ourselves as a whole in relation to gravity’s constant pull – whether our supportive tissue structures are working normally or



abnormally – is operating no matter what position we may be in and no matter what motion we may be making at any given moment as an essential component of what Alexander called “the universal constant in living.”<sup>251</sup>

Because of this limited “vertical perspective,” we sometimes see a misinterpretation of Alexander’s concept of a good use of the self that’s based on the idea of our head being freely “poised” *on top of an erect vertebral column*, and this obviously could only be the case when we’re standing or sitting in the upright in a way that requires the behavioral vertical to coincide fairly exactly with the gravitational vertical. As a consequence, this perspective has led to the claim that a lengthening of our spine will be produced or elicited if we allow our head to *fall* slightly forward *off the top of* our (erect) vertebral column. Of course, this view then easily gets interpreted as “maintaining a certain posture,” “right position,” or even “alignment.” Therefore, I think it’s especially useful in this light to re-state here Alexander’s own view on the subject of correct positions or postures in his second book *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* from 1923:

... “correct positions” or “postures” find no place in the practical teaching technique employed in the work of re-education advocated in this book. A correct position or posture indicates a fixed position, and a person held to a fixed position cannot grow, as we understand growth. The correct position today cannot be the correct position a week later for any person who is advancing in the work of re-education and co-ordination.<sup>252</sup>

Nevertheless, most of what Alexander writes still seems for many readers to be oriented around a basic concept of “uprightness” that a person learns to direct and maintain as a constant manner of use from moment to moment. This tendency reminds me of an instance of giving a lesson to a newly-trained visiting Alexander teacher. After I’d worked with him for a while doing basic chair work from sitting to standing and back to sitting, I offered to give him some lying-down work, and as he was walking over to my teaching table he said, “Now you’ll be taking me out of gravity,” – as if gravity would somehow stop having any effect upon him while he was lying down. Maybe he actually meant that he wouldn’t need to be as concerned about *balancing* himself in space from moment to moment as he would be while standing, seated, or moving from one of these orientations to the other. However, I wanted to remind him that lying in a semi-supine position – or in any position, for that matter – is still a matter of *balancing* in relation to gravity’s pull and still a matter of

managing our entire supportive function in relation to the surface(s) we're in contact with at any given moment. Of course, it's easy to understand how most people have the idea that "posture" has basically to do with standing, sitting, walking, and other activities that we do when we're "up and about." Then when they lie down "to rest" – or even when they sit down to rest – they usually give up much or all of the overall supportive action of their musculature and merely collapse onto, or sink into, the surface they're sitting or lying on. Often this tendency is greatly encouraged by the backward sloping and soft cushioning of much contemporary furniture in developed countries where people have generally given up the ability to maintain the "connection" of their legs with their spine, torso, and head that those in other cultures who are accustomed to squatting while keeping their heels on the ground seem to maintain all, or most of, their lives.

With all the above points mind, I composed these following twelve hypotheses, or claims, that I think may need to be investigated in sequential order so that an accurate understanding of the Alexander Technique – including its highly-skilled mode of manual contact – can be presented to the various medical and academic fields that would benefit from carrying out a careful examination of what learning the Technique and applying it to every moment of our lives entails. As far as possible, I've also tried to avoid the jargon that teachers and students of the Technique tend to use, and I've even substituted for "postural mechanisms" the phrasing "the functioning of the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull" – particularly so that there is the least chance for anyone to interpret my language in terms of "posture" or "position." Of course, I also realize that my rendering of these points may seem to many readers to be overly technical in the same way that I've claimed much of "scientific language" is prone to be. I hope that won't be the case; however, I'm sure that better writers (and thinkers) than I could improve greatly on what follows.

Here is the list of hypotheses, or claims, that also contains some alterations I've made since they were published several years ago in Alexander newsletters<sup>253</sup>:

### *Twelve Alexander Hypotheses*

1. That in humans there can be either an integrated (normal) or an unintegrated (abnormal) functioning of all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull whether we're in motion or at rest.

2. That the functioning of all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull is governed primarily, for better or for worse, by the way we manage our head, torso, and limbs in sequential relation to each other no matter what spatial orientation we may be in at any given moment.
3. That there can be a condition of equalized *lengthening* in all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull, and this equalized lengthening activity is distinct from what is generally considered to be "stretching." Consequently, if contraction needs to be made in actions requiring effort, this contraction would be made on the basis of maintaining the most equalized lengthening of *all* our elastic tissue, even if some areas need to contract more than others so that a fully equalized overall lengthening can return as soon as the specific activity is completed. No action requiring contraction is allowed to completely override the balanced functioning of our supportive elastic tissue in relation to gravity's constant pull.
4. That in the majority of adults the functioning of all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull is working – to a greater or lesser degree – in an unintegrated (abnormal) way as a result of each person's habitual and generally subconscious tensional patterns of carriage and reaction in combination with the accumulated and often chronic tightnesses or flaccidities that are the result of our habitual patterns of carriage and reaction being continually repeated or sustained over time. (The tensional patterns required by various occupations and repetitious activities may also figure into this subconscious influence.)
5. That the degree of integration of all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull has a fundamental influence, for good or ill, on many aspects of our behavior and functioning (whether classified as primarily "physical" or primarily "mental"), and this influence must be taken into account if any attempts at improving our health or well-being, correcting defects, changing habits of behavior, and performing activities or acquiring skills that are dependent upon superlative psychophysical coordination are to be complete.
6. That re-education and restoration of the integration of all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull is nearly impossible for us to achieve unaided

due to the faulty (and largely subconscious) proprioceptive and interoceptive judgment associated with our habituation to the unintegrated functioning of the tissue structures that support us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull that we may have acquired through subconscious imitation, specialized activities, and conforming to various cultural influences.

7. That an integrated (normal) working of all the elastic tissue that supports us in relation to gravity's constant downward pull can be restored by assistance from another person who has acquired the appropriate manual and verbal re-educative skills of:
  - a) assessing the conditions of a person's elastic tissue that supports them in relation to gravity's constant downward pull,
  - b) redistributing any temporary or chronic conditions of tightness or invigorating any conditions of flaccidity in a person's elastic tissue into a balanced state of tonus in relation to gravity's constant downward pull, and
  - c) facilitating the head-spine-torso-limb dynamic required to sustain the supportive function of all the elastic tissue that supports a person in relation to gravity's constant downward pull from moment to moment whether they are in motion or at rest.
8. That with the skilled manual assistance and the appropriate verbal instruction from another person, we can gain the ability to recognize and inhibit any tensional responses that interfere with the integrated (normal) working of the supportive function of our elastic tissue in relation to gravity's constant downward pull, and we can also learn to reliably facilitate, maintain, and improve this integration for ourselves through specific ideo-interoceptive and ideo-proprioceptive directives that we project sequentially to our head, spine, torso, and limbs from moment to moment. These same ideo-interoceptive directives can also serve to transform built-up, chronic patterns of tightness or flaccidity into a balanced condition of tonus that can best integrate with the overall supportive function of our elastic tissue in relation to gravity's pull on us from moment to moment whether we are in motion or at rest.
9. That the manual skill of assessing the conditions of and assisting in the restoration and re-education of the integration of another person's supportive function of their elastic tissue in relation to

gravity's constant downward pull involves a highly specialized and subtle tactile leveraging that is dependent entirely upon the degree of integration in the facilitator's own supportive elastic tissue during the time of actual manual contact and guidance, rather than being the result of any type of contact involving local muscular efforts of the facilitator's hands and arms (which generally produce only local and non-integrating alterations in the recipient).

10. That training to become a competent facilitator of the integrated (normal) supportive functioning of others' elastic tissue in relation to gravity's constant downward pull usually requires at least several years of near-daily restorative and re-educative work at the hands of other highly-skilled facilitators who have worked in the field for a number of years. In some cases, this training may require even more time, depending upon the degree of unintegrated (abnormal) conditions present in the trainee's elastic tissue, both in terms of chronic tightnesses and in terms of habitual patterns of carriage and reaction in relation to gravity's constant downward pull in motion and at rest.
11. That the ideo-interoceptive and ideo-proprioceptive activity involved in developing and maintaining a constructive conscious control of an integrated (normal) working of the supportive function of our elastic tissue provides a basis for achieving an ongoing psychophysical unity in living in relation to gravity's constant downward pull. This unity serves to counteract the effects upon us of most current approaches to improving human behavior and functioning that perpetuate a mind/body dichotomy by separating human activity into so-called "physical" and "mental" functions – as opposed to considering a person as a unified being (a "self") within whom the various processes of thinking, imagining, dreaming, feeling, moving, resting, breathing, speaking, digesting, etc. may all be occurring from moment to moment, often with one mode being more predominant at certain times than the others.
12. That some of the main obstacles to developing and maintaining a constructive conscious control of the functioning of an integrated (normal) working of the supportive function of our elastic tissue in relation to gravity's constant downward pull are due to and perpetuated by deeply ingrained emotional states,

fixed prejudices, cultural beliefs, aggressive or controlling attitudes, narrowed focus of attention, and other subconscious habits of thinking and reacting.

## 15 Late Reflections

### The Alexander Technique, Touch, Eros, and Identity

As every flower fades, and as all youth  
Departs, so life at every stage,  
So every virtue, so our grasp of truth,  
Blooms in its day and may not last forever.  
Since life may summon us at every age  
Be ready, heart, for parting, new endeavor,  
Be ready bravely and without remorse  
To find new light that old ties cannot give.

Hermann Hesse, *Magister Ludi*

I've thought more recently that if we accept as valid Alexander's claim that improving our use of ourselves as a whole can have a beneficial influence on *every* aspect of our lives, then it may be important to emphasize today that this broad perspective encompasses those sensory capacities and experiences we consider to be emotional, sensual, and erotic in nature. I also think this acknowledgement is particularly needed now because Alexander didn't seem to want to address these factors too explicitly in his published writings. Just as we might expect from someone of his generation (1869–1955) making formal statements about their findings, he barely gave a passing nod to these aspects of living by merely referring to “the needs and desires of the reproductive system” as he more or less grouped them with “the needs and desires of the digestive and assimilative systems.”<sup>254</sup> Consequently, this language left little if any leeway for considering how our experience in the Alexander Technique could influence how we may reckon with our needs and desires *as a whole person* for giving or receiving affection or pleasure to and from those we care for or love – dimensions of living that seem to remain a major concern for people from all walks of life in spite of an increasing knowledge of the various and differing anatomical characteristics and physiological functioning of the female and male reproductive systems as they play their parts in perpetuating the human species from scientific and medical perspectives.

Even though many who've come to appreciate the wide-ranging benefits of the Technique would also agree that improving the use of ourselves as a whole can have a profound effect on how we experience and

manage our emotional, sensual, and erotic capacities, a full recognition and understanding of this possibility continues to be greatly thwarted by current scientific, medical, psychological, and colloquial language – particularly in English. I believe this situation is largely due to the firm separation in people’s thinking between so-called “mental” and “physical” processes<sup>255</sup> that’s largely been created and maintained by our use of the nouns “mind” and “spirit” on one hand and “body” on the other – terms that Alexander so strongly decried in his last published statement on the Technique (1946):

The fact to be faced is that the human self was robbed of much of its inheritance when the separation implied by the conception of the organism as “spirit,” “mind,” and “body” was accepted as a working principle, for it left unbridged the gap between the “subconscious” and the conscious. This gap still remains unbridged by the studies, scientific or otherwise, which have been stimulated by the conception of separation. I venture to assert that if the gap is to be bridged so that the self may enter into and enjoy the fuller benefits of “man’s supreme inheritance,” it will be by means of a knowledge, gained through practical experience, which will enable man to *inhibit his instinctive, “subconscious” reaction to a given stimulus, and to hold it inhibited while initiating a conscious direction, guidance, and control of the use of himself that was previously unfamiliar.*<sup>256</sup>

I also think that this conceptual gap perpetuated by our use of the nouns “mind,” “body,” and “spirit” may have become even more severe in the last few decades because of the urgent need to protect the world population from several potentially lethal diseases. Science’s epidemiological solutions, acting in the wake of earlier efforts to liberate intimacy and relationships from long-standing cultural constraints, have tended to focus on the subject of intimate contact in a detached way that can further distance our awareness and understanding from what it can mean for us to interact with others in a fully empathic and compassionate way. Therefore, with this situation in mind, I’ve come to think that the highly skilled and subtle use of touch involved in teaching the Alexander Technique that I described earlier in the chapter on training teachers may also be able to provide a basis for our moving on to a more evolved and fully human way of experiencing and communicating with each other in emotional, sensory, and erotic spheres that isn’t governed by splitting ourselves into “physical” and “mental” factions in any form of human activity.<sup>257</sup>



## ALEXANDER TOUCH

Professionally, as Alexander teachers, we consider the refined use of the hands in teaching as being emotionally, sensually, and erotically neutral in order for it to promote the fullest possible integrative action in another person's neuro-muscular response to gravity from moment to moment *whatever* activity they might be engaged in, even if it's only remaining quietly in one position for a long time. Therefore, I'd like to suggest here that the basis of this way of using manual contacts in teaching the Technique can also have profound implications for how we might touch others and how we might receive their touch in the context of deep friendships and intimate relationships – particularly as encompassed by the broad concept of eros described by the ancient Greeks<sup>258</sup> and others who've been inspired by them.<sup>259</sup> The positive regard from moment to moment for another person's *entire* being while we're working with them in the context of Alexander teaching need not – and should not – stop when we make tactile contacts in other life-affirming situations. In fact, our everyday affectionate and intimate contacts may ultimately be rendered even *more* positive and nurturing because of our Alexander experience than they often are otherwise. Certainly, as a traditionally-trained Alexander teacher, I don't stop using my hands and the whole of myself in a well-directed way when I'm not giving Alexander work to someone. Also, because I'm committed to never abandoning this overall positive direction of myself in any part of my life, all other tactile contacts that I may make – even if only shaking someone's hand – are more positive and life-enhancing toward the other person than they would be if I hadn't incorporated the Technique into my use of myself as a whole. It's also important to re-emphasize here that the manual contacts used in the Technique are basically a manifestation (or extension) of the overall use of ourselves *as a whole* rather than merely being a localized skill in using the hands themselves, and this is why, as I've said earlier, our drawing continually upon this expansive source of awareness and direction is the hardest thing to learn in Alexander teacher training and why the training takes so long.

On the subject of *receiving* Alexander hands-on contacts, I can only speak from my own fifty-plus years' experience of having Alexander work given *to* me in four different contexts: first, in the initial private lessons I had with four different teachers over the course of four years; second, in the three-year teacher-training course I attended that involved extensive hands-on contacts for several hours a day, five days a week, from numerous teachers and trainees at various levels of experience; third, in exchang-

ing hands-on work with thirteen colleagues (sometimes daily for several weeks at a time) over many years after completing my training; and fourth, during the ten years that I trained teachers when I would coach trainees in using their hands on me in the most effective way for teaching. Out of all these experiences, I can count at least sixty-two different people who may have touched me in a sustained way within the context of Alexander work. However, out of those sixty-two, I can only say that I've registered a positive emotional or sensual response – to varying degrees – when eight of them worked with me. This is to say that, even though these were strictly Alexander contacts intended to contribute to the integration of myself as a whole, their essentially pleasant tactile nature made me think that I could also accept and enjoy any of these eight people touching me if I were ever to have any degree of a friendship or intimate relationship with them. Of the remaining fifty-four people I've had manual contacts from during Alexander work, most were at least positive on a basic sensory level. Unfortunately, though, a few of these were actually unpleasant or negative to the extent that I would rather not have had them touching me at all in the context of Alexander work or in any other situation whatsoever. The negative nature of these unpleasant contacts seemed to me basically due to the fact that these particular people only regarded the Technique as a “physical” method instead of a means for positively influencing other people's use of themselves *as a psychophysical whole* – which includes, of course, their entire emotional state of being at any given moment.

Then there's also the very much larger group of people numbering in the hundreds to whom I've *given* hands-on work during my years of teaching. This experience encompasses a wide range of basic tactile impressions that I registered when working on these students – with the greatest textural distinction being between males and females, no matter how “masculine” the females or how “feminine” the males may have been considered in general appearance or comportment by their particular culture.<sup>260</sup> Within each of those two general textural distinctions there has been, for me, a broad range of differences to register and appreciate on a spectrum from positive to indifferent to negative. Generally speaking, though, all these tactile impressions also corresponded directly with the degree of emotional compatibility or incompatibility I'd feel about the person in terms of whether or not I would ever be drawn to want to know them in a collaborative friendship or relationship.

On the other side of this “tactile coin” I've sometimes been puzzled when various students have told me of their “attraction” to me as a result of their experience of the hands-on work I gave them. These were

instances where I felt *no* positive sensory response whatsoever from giving them hands-on work. I've often thought that these students' reactions happened because many people – especially Americans – are so *unused* to having *any* physical contact at all with others that when they do receive even the “neutral” manual contact in an Alexander lesson it unmasks a deeper personal need that may have very little, if anything, to do with the particular teacher who's providing the contact. Even people in committed long-term relationships may not experience a fulfillment of this need for positive and nurturing contact, especially if their partner doesn't have a balanced use of the self as a whole that includes an attitude of compassion and respect.

Writing about this aspect reminds me of something a middle-aged married student of mine once said to me. She and her husband were both having lessons with me, and they were both very appreciative of the Technique and how it was helping them in their lives – especially the wife who had some difficult health issues to contend with. As far as I could tell they had a very harmonious and respectful partnership that included a deep mutual admiration and many shared interests that were bonded by an equal collaboration in so much of what they did in life together. However, one day the wife remarked to me in her lesson that she hoped that having Alexander work would help her husband learn how to touch her more gently. She said “He hurts me [when he touches me].” Even though this seemed the case to her, I was also sure that the husband believed that his way of touching his wife was entirely loving, caring, and gentle. I also think that the wife may have become even more sensitive to this tactile issue when she discovered how positive and helpful the hands-on experience of the Alexander work could be, and it gave her some hope that her husband might be able to discover a better way of expressing his affection and caring through touch too. They moved away soon afterward, though, so I don't know if that aspect of their relationship ever changed. However, I think it was certainly possible with a continued experience of the Technique.

Along with this last point it may be meaningful to mention the possibility that a large portion of the population may not experience a particularly positive influence through any of the tactile contacts they may have with others in public – especially when we consider situations where we are often pressed against each other on crowded buses or trains. For instance, I often find, when I'm in that situation, the contact from passengers sitting next to me – even if it's just from their being in touch with my shoulders or arms because of limited space – usually has a pulling down effect on me

that makes me have to expend extra energy in order to maintain my own positive, upward-flowing direction. In those cases, I'd much rather stand for the entire journey, and I usually try to move away from those negative contacts as soon as possible if I can find a less cramped space.

#### EROS AND TOUCH

If we extend the meaning of eros to encompass the highest level of emotional and compassionate elements in our lives – particularly with regard to our friendships and intimate relationships – this broader perspective may naturally require us to examine the sensory and emotional experiences in our lives that we may have otherwise considered to be exclusively erotic in nature. I think the use of touch learned through training to teach the Alexander Technique can provide a gateway, or basis, for evolving our understanding of this broader sphere of eros toward its most mutually respectful and emotionally enhanced level of feeling and communication. This possibly exists because Alexander-influenced tactile contacts aren't acquisitive or domineering, and they always intend to guard against causing discomfort or pain in any way *as a major concern*. Also, as part of extending that positive regard beyond the Alexander teaching format, this more "enlightened" form of touch encompasses what the "toucher" may receive or sense when they touch someone – including an appreciation for the nature and texture of the contact, *whenever* it may be made in the context of a friendship or an intimate relationship.

When we allow for the possibility of a fully balanced coordination to develop within us, it naturally can include all regions of ourselves that we have a capacity to perceive and direct as part of our integrated whole beyond the mere perception and control of our basic head-spine-limb coordination in relation to gravity's constant downward pull that the Technique mainly focuses upon. Once this basic overall coordination is established as a primary field of reference, then our awareness can be extended to include those regions we may otherwise experience and conceive of as containing entirely separate or independent feelings such as those we associate with control of erotic sensations, bowel and bladder activity, and emotional responses that we sense in our diaphragm, ribcage, abdominal areas, etc. We may also discover that these regions can carry "collected" tightnesses (conditions of use)<sup>261</sup> and patterns of holding or control (manner of use)<sup>262</sup> that may even have originated in our earliest years of learning to develop self-control over our social interactions, elimination processes, erotic sensations, and other responses to life's demands. Of course, there can be many differences or variations in the

nature and extent of these “control mechanisms,” or habits, from culture to culture, person to person, and even from within our own evolving self-perception at different times in our life.<sup>263</sup> All these restricting aspects of our use of ourselves may sometimes need a lot of time – even many years – to be reckoned with fully if they’ve been particularly severe or have been governed by strong cultural constraints, prejudices, and beliefs.

#### IDENTITY

When we examine the nature of the cultural conventions and social constructs surrounding emotional and erotic experiences from the perspective of the neuromuscular balance we achieve through the Alexander Technique, doing so may also seriously challenge our experience and conceptions of what we consider to be the essential elements of gender identity in the particular culture and family we were brought up in. This challenge often arises because so many of the distinctions we usually learn to make between “masculine” and “feminine” behavior, comportment, and self-perception become greatly reduced – or even disappear – when we experience an integrated manner of use of the self as a whole and incorporate it into our daily life from moment to moment. Patterns of standing, walking, sitting, reaching, speaking, gesturing, etc. that many consider to be inborn traits eventually reveal themselves to be habits that we’ve usually learned through the process of what Alexander called subconscious imitation<sup>264</sup> that starts operating in us long before we have any memory of acquiring our various modes of speech (intonations, regional accents, grammar, etc.), carriage, attitudes toward life, and other conventional behaviors and ways of thinking. He addressed this imitational element at length in 1923 in his second book:

The psycho-physical process called imitation would seem to be one that is operative in most people to a high degree . . . We are all aware of this aptitude, as we call it, in our fellow beings, and subconscious imitation of the characteristics of others is a factor which plays a great part in the development and growth and also in the use of our individual psycho-physical selves. Overwhelming proof is forthcoming in regard not only to the natural aptitude and subconscious inclination to imitate, but also in regard to the harmful consequences which may result from imitation . . .

. . . the chief stimulus to imitation comes from our perception, subconscious or conscious, of some characteristic or striking manifestations of another human creature, and such manifestations are as a rule the manifestations of psycho-physical defects or peculiarities. In all spheres of

present-day life the dangers from the individual imitation of others' defects or peculiarities are very great, it is therefore of the utmost importance that these dangers should be eliminated, or at least minimized, in all our activities in learning or learning to do . . .<sup>265</sup>

The nature of this imitational factor might be further illuminated by more recent studies of how mirror neurons function when we merely observe another person performing an action. This mirroring function could presumably extend to our observing many other aspects of people's presence, behavior, and comportment as well – even beginning in our earliest years.<sup>266</sup> Here's a basic account of how mirror neurons operate:

Before the discovery of mirror neurons, scientists generally believed that our brains use logical thought processes to interpret and predict other people's actions. Now, however, many have come to believe that we understand others not by thinking, but by feeling. For mirror neurons appear to let us “simulate” not just other people's actions, but the intentions and emotions behind those actions. When you see someone smile, for example, your mirror neurons for smiling fire up, too, creating a sensation in your own mind of the feeling associated with smiling. You don't have to think about what the other person intends by smiling. You experience the meaning immediately and effortlessly.<sup>267</sup>

I think it's also important to comment here on the above phrase “creating a sensation in your own mind” because from the perspective of psychophysical unity that the Alexander Technique cultivates, we wouldn't have a “sensation” in our “mind” of the “feeling associated with smiling.” We would have the *feeling of smiling in the musculature and other elastic tissue* that we normally smile with – even if that musculature doesn't appear to an onlooker to be engaged in the visible act of smiling. This next quote helps somewhat further to illustrate my point:

. . . the first human mirror neuron study examined hand-muscle twitching. In a 1995 paper in the *Journal of Neurophysiology*, [neurophysiologists] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Luciano Fadiga . . . recorded motor-evoked potentials – a signal that a muscle is ready to move – *from participants' hand muscles* [emphasis added] as the participants watched the experimenter grasp objects. They found that these potentials matched the potentials recorded when the participants actually grasped objects themselves.<sup>268</sup>

When Rizzolatti and Fadiga recorded what they call “motor-evoked potentials” they actually seemed to be examining the main capacity that the Alexander Technique deals with, which basically involves the neurophysiological activity that can occur in our musculature and other tissue structures in response to neurocognitive stimuli even though *no actual movement through space* is being performed. In Alexander terminology, this may be the process we call “directing” (whether consciously or subconsciously self-guided) that’s involved in what Alexander described as “projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms”<sup>269</sup> – particularly when we’re using this process to influence the integration of our whole self in relation to gravity’s constant downward pull on us (as I described in the chapter “Working On Yourself”).

Cognitive neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese, a colleague of Rizzolatti, has also extended mirror neuron research to include empathic and aesthetic appreciations:

. . . It seems clear that mirror neurons are one key to understanding how human beings survive and thrive in a complex social world . . .

This neural mechanism is involuntary and automatic – with it we don’t have to *think* about what other people are doing or feeling, we simply know.

It seems we’re wired to see other people as similar to us, rather than different . . . At the root, as humans we identify the person we’re facing as someone like ourselves.<sup>270</sup>

It could be argued though that we may actually have a negative – or opposite – mirror neuron response when we see someone smiling (or expressing any emotion) in a false or contrived way. Of course, many people seem to be easily fooled by others’ falseness, so maybe there can be a continuum in the degree of our ability to estimate the authenticity of other people’s expressions. On the other hand, many are able to distinguish clearly between “good,” “poor,” and “bad” performances by professional and amateur actors, so it seems that there must be a broader range of perceptual possibilities than mirror neuron studies may be allowing for – at least as far as I’ve looked into writings on the subject.

These possible differences in perception were somewhat addressed in a seminar entitled “Acting and Mirror Neurons” held at the Philoctetes Center in New York in 2007 – which included Gallese, numerous key people in the acting and psychology professions, as well as a teacher of the Alexander Technique – where the panel noted that there may be a



difference in degree and quality of mirror neuron response (“motor evoked potentials”) in observers according to how much experience the observers may have in a skilled activity that they’re in the process of watching someone perform. For instance, when watching a classical ballet performance, someone with extensive ballet training may tend to have a fuller or richer mirror neuron response while watching the ballet performed than someone who is mainly experienced in break dancing.<sup>271</sup> Of course, it also seems that the greater the experience and refinement an observer may have achieved in a particular field could actually make it harder for them to have a *positive* mirror neuron response (“motor evoked potential”) when observing an inferior performance or one that conflicts with the “standard” they’ve developed or come to appreciate. Although, maybe that kind of negative response is evoked by a different type of mirror neuron activity.

No doubt variations in degree of mirror neuron response also occur while watching sports: those who’ve played a sport extensively from an early age may experience a more pronounced neuromuscular response while watching a game than those who haven’t played that particular sport very much, if at all. On the other hand, I’m not sure if we need to have experienced severe injury in order for us to “feel” the effect of players’ injuries empathically when, say, watching them getting hurt in a game. I think that this empathic experiencing may even increase in degree when we become more integrated in relation to gravity’s pull as a result of having lessons in the Alexander Technique – especially because the Technique deals so much with improving our sensitivity to all our interoceptive “channels” that may have been closed off or suppressed through the various ways we may have adapted to life’s stimuli by developing “self-control.” However, it also seems that our empathic experiencing of others being injured may be *decreased* by over-familiarization through frequently watching people get hit hard or hurt during various contact sports such as boxing, wrestling, American football, rugby, ice hockey, etc. It’s interesting to me too that even though I’ve incorporated the Technique into my life on a moment-to-moment basis in a way that’s allowed me to cope better with a broader spectrum of my own discomfort or pain, it has also, at the same time, made it harder for me to witness others’ pain or suffering without experiencing some degree of uncomfortable empathic reaction within my entire being.

Often it seems that mirror neuron activity can also get carried into full-fledged overt subconscious action. For instance, I think this may have been the case for a professional flutist I once gave Alexander lessons to



who told me a charming account of her early flute-playing experience. When she was in high school, her band director noted that she constantly batted her eyelids as she played. She hadn't been at all aware that she was doing this, but as soon as he mentioned it to her, she was embarrassed and made a conscious effort to stop. She'd never thought about how or when she acquired the habit, but once her effort to stop was successful, the whole subject faded from her memory. However, many years later, at a music conference, she unexpectedly ran into her original flute teacher for the first time since elementary school, and she noticed as they conversed that *he* was rapidly batting his eyelids as he spoke. Of course, she immediately realized that she must have subconsciously imitated him as he demonstrated "correct" flute playing during her childhood lessons – or I suppose it could also have been that she may have first "mirrored" his eye blinking during her early lessons and then it became a subconscious habit.

#### FEATURES OF IDENTITY

Even if we only take into account the more obvious "external" aspects of the use of ourselves as a whole such as carriage, gait, and vocal modulation and compare their various representations from culture to culture, we can easily see that these acquired characteristics don't support a universal genetic truth about the nature – or even the existence – of "masculinity" and "femininity." Nevertheless, many people seem to believe that their particular concept of distinctly separate gendered behaviors is a biological given, and they often make a definite effort (consciously or subconsciously) to speak and comport themselves according to the traits they've identified with or wish to emulate.<sup>272</sup> But when we replace our more superficial and acquired *habitual manner of use* with a balanced coordination in relation to gravity, most distinctions between male and female are reduced to a few basic anatomical differences that exist quite independently from any subconsciously or consciously acquired mannerisms of speech, carriage, gait, etc. Therefore, it seems that this subject begs for a thorough psychological, sociological, and anthropological study using a balanced integration of the self in relation to gravity as its baseline of analysis – particularly for examining how these acquired characteristics are manifest in cultures where a heteronormative patriarchy is taken for granted as the only "natural" social structure in which to live a fulfilling life and where those who don't conform to that conventional view or lifestyle ideal are considered to be aberrations or somehow morally inferior.<sup>273</sup>

These points about identity should also be viewed in the context of citing all the other ways that experience in the Technique can call into question and can influence how we experience and understand the nature of all our habitual emotional, sensual, and erotic responses. For instance, it's often common for those who develop an improved use of themselves as a whole to find that there's a change, or refinement, in the "texture" of many of their reactions, attitudes, and experiences – such as feeling joy without a hyper element, grief without despair, anger without irrationality, fear without panic, hurrying without rushing, deep concern without worry, pride without arrogance, disappointment without dismay, leadership or control without manipulation, following without submission, sadness without depression, desire without lust, love without possessiveness, etc. Of course, there's nothing in the traditional approach to teaching the Technique that *requires* a person to examine these aspects of living; however, such insights and changes in perception often occur spontaneously as part of our learning to inhibit *all* our habitual and automatic modes of thinking and behaving and replacing those with intelligently considered responses that rise above the automatic and conventional demands of society at large.

Other findings by Vittorio Gallese about the involvement of mirror neurons when we *feel* empathy for another's suffering or joy may shed light on how experience in the Technique can influence our compassion for others. For instance, when I see real life close-up views of a person or an animal getting cut or wounded in a film or television program, my empathic neuromuscular response seems to have grown stronger as my overall conditions of use have improved and become more unified. I often experience it in my feet, legs, and pelvic area the most, but I usually feel it as a kind of tingling cringe everywhere to a certain degree – that is, if I haven't already turned my eyes away before the disturbing action comes on the screen. (Something in me also wants to avoid having the visual image imprinted in my memory so that it won't come back to haunt me later on – even in a dream.) Much of the holding and tightness that I previously carried around in my musculature because of the particular emotional controls and attitudes I'd adopted in my younger years before having Alexander work (e.g. "men don't cry," "be an adult," "don't show any weakness," etc.) seemed to block or stifle my empathic reactions in the past. However, the greater freedom that's come with a more balanced coordination and power of overall control has allowed me to be able to experience – and express – a fuller empathic response than I could before in in all kinds of situations. I think this greater availability to empathic

feeling has come about mainly because I also know that I now have a reliable *means* to bring myself back into balance fairly quickly if the experience is extremely disturbing – whereas before, I would usually block the feeling from happening at all (by tightening or bracing) because I knew it could have more of an overall and long-lasting control over me that would interfere with everything else I needed to do at the time. (I describe in detail in Chapter 4 the change in this blocking factor while I was on the teacher training and experienced the break-through in dealing with the phobia of certain kinds of birds.)<sup>274</sup>

#### TOUCH, EROS, AND CULTURE

For understanding more of what the Alexander Technique may have to offer the affectionate and intimate aspects of our lives, I think it also helps to take into account differing attitudes about touch from culture to culture – as well as the differences *within* a particular culture. For instance, it's often seemed to me that there's a big contrast between Anglo-Saxon males and those of European origin when it comes to touching and overtly expressing affection to each other. One vivid example happened for me during my college years where I grew up in the mid-western U.S. when I saw for the first time in my life a father and his adult son kiss on the cheek when they greeted each other after a long separation. They were natives of New York City, whereas all the fathers and adult sons I'd known until then in the mid-west would *never* have expressed their fondness in any other way than by shaking hands or giving a pat on the shoulder – if even those. That college experience was certainly a big jolt to my learned conception of “normal adult male behavior.”

Eventually my own ability to be open to affectionate touching with family members changed dramatically after I had studied and taught the Technique for some years. However, one of the most poignant experiences I had of this change was in being able to touch my mother in a comforting and positive way during her final weeks of illness. I think it made an enormous difference to both of us, and I'm sure the fact that I had also given her a great deal of regular hands-on Alexander work over the previous two decades made the meaning and value of the affectionate and compassionate touch I gave during her illness even more important to her than it would've been otherwise. I also had a similar, but briefer, experience with my father in his final days even though I'd only given him a minimal amount of Alexander hands-on work in earlier years.

Another powerful example of a change in my attitude about intimate contact occurred near the end of my teacher training when I was strongly

drawn to know someone who was much more advanced in the balanced use of the self than I. Somehow I realized that she would never accept my approach to getting to know her if I resorted to *any* of the actions and attitudes that I'd believed up to then were how a "man" should "behave" in relation to a "woman" he hoped to get to know intimately. I wasn't at all an assertive person when it came to relationships and getting acquainted with someone I liked or was attracted to; in fact, most of the time I've usually waited for others to approach me first out of their own wish to get to know me. However in this case, I knew I still needed to inhibit (or set aside) any tendencies of endgaining so that I could communicate my interest, appreciation, and attraction in an unimposing and non-manipulative way to convince her that my intentions would totally respect her integrity and full humanness in every possible way. I knew that any initiating of touch or closeness would have to be hers and not mine, and my recently developed level of inhibiting and directing allowed me to stay dedicated to that attitude – even though it was still somewhat tentative at that point in my Alexander development.

Since that time, whenever I've wanted to get to know someone for the possibility of developing a deep and collaborative friendship or relationship, I've always felt the great importance of not doing it in any way that could be construed as being manipulative or even expectant of success (endgaining). Instead, I've tried to merely "state my case" and then leave it up to the other person to respond as they felt they wanted to or could. In most cases, I've actually *expected* the person NOT to want to become involved in any kind of friendship or relationship, and I've often been surprised sometimes to find out that they *did*, in fact, want to know me in a more long-lasting way. Of course, there have been times when even this non-endgaining approach was misinterpreted, and whatever I did – or didn't do – failed to show that my intentions were positive, and the other person became convinced that my motives were opposite to what they actually were.

#### ANIMALS AND TOUCH: RIDING – 1986

A tale about an experience I had with horseback riding illustrates well how the kind of sensitive and positive contact involved in learning to teach the Alexander work can be something that animals also appreciate and respond well to. It happened for me quite unexpectedly after I'd been teaching the Alexander Technique for fifteen years and training teachers for several years when I was a week-end guest at the country house of a colleague and his parents.

I hadn't been on a horse since my pre-teen years in the 1950s when I would try unsuccessfully to steer my cousins' horse around their farmyard. I'd never had any riding lessons, and the horse could obviously sense that I really didn't have the skill to keep her on the course I wanted us to go. Sensing this, she pretty much went wherever she pleased – mostly heading back to the barn for some oats or veering over to the side of the lane that passed under very low tree branches where I suspected she was trying to brush me out of the saddle. Even so, I loved horses, read all I could about them, and hoped I might even have one of my own someday. Going every summer to the horse show and races at the state fair also fueled that ambition and my fantasy that I was already a fairly skilled rider who only needed to find the horse of my dreams who would obey my every wish. However, this illusion was pretty easily shattered one summer in my early teens when I persuaded my parents to let me go riding at a fine stable near the big city where we were visiting relatives. After my father talked things over with the owner, I was given a gentle and very well-schooled horse to ride, and as you might expect, I couldn't for the life of me even get him to walk around the paddock in the direction I wanted him to go. This was such a disappointing experience that I pretty much set aside the idea of ever riding again, especially since there was no place to take riding lessons near our small town.

Even so, on this weekend in 1986 at my colleague's country place where they also had two horses, he became convinced that we could have a good time riding together around the neighboring countryside, and he persuaded me to give it a try. On some previous visits there I'd already met the horse I'd be riding – a tall, older hunter – and had liked him a lot. Whenever I went to see him in the pasture or stable, he seemed quite gentle and friendly, so I wasn't too concerned about trying to ride him because my colleague seemed to think it was such a good idea. However, if the horse had been younger and fairly high-strung, I don't think I would've taken on the challenge.

I was also reassured by my colleague's mother who was an experienced rider and didn't seem to think it was a bad idea for me to ride that particular horse either. Nevertheless, she came out and sat on the front steps as we mounted up just to make sure everything would be all right for me. She had also taken many Alexander lessons, so I think she had a lot of confidence that my awareness and control of my use of myself as a whole would probably serve me well in this particular situation too.

We had saddled the two horses in the stable and led them out to mount up in the driveway that circled past the front of the house to and from the

main road, but as my colleague was trying to get my horse to stand still so that I could get into the saddle, he suddenly became as skittish as a young colt, behaving as if he didn't ever want anyone to ride him. When he started acting up like this I couldn't help thinking that maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all for me to try riding him. However, he eventually calmed down enough for me to get astride, and as soon as I was in the saddle I felt like "I'd come home again" – especially because I realized I could easily keep my overall lengthening coming up out of the contact of my feet in the stirrups so that I wasn't merely "sitting" on his back and spine. I also felt that he instantly realized that I was going to be sensitive and respectful of his mouth and head through the light but definite way I was handling the reins. This also made me think that what needs to happen in a person's head-spine relationship in order to maintain a balanced coordination must be just as important for horses and other animals as it is for humans if we hope to interact with them at all well. I also thought that all my experience of directing my students' and trainees' head, spine, and overall relation to gravity with my hands was surely serving me well on horseback then too because I believe there's also an aspect in our touch through which many animals immediately sense our general emotional state and temperament when they're touched by us – especially if we are at all aggressive and controlling toward them and try to make them do what we want no matter what. I've also had numerous experiences with cats and dogs who usually want to avoid strangers at all costs but will eventually come up close to me (and even lean into me) because they somehow sense that I'm balanced within myself and don't want to try to control them or impose myself on them in any way. Maintaining my inhibiting and directing surely adds to their sense of "safety" and sense of my caring for their whole being when they're around me.

Before we set off on our ride, my colleague gave me a few tips about holding the reins, how to signal the horse to canter, etc., and from that moment on everything was fine for me and the horse. We then went on to ride out into the countryside for at least an hour or so, and it turned out to be one of the most enjoyable things I've ever done – as if a long-forgotten dream was finally fulfilled!

Another interesting point is that after we returned from the ride and I was talking it over with my colleague's mother, she said that the moment she saw me in the saddle she knew everything would be fine and that she had no worries at all about our heading out into the countryside.

I also had the chance to ride this same horse on at least two other occasions, and both times he was equally cooperative and seemed to appreci-

ate how I respected him. I found out somewhat later, though, that even accomplished riders thought he could be rather difficult to manage. Since I wasn't an experienced rider at all, I felt even more sure that my Alexander training and teaching experience had given me a way to "connect" with him and communicate on a level that others with such little riding experience might not have access to.

One other thought about riding that I've had in recent years was that I can well imagine it makes a big difference to a horse if someone on its back is "going up and lengthening and widening" and especially "coming up" from the contact of their feet in the stirrups and their sitting bones on the saddle – instead of merely "sitting" on the horse's back and spine with their legs and feet pretty much "disengaged" from their head, spine, torso, and arm coordination – as is the case with many people when they sit down on any surface and "give up" their legs. I think this happens especially in cultures where chairs and sofas are used most of the time for sitting – in contrast to cultures where squatting is more common and people generally seem to maintain their overall response to gravity even while they're squatting. A horse surely senses how a rider is "relating to" its back, and if someone is merely bouncing up and down on its spine with every stride, it must not be the most comfortable (or healthy) thing for the horse. This thought often reminds me of jockeys who race thoroughbreds in a near-standing position with their stirrups drawn up quite high on the horse's sides. In that orientation, it would seem that the jockey's legs act more as springs – or even as shock absorbers – that help to avoid all interference with the working of the horse's back and spine.

This example also makes me think of the exciting scenes in old cowboy films where you'd see horses with riders like Roy Rogers galloping at full speed in the smoothest possible way while also pretty much "standing" in the stirrups and barely touching the seat of the saddle, if at all. This must also liberate the horse's head and spine to access the freest, strongest central coordination needed for galloping along so fast.

These ideas are probably commonplace now among riding instructors and experienced riders, especially since there've been numerous Alexander teachers – some of whom are also professional riders – who've specialized in teaching the Technique in conjunction with riding. Therefore, the current understandings of riding along these lines are probably far greater than what I've described here. It's also worth noting that Alexander himself was said to have been an excellent horseman who was able to ride horses that no one else could handle, and it's easy to think that he must have been able to do this because of what he had discovered about how to



improve and manage his own use of himself (and his hands in teaching) in an integrated way.

I think I should also add that, in retrospect, my very early interest in horses and riding may also have played some part in the success of my riding in these later years without my having had any formal riding instruction at all. I think that all my reading about riding, horse breeds, and their various capacities and temperaments had been lodged in a very deep place in my memory that was still available to be tapped into when it came to actually meeting the challenge of riding my colleague's well-trained horse. It wasn't as if I actually *thought* of what I'd read about riding years ago, but there was nevertheless a stock of understanding and a great love of horses still present within me that was just *there* to be brought up when the actual opportunity to ride presented itself again much later on. This, of course, combined well with my extensive Alexander training and teaching experience to give me more of an advantage in the situation than someone who didn't have any knowledge or great love of horses. In fact, on one occasion somewhat later at those same friends' country place there was a foreign college student visiting for the weekend, and he was offered the chance to ride the same horse that I'd had so much success riding. However, it was obvious as soon as he mounted the horse that he had no idea whatsoever how to ride or how to manage himself while astride. I don't remember the exact outcome, but I think the horse may simply have trotted straight back to the stable, and that was the end of the adventure for both rider and horse.

#### SUMMING UP

Contrasts in attitudes about touch in relationships – and even with animals – also bring to mind the subconscious conflicts many of us may harbor between what psychoanalyst John Desteian calls the “prevailing spirit” of the particular culture we live in and the “essential spirit”<sup>275</sup> that involves our most personal and deepest individual thoughts and feelings that often radically contradict or transcend what we've inherited or been taught by our family, our education, the media, and other forms of public communication. When we closely examine the power of these cultural influences it easily brings to mind again Alexander's thoughts about how subconscious imitation affects our use of ourselves in all we do and think – “a factor which plays a great part in the development and growth and also in the use of our individual psycho-physical selves”<sup>276</sup> – which of course includes how we interpret and deal with our emotional, sensual, and erotic feelings from moment to moment. We can easily forget that it's possible



for our feeling to change over time because the way we believe we'll always feel (and think) about some aspect of living, a particular person, or a certain place may not stay the same for us throughout our lives.

Alexander's challenge to examine the bulk of our beliefs about life and human nature sums up well this aspect of addressing the influence of social attitudes on our concepts of identity and intimacy:

... surely it behoves every individual to stop – and I mean this in its fullest sense – and reconsider every particle of supposed knowledge, particularly “psychological” knowledge derived from his general education, from his religious, political, moral, social, legal, and economic training, and ask himself the plain, straightforward question, “Why do I believe these things?” “By what process of reasoning did I arrive at these conclusions?”

If we are even and direct with ourselves in regard to our cherished ideas and ideals, the answer may at first prove a shock to us, to some of us, indeed, almost a knockdown blow. For the truth will be borne in upon us that much of our supposed knowledge has not been real knowledge, and too often the boasted truth a delusion. Many of us may awaken to the fact that the majority of our cherished ideas and ideals are the product, not of any process of reasoning, but of that unreasoning process called impulse, of unbalanced emotion and prejudice – that is of ideas and ideals associated with a psycho-physical condition in the development of which unreliable sensory appreciation [customary neuromuscular feeling] has played a leading part.”<sup>277</sup>

To Alexander's list of “general education, religious, political, moral, social, legal, and economic training” we can easily add the knowledge and beliefs encompassed by the terms “eros” and “identity” that I've been addressing in this chapter. Experience with the Technique has certainly caused me to examine and question a good deal of my own beliefs, ideas, and ideals in these realms that I increasingly realized were conditioned into me by my family, my education, and my country beginning in my earliest years. I think this questioning and examining was possibly made more acute because the three-year Alexander teacher training course that I attended in London was in a different country from the one I had lived in until I was twenty-five years old. Even though my ancestry is primarily Anglo-Saxon, and even though England is mainly an Anglo-Saxon country, there are still great differences between the habits and beliefs that I was conditioned to hold as an American and those held by most of

the people in Great Britain of that same ethnic background whom I came to know during my three years of training there.

Therefore, experiencing first-hand and at considerable length these differing cultural attitudes and conventions made me realize that many of the beliefs about identity and expression of affection that I'd taken for granted as "natural" or "normal" were not necessarily worldwide constants. I became more and more compelled to face the fact that there may be many different ways of looking at life's possibilities than the one's I'd learned and automatically absorbed without question while growing up in the United States. Attitudes about love, belief, relationships, marriage, friendship, competition, nationalism, race, education, intelligence, interpersonal communication, family – and many more – came dramatically under question as I began to experience how they'd subconsciously affected my use of myself as a whole in terms of how I habitually reacted in nearly all that I did and thought from moment to moment. I soon saw that these culturally conditioned attitudes and responses begged very careful examination before I could begin to trust that I'd come to any particularly truthful understanding of what life can consist of when it's not automatically lived in the ways a culture and its language<sup>278</sup> usually teach us is most natural, normal, or acceptable. It also became clear to me that most people are mainly, and subconsciously, living out their cultural conditioning and that they're automatically following what Alexander called the "herd instinct,"<sup>279</sup> or the cultural norm, in most of what they think and do, rather than discovering what it means to live a life that's truly original and free from the restrictions and beliefs they've inherited, have been taught, or that are perpetuated by the media and people in positions of power and influence.<sup>280</sup> In recent years, we've often heard this unconventional and original attitude being called "thinking outside the box" or "marching to the beat of a different drummer," and I think that Alexander would surely agree that such a change in perspective is something that experience in the Technique can bring about in us as a means for living from moment to moment in the most effective, authentic, humane, creative, compassionate, and brilliantly adventurous way – both in relation to each other and in relation to the world in general.

## Endnotes

- 1 F. Matthias Alexander *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (London, Mouritz, 1996; 1910), *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (London, Mouritz, 2004; 1923). *The Use of the Self* (London, Chaterson PDF, 1946; 1932). *The Universal Constant in Living* (London, Mouritz, 2000; 1941).
- 2 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), p. 19.
- 3 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living*, p. xxvii.
- 4 In his article "A History of Magnus in the Alexander Technique," (Mourtiz, 2019), Jean Fischer describes well Alexander's error in equating the term "primary control" with pharmacologist and physiologist Rudolf Magnus's concept of *zentralapparat* ("central control") that was based on there being a "righting reflex" in animals that happens after altering their head's relation to the rest of their structure. <https://alexandertechniquescience.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/A-history-of-Magnus-in-the-Alexander-Technique-1.pdf>
- 5 "Our only hope is to shift our viewpoint, to cease our muddled examination of the details just in front of us, and try to see our problem in the broad terms of one who can stand back and see life moving through the centuries." F. Matthias Alexander *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. 101.
- 6 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxviii.
- 7 See the Youtube film clip narrated by Walter Carrington of Alexander giving chair work to two people <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEmQHuYt404>. It's also interesting that Alexander isn't speaking to these two people at all while he's working with them. I think they both had a good deal of previous experience with the Technique, so they probably already understood enough about inhibiting and directing their use of themselves at that point that they didn't need any particular verbal instruction from him just then. Nevertheless, the film does illustrate well the use of the hands in teaching as a constant facilitation and reinforcement of a student's integrated relation to gravity.
- 8 In the early years of the founding of The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (just after Alexander's death in 1955 by a number of teachers he trained) the Society's constitution prohibited trainees from using their hands on anyone outside the training class. And even within a training class, trainees were not allowed to use their hands on each other without supervision until their third year. Additionally, after completing their training, teachers were not eligible to apply for permission to conduct a teacher training course until they'd given private lessons for at least seven years. (More recently, I believe

that this eligibility requirement to apply to train teachers has been extended to ten years of giving private lessons.)

- 9 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant of Living* (2000), p. 20.
- 10 Over the years that I've been involved with the Alexander Technique I've sampled a few different methods of manual contact such as massage therapy, chiropractic, reiki, and polarity therapy. But none of them have involved the same manual skill used in the teaching of the Alexander Technique with regard to our ongoing relation to gravity's constant pull. However, if the approach was gentle enough, I was sometimes able to "use" the contacts involved to improve my lengthening in stature that I was, of course, constantly directing anyway. This happened mainly when I received the massage therapy – especially because the masseur initially asked me how much "pressure" I would prefer on a scale from one to ten and I immediately answered, "minus two." My stating this ensured that my lengthening integration wouldn't be detracted from so that the main effect of the massage for me was simply a soothing one – rather than a "reduction of tension" by causing my musculature to collapse ("relax") from applying some degree of localized pressure.
- 11 It may also be that Alexander didn't fully appreciate how valuable it could be to have "assistance" from someone else's hands – especially because he was so intensely focused on the use of himself as a whole that the hands-on aspect of his discoveries may have seemed less significant in comparison to his own self direction from moment to moment.
- 12 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, pp. 14–16.
- 13 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxviii.
- 14 The Wikipedia entry on interoception states: "The twenty-first century has seen a tremendous increase in publications on the topic of interoception, and to a recognition of its multifaceted nature. This has led to the emergence of different ideas about interoception. One contemporary definition widens the concept to encompass 'the skin and all that is underneath the skin' and the perception and function of bodily activity to more fully understand psychosomatic processes." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interoception>
- 15 See F. M. Alexander's chapter "Use and Functioning in Relation to Reacting" in *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, pp. 32–37.
- 16 These features of the startle pattern were recorded by Frank Pierce Jones and reported in "Method for changing stereotyped response patterns by the inhibition of certain postural sets," *Psychological Review*, 1965, 72, pp. 196–214. They were also cited in his book *Freedom to Change* (2003), pp. 130–133.
- 17 This method is called Physiosynthesis, and it's based on the concept of bypassing an *activation* of our surface, more athletic musculature in order to *animate* a deeper, supportive activity in our underlying musculature and

other tissue structures. I found the interoceptive/proprioceptive experience of this method to be very similar to that achieved at the hands of an experienced Alexander teacher, even though the Physiosynthesis instructors I had lessons with only used verbal instruction to guide me through the various slow and subtle movements that facilitated this supportive activity by beginning with the toes, feet, legs, and eventually including the arms, torso, and head. But these instructors considered it only to be a “physical” method that doesn’t address the element of reaction and its effect on our relation to gravity from moment to moment. However, my colleague, Alexander teacher Pamela Hartman, has developed a synthesis of the two methods that is extremely effective – particularly because of her extensive training and experience as a professional visual artist and her refined hands-on skills as a fully trained Alexander teacher. Of course, when I had these two sessions of Physiosynthesis, I had already developed a fairly high standard of the ability to direct myself as a whole in relation to gravity, so everything I did in following the Physiosynthesis teachers’ instructions was based on my applying this level of Alexander skills in self-directing. One of the instructors acknowledged that I seemed more able than most to follow her directions effectively without extra effort (“endgaining”), and she remarked after the lesson that she finally realized that there must be something valuable to be gained from studying the Alexander Technique that she hadn’t believed was there to be learned in any other way than through the Physiosynthesis method.

- 18 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 113.

19 *Ibid.*, p 113.

- 20 See “Walking naturally after spinal cord injury using a brain–spine interface,” Henri Lorach, Andrea Galvez, Valeria Spagnolo, et al. *Nature*, May 24, 2023. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06094-5>. This research outlines a procedure for rehabilitating paralyzed patients by implanting electrodes in their brain that allow them to consciously elicit stimuli to operate externally attached electronic devices designed to support them in standing and walking. Once patients learn to use the new neuro-muscular pathways to operate the external devices, the devices can be turned off and patients are able to consciously direct their legs and feet to stand and walk in the same way that the devices facilitated. It’s also easy to think that eliciting these “alternate” neuro-cognitive/neuro-muscular pathways to control standing and walking may be similar in some way to what the hands-on work from an Alexander teacher does to help a student experience an improved overall coordination in relation to gravity’s pull while sitting, standing, walking, or doing any other activity including lying still. Furthermore, the Alexander students’ concomitant practice of projecting “messages from the brain to the mechanisms”

eventually allows students to continue on their own with the changes that have been brought about in collaboration with the teacher's hands-on guidance. It would be interesting to study these two approaches from the perspective of what is being learned by both the paralyzed patient and the habitually and subconsciously co-ordinated Alexander student.

- 21 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, pp. 15–17.
- 22 *Ibid*, p. 19.
- 23 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxviii.
- 24 Elaine N. Aron *The Highly Sensitive Person* (2001).
- 25 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 134–148.
- 26 "... our manner of use is a constant influence for good or ill upon our general functioning." F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. 9.
- 27 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 29.
- 28 I also remember thinking and feeling when I completed my three years of teacher's training that I would always be able to maintain a balanced psychophysical state no matter what tragedy might befall me – even having an atomic bomb dropped nearby. That condition lasted for a number of years until I began to suffer from a painful medical condition that considerably diminished my conditions of use that I describe in Chapter 7 about working on yourself by directing and ordering.
- 29 I think that some animals – particularly dogs and cats – are particularly perceptive of the concords and discords between people in their presence, and this greatly influences how close they may want to have direct tactile contact with the people they're around. I remember several instances when I was spending time with various friends who had a dog or cat that would let me touch or hold them while the friend and I were sitting and conversing in a harmonious way, but as soon as the subject became the least bit contentious or difficult between us, the pet would immediately get off my lap and move quickly away from me. Likewise, other friends' cat might take a whole evening before he ventured any closeness at all to me until we'd come to an easy flow of positive conversation over dinner.
- 30 F. M. Alexander *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. 101.
- 31 Alexander Murray was principal flute with the London Symphony Orchestra and later professor of flute at Michigan State University, The Hague Conservatory, and The University of Illinois. He also trained to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique several years after Joan Murray trained. Together, they conducted an Alexander teacher training course in Urbana, Illinois.

- 32 Joan Murray was a former dancer with the London Festival Ballet. She trained as a teacher of the Alexander Technique at The Constructive Teaching Centre in London.
- 33 According to all the first-generation teachers I've known – those who trained fully or partially with F. M. Alexander and his brother, A. R. Alexander – F. M. Alexander didn't give pupils table work himself, but he did ask his assistant teachers to work with his pupils lying on a table if he thought they needed it – especially before they came into his teaching room for a lesson with him. This was particularly recounted in Eva Webb's 1947 *Diary of My Lessons in the Alexander Technique*, which was published in an appendix to George C. Bowden's *F. Matthias Alexander and the Creative Advance of the Individual* (1965), pp. 159–177. Table work is also described by Louise Morgan in a section of her *Diary of Lessons with Alexander* (originally published in 1954) that appears in *More Talk of Alexander*, a compilation by Wilfred Barlow of writings on the Alexander Technique (1978), pp. 29–37. Walter Carrington also states that “[Alexander] . . . advised us to begin a lesson with the pupil standing in front of a chair. When we had secured as much direction and freedom as possible, we could lay the pupil down and work for further lengthening and widening. However, we should finally stand the pupil up again and see whether we could maintain the same improved conditions that we had secured lying down.” F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. xiii.
- 34 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946).
- 35 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxvii.
- 36 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946).
- 37 “First generation” Alexander teachers are those who trained either fully or partially with F. M. Alexander and his brother A. R. Alexander before F. M. Alexander's death in 1955.
- 38 The U.S. Army Field Band and Chorus is the U.S. Pentagon's main public relations representative. The band is governed officially from Washington, DC, but it is headquartered at Fort Meade, Maryland, just outside Washington, when it isn't performing on extended concert tours throughout the U.S. When I played in the band it included many musicians my age who had already performed professionally for a number of years, as well as more senior members who had joined the band earlier on and continued as career musicians.
- 39 Frank Pierce Jones had trained with F. M. and A.R. Alexander, and Rivka (Rika) Cohen had trained with first-generation teacher Patrick Macdonald. Both were teaching in Boston at that time.



- 40 Raymond Dart's *Skill and Poise* (1996) contains articles by Professor Dart that directly relate to the Alexander Technique as well as two articles on the subject of skill and poise. The former are "An Anatomist's Tribute to F. Matthias Alexander" (1970), "Voluntary Musculature of the Human Body: The Double-Spiral Arrangement" (1950), "The Postural Aspect of Malocclusion" (1946), and "The Attainment of Poise" (1947). The latter are "The Significance of Skill" (1934) and "Weightlessness" (1961). The volume also includes a description of "The Dart Procedures" by Alexander Murray (first developed by Dart in 1943) and presented to Dart in 1967 by Murray and his wife Joan Murray.
- 41 Many of J. Krishnamurti's talks have been published by Harper & Row; notably *Freedom from the Known*, *Education and the Significance of Life*, *The Awakening of Intelligence*, *The Urgency of Change*, and *Beyond Violence*.
- 42 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 53.
- 43 Catharine Wielopolska *Never Ask Why* (2001).
- 44 Walter Carrington was director of The Constructive Teaching Centre, London.
- 45 F. M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 19 and p. 23.
- 46 F. M. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 98–111.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 134–142.
- 48 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self*, "Evolution of a Technique," (1946), pp. 7–31.
- 49 Fernand Gillet (1882–1980) was first oboist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, 1925–1946.
- 50 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), pp. 27–28.
- 51 Vivien Mackie *Just Play Naturally* (2005).
- 52 Walter Carrington *Thinking Aloud* (2021) and *The Act of Living* (2021).
- 53 Frank Pierce Jones (1905–1975), had been an instructor in Greek and Latin at Brown University from 1937 to 1941, and between 1949 and 1972 he carried out a number of experiments on aspects of the Alexander Technique at Tufts University. He published numerous scientific articles, and his book *Freedom to Change* (1997).
- 54 F. M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. XXVII.
- 55 Particularly useful and inspiring for me to read at this time were John Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1974), *Human Nature and Conduct* (1950), *Art as Experience* (1958), as well as John Holt's *How Children Learn* (1973) and *How Children Fail* (1982).
- 56 Helen R. Jones had trained partially with the Alexander brothers while they were teaching in the U.S. during World War II.



- 57 Joe Armstrong *Effects of the Alexander Principle in Dealing with Stress in Musical Performance*, Master's Thesis (Medford, MA, Tufts University, 1975).
- 58 See my article "Oboe Master Fernand Gillet's Legacy to Flutists: His Methods for Developing Superior Technique and Expressive Control," (*The Flutist Quarterly*, Winter, 2004), Vol. 29, Issue 2.
- 59 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946). PDF, p. 28.
- 60 *Ibid*, p. 19.
- 61 *Ibid*, p. 25, "thinking in activity" is a phrase Alexander attributes to John Dewey for describing the continued process of giving directions for maintaining an improved use of the self in daily activity.
- 62 Frank Pierce Jones *Freedom to Change* (1997), pp. 130–133.
- 63 From my own experience, I've certainly found that my responses to startling and disturbing stimuli have been drastically lessened due to what I've gained from the Technique, particularly as I describe in the chapter on my teacher training experience when I found that my long-standing and strong phobic response to certain kinds of birds began to lessen dramatically. I should also add that a much earlier study of the startle pattern showed that it begins with an eye blink. (C. Landis and W.A. Hunt *The Startle Pattern* (1939), p. 27.
- 64 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004). pp. 9, 18, 28, 30, 31, 32, 37, 40, 43, 45, 46, 80, 84, 151.
- 65 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), pp. 28–29.
- 66 Video of Walter Carrington narrating a silent film clip of Alexander working with his hands: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEmQHUYt404>
- 67 F. M. Alexander *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1996), pp. xxxiv, 17, 52, 58, 61, 81, 87, 90, 118–119, 133, 168, 170, 184, 185, 187, 200, 204, 205, 207, 218.
- 68 Adapted from "Know Your Brain, *Neuroscience Made Simpler*. (Based on J. Nolte, *The Human Brain: An Introduction to its Functional Anatomy*, 6th ed. Philadelphia, Elsevier, 2009).
- 69 Y. Ivanenko and V.S. Gurfinkel *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, March 20, 2018; Vol. 12, p. 171.
- 70 It should go without saying that if we don't maintain as much freedom and spaciousness in all our joints – particularly our hip and knee joints – there can be a danger of cartilage being worn down between adjacent bone surfaces, and this can ultimately lead to a deterioration of the entire joint – as must surely happen in so many who have needed joint replacement surgery. I should add here that we learned in anatomy and physiology lectures on our teacher training course that, for instance, in our hip joints there is only a very small area in the pelvic "socket" (the acetabulum) that will initially receive contact from the "ball" of the head of the femur if there is any excessive downward pressure put on the joint. Therefore, it's very easy for this contact

to “wear down” both bone surfaces if this pressure is put on the joint in a continual way, which of course would very likely be happening if a person isn’t fully lengthening and maintaining as much spaciousness as possible in their hip joints when walking, running, going up and down stairs, etc. A similar situation surely occurs in our knee joints if there’s extra downward pressure being exerted on them during those activities. It’s also obvious that local muscular development in the legs alone is often not enough to protect these joints from wearing down – especially if a person’s main and primary concern is not for maintaining the fullest lengthening in stature in relation to gravity’s pull in all they do – particularly when walking, running, climbing, and jumping.

- 71 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), “Preface to New Edition,” (1946), p. xxvii.
- 72 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), p. 19.
- 73 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 115.
- 74 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), p. 19.
- 75 Some interpretations of the concept of working on yourself involve spending a certain period of time doing specific tasks without their usual time constraints while you maintain as your sole priority your attention to improving your manner and conditions of use of yourself as a whole. Another variation of this approach that I read about in an early student’s lesson notes was to set aside a time in which you would do various actions and tasks as if you were an actor on stage portraying a character who exemplifies at every second an improved use of the self as a whole fostered by the Alexander Technique.
- 76 See Chapter 4 where I explain the difference between conditions of use and manner of use.
- 77 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 30–34.
- 78 Barbara Brown *Supermind* (1973), p. 258–259.
- 79 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF p. 19.
- 80 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. 126.
- 81 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. 108.
- 82 In *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 112–20, Alexander uses the wording:

Order the neck to relax,  
the head forward and up to  
lengthen the spine (on p. 115).  
widening of the back (appears later on p. 120).

I never heard any of the first-generation Alexander teachers I knew use the phrase “neck to relax” for instructing a student or trainee; so I assume that he must have changed the phrase to “neck free” during the years after he

wrote *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* because all these teachers used “neck free” unanimously even though they differed in other ways in their teaching. In my experience, “relax” and “relaxation” have usually been avoided or strongly denounced as part of the teaching vocabulary because they imply “collapse” to most beginning students. The first-generation teachers I knew also pretty consistently spoke of the back “lengthening and widening” in one phrase when they taught. For the most part, the word “spine” seems to have been discarded, although I do remember teachers who had trained at one school referring to an “up-thrust along the spine.”

As I pointed out before, Frank Pierce Jones’s research on the startle pattern corroborated Alexander’s choice of the particular sequence of the directions. Electromyograph readings show that many reactions start at the level of the head and upper spine and pass down the trunk and limbs in a fraction of a second. Sometimes milder reactions happen in the neck and nowhere else. Other, more recent studies seem to indicate that some reactions may occur in a different sequence, however, many people still seem to overlook the fact that Alexander saw his work primarily as a way of dealing with reaction, rather than as a movement technique or as “bodywork.” He defines it most succinctly in *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. 88: “My technique is based on inhibition, the inhibition of undesirable, unwanted responses to stimuli, and hence it is primarily a technique for the development of the control of human reaction.”

- 83 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 26.
- 84 *Ibid.* *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 45.
- 85 See Jean Fischer’s article “A History of Magnus in the Alexander Technique,” (Mouritz, 2019) describing Alexander’s error of equating the term “primary control” with pharmacologist and physiologist Rudolf Magnus’s concept of *zentralapparat* (“central control”) that was based on there being a “righting reflex” in an animal that happens when altering the relation of its head to the rest of its structure. <https://alexandertechniquescience.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/A-history-of-Magnus-in-the-Alexander-Technique-1.pdf>
- 86 Wilfred Barlow *The Alexander Technique* (1973), p. 172.
- 87 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 88 See Chapter 3 describing my Army basic training experience where I used my Alexander skills to learn to do the “low crawl” in a way that challenges the common interpretation of Alexander’s direction for our head as if it only functions effectively in relation to our whole coordination when we are operating in an upright orientation to gravity.

- 89 Patrick Macdonald "On Giving Directions, Doing and Non-doing," in C. Bowden's *F Matthias Alexander and the Creative Advance of the Individual* (1965), p. 182.
- 90 Catharine Wielopolska *Never Ask Why* (2001), p. 131.
- 91 F. M. Alexander *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. 126.
- 92 Barbara Brown *Supermind* (1973), pp. 263–264.
- 93 Personal letter from Walter Carrington to Joe Armstrong, August 14, 1981.
- 94 Walter Carrington "The Knees Going Forward and Away." A lecture transcribed by Christina Benn Wilton, 1972.
- 95 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxvii.
- 96 After fifty-some years of working with the principles of the Technique, I've come to think that the ability to work on oneself should be considered as being quite distinct from what one can receive from the collaboration with a trained person's hands. I think it's even possible for someone to gain an ability to work on oneself that can be refined in its own right on a tangent that can extend in subtlety far beyond what is created within the hands-on collaboration between two people – even if the hands-on collaborative work brings about extraordinary improvements within its own parameters. I've also come to believe that these two activities need to be viewed as two *different* sources for maintaining and improving our standard of use, even though they're so closely related.
- 97 There have been numerous ways of explaining the forward and up direction of the head, but one of them seems to persist that describes the head as being fully poised *on top of* an erect vertebral column, and then *falling* slightly forward *off the top of the spine* in order to elicit a lengthening of the back [italics mine, JA]. I've written elsewhere that employing this concept may indeed produce an effect, but since it obviously can't occur when we're not in an upright position in relation to the gravitational vertical, it doesn't seem to exemplify Alexander's concept of our direction of our manner of use of ourselves being a "universal constant in living."
- 98 If it's understood and experienced fully enough, I believe that the psychophysical unity that the Alexander Technique engenders ultimately brings us to the point where we can no longer consider that we have a "mind, body, and spirit," but that we are essentially whole *beings* who engage in various *processes* (often simultaneously): thinking, imagining, moving, being still, feeling, etc. Alexander himself says, in the first paragraph of *The Use of the Self*: "... in my search for a means whereby faulty conditions of use in the human organism could be improved, I must admit that when I began my investigation, I, in common with most people, conceived of 'body' and 'mind' as separate parts of the same organism, and consequently believed that human ills, difficul-

- ties and shortcomings could be classified as either ‘mental’ or ‘physical’ and dealt with on specifically ‘mental’ or specifically ‘physical’ lines. My practical experiences, however, led me to abandon this point of view and readers of my books will be aware that the technique described in them is based on the opposite conception, namely, that it’s *impossible* to separate ‘mental’ and ‘physical’ processes in any form of human activity.” (1946, PDF, p. 7)
- 99 Claudio Naranjo, Robert Ornstein *On the Psychology of Meditation* (1971), pp. 5, 7, 8, 150, 151.
- 100 Wilfred Barlow “Ordering,” *More Talk of Alexander* (1978), pp. 164–165.
- 101 See Chapter 8, “Inhibiting: ‘One’s Moment of Complete Freedom.’”
- 102 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), pp. 107–109.
- 103 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 134–148.
- 104 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), pp. 106–109.
- 105 *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.
- 106 Physiosynthesis is a method developed by osteopath Dr Amy Cochran. It involves using extremely slow, gentle, and slight movements to “animate” the deeper layers of musculature around our joints rather than “activating” the more surface layers of musculature involved in making effortful movements that require more athletic degrees of strength. This approach begins with subtle movements of the toes and feet, and then it eventually adds more involved movements that facilitate the overall supportive function of our entire musculature. A skilled Physiosynthesis teacher is able to perceive when a student needs to pause and refrain from attempting to go too far with a particular movement in a way that would jeopardize the deeper integrative action that’s the goal of the whole method. Some have likened the effect of a Physiosynthesis lesson to the effect of an Alexander lesson at the hands of skilled teacher. Some have also found that applying the inhibiting and directing abilities that they’ve learned through Alexander work to doing the Physiosynthesis movements offers them a unique and refined way to carry over Alexander skills into improving the quality of their movement and balance.
- 107 Howard Gardner *Multiple Intelligences* (2006), pp. 6–18.
- 108 *Chambers’s Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language* (1903), p. 64.
- 109 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 164–166.
- 110 See Jean Fischer’s compendium of Alexander’s use of the term “primary control” at <http://www.mouritz.co.uk/23keyconcepts.html> (Library: key Concepts: Primary Control).
- 111 John Dewey, “Introduction” to Alexander’s *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 7.

- 112 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. 85.
- 113 *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 114 The phrase is taken from the book-length interview I did with senior Alexander teacher Kitty (Catharine Merrick) Wielopolska: *Never Ask Why* (2001), p. 141.
- 115 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 98–111.
- 116 *Ibid.* pp. 134–148.
- 117 Charles Sherrington *The Brain and its Mechanism* (1933).
- 118 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. 85.
- 119 Chandra Otterson “What is Inhibitory Control?” (Foothills Academy, May 10, 2022). <https://www.foothillsacademy.org/community/articles/inhibitory-control-adhd>
- 120 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 85–88.
- 121 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), pp. 180–181.
- 122 *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.
- 123 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF p. 28.
- 124 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), pp. 107–109.
- 125 “It is therefore of primary importance that the teacher should recognize and endeavor to awaken his pupil to the fact of his (the pupil’s) unreliable sensory appreciation, and that during the processes involved in the performance of the pupil’s practical work he should cultivate and develop in him the new and reliable sensory appreciation upon which a satisfactory standard of co-ordination depends.” F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 99.
- 126 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), pp. 28–31.
- 127 *Ibid.* p. 28.
- 128 Eugen Herrigel *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1953).
- 129 Frank Pierce Jones “Method for changing stereotyped response patterns by the inhibition of certain postural sets,” (*Psychological Review*, 1965, 72), pp. 196–214.
- 130 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxviii.
- 131 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), pp. 147–153.
- 132 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 134–138.
- 133 F. M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxviii.
- 134 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. 101.
- 135 Piero Ferrucci *What We May Be* (1982).
- 136 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 97.

- 137 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–166.
- 138 Luca Bonini, Cristina Rotunno, Eduardo Aruri, and Vittorio Gallese “Mirror Neurons Thirty Years Later: Implications and Applications,” (*Trends in Cognitive Science*, Cell Press pdf, 2022), Month 2022, Vol. XX, No. XX.
- 139 Carl Rogers *On Becoming a Person* (1961), pp. 342–345.
- 140 John Hunter “The 2002 Annual Memorial Lecture of the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique,” *The Alexander Journal* (Spring 2003), No. 14, p. 7.
- 141 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), p. 28.
- 142 *Ibid.* pp. 11–12.
- 143 *Ibid.* pp. 28–29.
- 144 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), pp. 38–40.
- 145 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxviii.
- 146 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. 113.
- 147 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 148 Claire Nee “Inside the Mind of a Criminal” (New York, *The New York Times*, May 31, 2015, “Sunday Review”), p. 10.
- 149 Catharine Wielopolska *Never Ask Why* (2001), pp. 143–144.
- 150 Gilbert Murray *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (1911), pp. 48–49.
- 151 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), p. xxvii.
- 152 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, “Respiratory Mechanisms” (2004), p. 126.
- 153 For Alexander’s description of these terms, see his chapter “Physiology and Physiologists” in *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), pp. 108–112.
- 154 In one of several lessons I had with Walter Carrington when he came to teach in the U.S. several years before I joined his teacher-training course, he spoke enthusiastically of how he had read that Native Americans believed nose breathing was very important for good health – especially because it warms and moistens the air that we inhale while it also helps to filter out dust and other matter at the same time.
- 155 This psychophysical disposition was referred to as “leaving yourself alone” during my training.
- 156 See Chapter 4 for a description of these aspects of learning the Technique.
- 157 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 130.
- 158 F. M. Alexander *Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxvii. Often, the hands-on work from the teacher in an Alexander lesson can facilitate releases in a student’s breathing mechanisms without even specifically addressing the act of breathing. This greater respiratory freedom can also bring with it a release from any topics of thinking or emotional elements a student may be caught up in at the time.



159 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 7.

160 This practice sequence of allowing time for air to return through the nose was recommended to me by flutist Alexander Murray.

161 For further practice suggestions on this basis see my article “Oboe Master Fernand Gillet’s Remarkable Contributions to Woodwind Playing,” *The Flutist Quarterly* (Santa Clarita, The National Flute Association, Winter 2004), pp. 28–33.

162 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 28.

163 Lulie Westfeldt *F Matthias Alexander* (1998), p. 148.

164 This subconscious gesturing – particularly with the head – is certainly noticeable in people from other cultures too. It can even be found among some people claiming to teach the Alexander Technique and can be seen in videos of teachers presenting aspects of the Technique. However, in my own study and training in the Technique, maintaining one’s head direction and general awareness while speaking was certainly considered to be a crucial factor in developing the improved standard use of the self from moment-to-moment in all of life and particularly as a fundamental requisite for teaching the Technique to others. Of course, it doesn’t mean that we should “hold our head still” or that we should never allow ourselves to gesture while communicating; it’s just that if we’re engaging in a habitual, subconscious, and automatic gesturing, it usually constitutes an interference with the best working of our overall use of ourselves as a whole. Good use while speaking simply means that we maintain *all* of our primary directions as a constant intention and that we merely leave out the habitual head gesturing – or *any* habitual movements or tensings, for that matter – and substitute for them consciously *allowed* ones if they’re needed in a particular situation.

165 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 12, et seq.

166 *Ibid.* p. 26.

167 Jonathan Kalb “Give Me a Smile: Trying to Laugh When Your Face Won’t Move” *The New Yorker* (New York: January 12, 2015), pp. 34–37.

168 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 120.

169 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

170 Some believe that there’s a natural vibrato that develops in an adult’s singing voice that can’t be stopped, but I think this may not necessarily be the case. If this were so, many popular singers, for instance, wouldn’t be able to begin a long note without vibrato and then bring it in toward the end of the note as you often hear them doing. So I think that what some people believe is a “natural vibrato” may, in fact, be a *habitual* one that’s been adopted subconsciously – just as people develop other subconscious habits in response to various stimuli. For instance, if you ask most people who haven’t had Alexan-



der instruction to stop pulling back their heads in relation to certain stimuli, they would most likely also say that they know no way to stop doing so (other than holding their head still by tightening in the muscles that govern their head's movements and position) even if they're able to perceive that they're pulling their head back when it's pointed out to them. Along with the subject of "automatic" vocal vibratos, in my own explorations and examinations of various types of flute vibrato, I've also found that many flutists produce a habitual, constant vibrato too, even though they probably didn't produce one when they first began to play the flute. Those types of automatic vibratos can also be revised for expressive purposes if they're studied closely along the lines I've recommended in my article "Carl Petkoff and His Technique for Creating a Subtle and Expressive Flute Vibrato," *The Flutist Quarterly* (Santa Clarita, The National Flute Association, Spring 2002), pp. 56–63.

- 171 It's hard for me not to conceive of our "core" as being located along an imaginary line that passes down through the center-most region of our torso – much in the same way that we would see the actual core of a vertical slice of an apple or pear running from its stem at its top down through the middle of the fruit to the most central point at its bottom. But it seems that others use the word "core" to signify a region that's located more toward the *front* (and lower) surface of our torso. When I search Google for a definition of (a person's) "core" it gives: "The core is the part of the human body located between the pelvic floor and diaphragm, and its main job is to hold and protect your spine. Your abdominal muscles are part of your core, but just one piece of the puzzle." I also think this lower abdominal and pelvic floor area may be the region that's sometimes called the "hara" in Japanese medical tradition where "hara refers to the area defined vertically by the lower edge of the sternum and the upper edge of the pubis and laterally by the lower border of the ribcage and the anterior iliac crests respectively."
- 172 Professional models show an extreme example of this tendency to shift their weight forward and down onto each hip and leg (especially when wearing high heels) as they're striding down a runway in a fashion show, and this also can contribute to an exaggerated forward curvature of the lower spine.
- 173 The basic walking approach that I've described here is one that I've based on a lesson in running given by Paul Collins, a Canadian classmate on the teacher training course I attended. Along with being an accomplished professional violinist he had also been a marathon runner who placed sixth in the British Empire (Commonwealth) Games. His Alexanderized approach to running generally involved experiencing a smooth transfer of our balance from the one heel to the other, then a gradual acceleration of lifting each foot off the ground numerous times while remaining in one place before advancing.

ing forward through space on that same basis, rather than abruptly “launching out” into a typical running mode that involved some degree of “leaning forward” (and usually somewhat downward) in the direction we would be going.

174 *Pablo Casals – Musician of the Century* (Columbia Records, M5 30069).

175 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF, p. 24.

176 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–31.

177 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 13–19, 167, 168, 170, 175, 207, 212, 218.

178 See my description in Chapter 1.

179 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 134–142.

180 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), p. xxxvii.

181 *Ibid.*

182 *Salon*, “Train and Socialize,” Chauncey Devega interview with Marcel Danesi, July 18, 2023.

183 F. M. Alexander *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (1996), pp. 39–40.

184 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004) pp. 112–122.

185 *Ibid.* In Alexander’s description of the process, he has the student work mainly from a seated position on a second chair placed behind the back of the chair that he has them put their hands on. This arrangement, of course, is less demanding because it doesn’t involve the flexed use of the legs required in standing. I think his description was mainly intended for the ordinary student rather than for the more full-fledged trainee. In the training course I attended, we mainly used the procedure while standing in the position of mechanical advantage (“monkey”) behind a chair. However, I believe that other training approaches have also used the seated version, which of course requires the elbows (i.e. forearms and upper arms) to be raised higher relative to the torso in order to place the fingers and thumbs opposing each other on the back rail of the chair while maintaining the backs of the hands parallel to the floor.

186 It should be clear here that we’re essentially attempting to stay as far away as possible from any contact that promotes an effortful grasp even though, in some instances, power may be used that comes from a balanced use of our entire musculature as a whole.

187 Eventually, if we wanted to, it should even be possible for us to lift the chair (or board) from this contact of our fingers and thumbs on its back by drawing upon our total power of lengthening in ourselves as a whole so that no single part of us is doing the lifting in isolation – as would ordinarily happen in most

forms of strength training that focus on developing specific muscular areas. Often, in private lessons, I demonstrate to students this way of lifting a chair after I've guided them through the process of setting up the dynamic relation of their hands and arms in relation to the back of a chair or a board. In order to demonstrate this lifting to them, I ask them to stand behind me and place their fingertips gently at the sides of my ribcage at about the height of my elbows so that they can feel the widening happening in my back that provides the lifting power that's coming from my back as part of my whole stature lengthening up from the contact of my feet on the floor instead of coming primarily from my local arm musculature. Students are usually surprised to see – and feel – how this equalized lifting can happen – especially if the chair is fairly heavy.

- 188 From John Dewey's "Introduction" to Alexander's *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF p. 6.
- 189 An earlier version of this section was published in *STATNews* several years ago.
- 190 In fact, you often hear the expressions among teachers and during teacher training: "*taking* a student's head, or leg, or shoulder, or *taking* a student out of the chair, or *taking* a student on the table."
- 191 Olga Averino (1895–1989) emigrated from Russia to the United States in the wake of the Russian Civil War. She was prominent in the musical life of Boston for over 60 years, first as a singer and later as a distinguished voice teacher.
- 192 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 134–138.
- 193 Joe Armstrong "Effects of the Alexander Principle in Dealing with Stress in Musical Performance" (Medford, MA, Tufts University, May, 1975).
- 194 *Ibid.*, Appendix C, pp. 67–69.
- 195 *Ibid.*, Vivien Couling [Mackie] letter, Appendix A. p. 55.
- 196 Thomas Moore *Original Self* (2001), p. 13.
- 197 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 134–136.
- 198 "After recording 119 CDs, a hidden jewel comes to light." (Boston, *Boston Sunday Globe*, August, 21, 2005). [Note: After Joyce Hatto's death, her husband was exposed as having super-imposed recordings of other famous players to be distributed under her name; however, I'm not sure that his deception necessarily invalidates what she says about the performer's role in this interview. JA.]
- 199 Claudia Walker (*Flute Talk*, November, 2001), Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 27–28.

- 200 André Pirro *The Aesthetic of Johann Sebastian Bach*, trans. J. Armstrong (2018).
- 201 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 202 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 203 Jennifer Homans “Steps, Steps, Steps” (*The New Republic*, February 18, 2002).
- 204 *Ibid.*
- 205 Vivien Mackie, Joe Armstrong *Just Play Naturally* (2002).
- 206 “The Art of the Violin” (Public Broadcasting System, December 13, 2019).
- 207 Frank R. Wilson *The Hand* (1998), p. 214.
- 208 José ma Corredor *Conversations with Casals* (1956), pp. 206-7.
- 209 Susanne K. Langer “Artistic Perception and Natural Light” *Problems of Art* (1957), pp. 71-72.
- 210 *Ibid.* pp. 72-73.
- 211 Ernst Cassirer *Die Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (3 Vols., 1923, 1924, 1929).
- 212 Susanne, K. Langer *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942).
- 213 Susanne K. Langer *Feeling and Form* (1953).
- 214 Susanne K. Langer *Problems of Art* (1957).
- 215 I was told by Harvard University Press that Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* has outsold all other titles, and her enormous final work, the three-volume study *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling* (1967-82), reveals how our symbol-making and symbol-perceiving capacities are what distinguish us most from all other species and can become a basis for reorienting psychology, sociology, anthropology, and the other sciences away from more mechanistic and animal-oriented models for understanding human behavior and feeling.
- 216 Susanne K. Langer *Problems of Art* (1957), p. 68.
- 217 Camille Paglia *Sexual Personae* (1990).
- 218 Joan Acocella “A Ballerina’s Second Act,” (*The New Yorker*, January 6, 2003), pp. 50-51.
- 219 Susanne K. Langer *Problems of Art* (1957), pp. 59-60.
- 220 *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.
- 221 Corredor *Conversations with Casals*, pp. 194-195.
- 222 Interview of Barbara Cook by Mike Wallace (“60 Minutes,” December 2, 2001. Vol. XXXIV, No. 12, Burrelle’s Transcripts, Livingston, NJ.)
- 223 Susanne K. Langer *Feeling and Form*, “The Image of Time,” Chapter 7, pp. 109-110.
- 224 Susanne K. Langer *Problems of Art* (1957), p. 60.
- 225 As I mentioned in Chapter 7 where I describe working on yourself by directing and ordering, Howard Gardner has also formulated a theory of there

- being at least seven intelligences that may vary in degree from person to person: musical, bodily-kinesthetic, logical-mathematical, spatial, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Howard Gardner *Multiple Intelligences* (2006), pp. 8–18.
- 226 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), p. 26.
- 227 Most of the Alexander teachers I have known refer in conversation with each other to “the Technique” rather than to “the Alexander Technique.” I’ve seen it reported that Alexander himself referred to it simply as “the Work,” but you couldn’t expect him to refer to it as “the Alexander Technique” since it was his own discovery and development. My friend Kitty Wieloposka preferred to refer to it more formally as “the Alexander work” because she felt that “technique” is a sterile word. But referring to the Alexander Technique as “the Work” feels presumptuous to me because it seems it should only be a phrase that Alexander himself (and perhaps his brother A.R. who also taught it) should have been entitled to use. So I tend to go along with the majority of teachers I know, and I continue to refer to it as “the Technique” when I’m in conversation with them and others who’ve studied it seriously for a considerable length of time.
- 228 Susanne K. Langer *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), p. 281.
- 229 I suppose my experience of taking conducting courses during high school and college had something to do with how I was using my arms and hands to indicate that these players should wait “immediately” – instead of just getting them to wait in a blank sort of way without any sense of the music’s feeling before it actually sounded. It’s hard to imagine what I might have done with my hands and arms if I hadn’t had that earlier conducting training experience, even though I never pursued it into any actual conducting work later on. It also helped, I’m sure, to have played under some very fine conductors who were wonderful at bringing out the fullest expressiveness of whatever you played under their direction – in contrast to having the experience of some not so good conductors who more or less failed at the task even though they may have been competent at maintaining a beat, giving cues for entrances, signaling dynamic changes, etc. I guess the issue could also be described as the difference between simply “indicating” with your hands and arms or actually “asking” something from the players with your hands and arms as part of your whole self being filled with the music’s essence.
- 230 Although the bulk of my Alexander teaching practice has been made up of professional musicians, I’ve never expected any of them to want me to work with them directly on their playing or singing. However, if they had come for lessons because of some specific difficulty that was interfering with their playing – sometimes even causing them to have to stop playing entirely – then, of course, I would usually offer to do all I could to help them work out an

approach to their instrument or voice that would include the utmost scrutiny of their use of themselves starting with their primary relation to gravity and building up gradually from there to “full out” playing or singing.

231 Vivien Mackie, Joe Armstrong, *Just Play Naturally* (2002), p. 151.

232 This basic bowing is an approach I derived from having cello lessons with Vivien Mackie when we were both training to become Alexander teachers.

233 Vivien Mackie often used a large cushion placed on the floor just ahead and off to the right of a cellist’s feet so that the cellist can more fully open out the insides of the joints of the right arm at the wrist, elbow, and shoulder while resting the tip of the bow on the cushion with their palm facing forward and somewhat upward. Resting the bow on the cushion in this way also allows the cellist to project a lengthening energy from the head, spine, torso, and legs through the arm, hand and fingers right out to the tip of the bow because the contact of the very tip of the bow with the cushion gives a more definite feeling of the full length of the bow than if the player is holding the bow without any “external” support or “grounding.” (A similar arrangement for resting the tip of the bow on a cushion can be set up for the other members the string family too. And there’s a parallel to be found for wind players and other instrumentalists as well, where the players find just the right height or angle of solid surface to rest their instrument on before bringing it up to play – for example, a fairly tall stool with books stacked on top to a height that doesn’t require players to reach down with hands and arms in a way that draws their head, shoulders, and trunk down with them. Likewise, pianists may do well to acknowledge that the piano is resting on the floor, and it can be useful to merely stand in front of the piano and place their hands on the lid when it’s still closed to establish a relationship to the whole instrument that’s not immediately occupied with touching the keys. Then, when eventually getting to the point of establishing a “grounded” relationship to the keys, it’s useful to let the fingers and thumbs make a contact all the way down to the key bed so that the fingers, hands, and arms may lengthen away from that contact rather than merely lightly resting on the key tops, which is more conducive to holding the hands and arms “in the air” by mainly using their arm and hand musculature more in isolation from their head-torso-limb relationship as it responds to gravity’s pull.)

234 With upper string players the “groundedness” of the strings can be traced from the contact of the instrument at your chin/jaw and on your shoulder and collar bone (through a shoulder rest, if you use one), and then on through your torso down to your sitting bones on your chair if you’re seated, or to your feet on the floor if you’re standing.

- 235 In *Just Play Naturally* (2002, pp. 22–23), Vivien Mackie vividly illustrates Casals's approach to abandoning the common assumption that left hand position needs to be a formation of hand and fingers that is for the most part kept at a right angle to the strings.
- 236 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 114.
- 237 Casals, according to Vivien Mackie, was one of the rare people who retain beyond childhood a near-perfect "use of the self," and I think this aspect is reflected in his saying, "Only this impulse, coming from the centre of the body instead of each extremity, will group the different movements in a unified whole, producing better results and less fatigue. This impulse, coming from what I call the centre of the body, is rather like an image of what I feel at the time, not an easy thing to identify or to name." *Conversations With Casals* (New York Dutton, 1956), p. 200.
- 238 Otto Friedrich *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* (1994), pp. 244–247.
- 239 Lulie Westfeldt *F. Matthias Alexander* (1998), pp. 78–83.
- 240 Frank Pierce Jones (1905–1975) was professor of Classics and instructor in Latin and Greek at Brown University from 1933 to 1941. He trained as an Alexander teacher with F.M. Alexander and A.R. Alexander from 1941 to 1944 and conducted research on the Alexander Technique in the Psychology Department of Tufts University from 1949 to 1972. He also taught courses at Tufts in kinesthetic perception.
- 241 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), p. 5.
- 242 Susanne K. Langer *Mind: An Essay in Human Feeling* (1967), Vol 1, pp. 36–37.
- 243 Joe Armstrong "Effects of the Alexander Principle in Dealing with Stress in Musical Performance" (Medford, Tufts University, 1975).
- 244 The startle pattern had been examined earlier by C. Landis and W. Hunt and their findings were described in *The Startle Pattern* (1939). Later, Frank Pierce Jones, John Hanson, and Florence Gray's studies of it were published in "Startle as a Paradigm for Malposture, (*Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 1964), vol. 19, pp. 21–22. The pattern was also described in detail by Jones in "Method for Changing Stereotyped Response Patterns by the Inhibition of Certain Postural Sets," (*Psychological Review*, 1965), vol. 72, pp. 96–214. Features of that study are also reported in detail by Jones in his book *Freedom to Change* (1997), pp. 131–133.
- 245 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living*, "Preface to New Edition, 1946" (2000), p. xxvii.
- 246 *Ibid.* pp. 103–119.
- 247 *Ibid.* pp. 107–111.
- 248 *Ibid.* p. 108.



- 249 Tristan D. Roberts *Understanding Balance* (1995), p. 14. “Instead of speaking of ‘zero gravity,’ it would be preferable to use the expression ‘zero-g,’ since it is the g-forces that are diminished in orbit, not the gravitational forces. . . . It may be that this confusion has arisen from thinking of force and acceleration in terms of cause and effect. It is preferable to regard these expressions as equivalent alternative ways of measuring a single type of event, namely a change in motion. . . . In an orbiting spacecraft there are no convenient reference points from which to measure the common acceleration of all the parts. It is a false conclusion to suppose that the absence of indications from accelerometers in the spacecraft may be taken as evidence that no gravitational force is acting. Indeed, without it there would be no orbital motion.” Roberts (1917–2009) was Senior Lecturer in the Institute of Physiology at the University of Glasgow from 1955–1977. Along with *Understanding Balance* and various articles he also wrote *Neurophysiology of the Postural Mechanisms*. (London, Butterworths, 1967). In his later years he also began having Alexander lessons in London with first-generation Alexander teacher Walter Carrington.
- 250 *Ibid.* pp. 95–96.
- 251 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living* (2000), pp. 7–8.
- 252 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 114.
- 253 Joe Armstrong “Alexander Hypotheses” (United States, *NASTAT News*, 1998) 42:20; (London, *Stat News*, 1998).
- 254 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 51.
- 255 Matthias Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF p. 7.
- 256 F. M. Alexander *The Universal Constant in Living*, “Preface to New Edition,” 1946 (2000), p. xxviii.
- 257 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 51.
- 258 Plato *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield (1994), pp. 3–72.
- 259 Allan Bloom *Love and Friendship*, “The Ladder of Love,” (1993), pp. 429–546.
- 260 I’ve never had the opportunity to give hands-on work to someone who identifies as transgender, so I can’t speak to how their male or female characteristics would manifest themselves in skin-tone and muscle-texture upon touching them. However, I can see that it may be an entirely different matter when touching those who are born with ambiguous genitalia as discussed by Rebecca Jordan-Young in *Brainstorm: The Flaws in the Science of Sex Differences* (2020).
- 261 See the description of “Manner and Conditions of Use” in Chapter 4.
- 262 *Ibid.*



- 263 Such muscular constrictions were called “character armoring” by psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich who claimed that “psychic and somatic rigidity . . . are not analogous manifestations; they are functionally identical.” Wilhelm Reich *Character Analysis* (1945), p. 346.
- 264 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), pp. 164–166.
- 265 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 266 I recall seeing a film many years ago of an experiment in which a number of women of child-bearing age were being observed one at a time interacting alone with a single infant they’d never seen before who was only a few months old. The male infants in each film sequence were dressed in pink pajamas and the female infants were dressed in blue, and each woman clearly exhibited quite different modes of behavior according to the color of the pajamas worn by the infant they were interacting with and according to their conventional concepts of “masculine” and “feminine.” From this clear example, it’s easy to see how these cultural conceptions (and their concomitant expectations) get imposed on us from the earliest age – and maybe even from before we’re born, now that the sex of a child can be identified through ultra-sound technology.
- 267 The study of mirror neurons has revealed “the motor system’s capacity to ‘reflect’ observed actions of others by recruiting the same neuronal substrates involved in action planning and execution. Its apparent simplicity and distribution across brain areas, functional domains, and animal species led researchers to view the mirror mechanism as a basic principle of brain function.” Luca Bonini, Cristina Rotunno, Eduardo Aruri, Vittorio Gallese “Mirror Neurons Thirty Years Later: Implications and Applications,” (*Trends in Cognitive Science*, Cell Press PDF, 2022), Vol. XX, No. XX.
- 268 Susan Perry “Mirror Neurons,” (brainfacts.org, November 16, 2008), p. 6.
- 269 F. M. Alexander *The Use of the Self* (1946), PDF p. 19.
- 270 Lea Winerman “The Mind’s Mirror,” (American Psychological Association, October, 2005), Vol. 36, No. 9, pp. 15.
- 271 The “Acting and Mirror Neurons” discussion participants were Francis Levy, Edward Nersessian, Blair Brown, Vittorio Gallese, Joe Grifasi, Robert Landy, Adam Ludwig. and Tom Vasiliades at the Philoctetes Center, New York, April 25, 2007.
- 272 Sociomedical scientist Rebecca Jordan-Young and cultural anthropologist Katrina Karzakis bring together a good deal of information and research to challenge the concept that the hormone testosterone represents the biological

- basis of “masculinity” or “manliness,” and they point out the need for more detailed study of the subject in *Testosterone: An Unauthorized Biography* (2019).
- 273 Professor of gender and sexuality studies Jane Ward comments: “Eugenicist campaigns for white marital harmony profoundly shaped American heterosexuality through the twentieth century and into the present. Romantic marriage – and the forging of bonds between white men and women – was offered to white couples as a white-supremacist strategy during the early Jim Crow era and later offered to African Americans as a central pathway to membership in American ‘normality’.” In Jane Ward *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (2020), p. 38.
- 274 See Chapter 4 where I describe the difference between conditions and manner of use. The tendency for some people to produce high levels of cortisol under these stressful conditions may also come into play here as I noted in the introduction where I suggested the possibility that skill in inhibiting and directing an improved use of ourselves in relation to gravity may improve our ability to contend with these experiences.
- 275 John Desteian *Coming Together – Coming Apart* (1989), pp. 34–38.
- 276 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 164.
- 277 *Ibid.* p. 53.
- 278 I’ve often cited the fact that the Wintu tribe of Northern California has a distinctly different concept of a human being that’s also reflected in their language. The following quote expresses that difference well: “When Dorothy Lee asked a Wintu the word for ‘body’ she was given a term meaning *the whole person*. The Wintu does not say *my head aches*; he says *I head ache*.” Jamake Highwater *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America* (1981), p. 73.
- 279 F. M. Alexander *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (2004), p. 184. Alexander cites numerous examples of the herd instinct, but the culminating one in this, his second book written just a century ago, bears an uncanny relevance to the present time, particularly in the United States: “. . . in the sphere of politics, what can be more stupid than the ordinary party attitude, leading, as it does, to undesirable individual manifestations of deception, prejudice, egotism, and ‘emotional gusts’? It is an unreasonable and dishonest course to withhold support from or denounce measures which one believes to be right and of value to humanity, simply because they chance to be advanced by the political party to which one does not belong. Under the present plan politics and deception are interdependent. The individual seeking re-election will resort to forms of deception to which he would not stoop in other walks of life, particularly in the matter of making promises which he has not the least hope of fulfilling and which his electors, if they used their reasoning powers,

would often know he cannot fulfill. *They are still at a stage of evolution where reasoning is dominated by the herd instinct*, [emphasis added] and so they are carried away by his oratory or personality or both.”

- 280 Marcel Danesi, professor of linguistic anthropology and semiotics, whom I cited earlier (note 182), says that “The first step in manipulating minds is tapping into an emotional state, such as fear or uncertainty. As cognitive science has been showing, the brain is designed to respond to fear in various ways, with its own in-built defense mechanisms which produce chemicals in the response pattern, such as cortisol and adrenaline. These chemical responses are also activated by forms of language that instill fear, either directly (as in a vocal threat) or, more insidiously, by twisted facts which allay fears through lies and deceptive statements. Research shows that this language taps into and ‘switches on’ existing circuits in the brain that link together important and salient images and ideas. Metaphors in particular bypass higher cognitive reasoning centers to make linkages that may not have a basis in reality. And when this happens, a person is less likely to notice the lie, because it ‘feels’ right.” From “Train and socialize”: *Salon* online interview with Chauncey DeVega, July 18, 2023. It would also seem, from an Alexander point of view, that the condition of a person’s use of themselves as a whole would play a part in how well someone could “see through” any falsehoods that were presented to them that contradict known facts. Or, at the very least, an improved use of the self would also involve inhibiting – or waiting to see what the truth may be of a situation or experience – before making one’s decision about accepting new “information” on any subject. Alexander’s exhortations to ask ourselves “Why do I believe these things?” and “By what process of reasoning did I arrive at these conclusions?” may take on even greater significance in light of Danesi’s and other experts’ investigations of how we may become influenced to believe mistaken information on a less conscious level than we would normally do when we’re presented with clearly expressed facts that have been shown to be accurate.

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