

Working on Yourself

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EDITORIAL NOTE

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ABSTRACT

There is value and even necessity in students of the Alexander Technique working on themselves. Various terms are used to describe such work, and Alexander Technique teachers understand the work in different ways. Some consider the work the application of Alexander's principles and concepts at any moment in life. Others take time out of their day to improve their use. This article discusses these variations. Other topics include the purpose and benefit of working; characteristics of students that predispose them to easily working on themselves; the optimal time to begin self-work during a course of hands-on instruction; examples of ways people work on themselves; and responsibilities of teachers and training directors to instil a value of working on the self in students and trainees.

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INTRODUCTION

But the real importance and value of the technique is that we learn to work on ourselves.¹

During the early days of the 2020 COVID lockdown, I wanted to offer my students suggestions for working on themselves in lieu of our regular in-person lessons. In my typical, orderly fashion, I thought I should first explain what I meant by *working on yourself*. I work myself by taking time out of my day – or I use waiting/passive time on train platforms, in checkout lines, or as a passenger in a car, train, or plane – to compose myself, think my directions, explore movement, lie down when possible, and more, all to maintain or improve my use. I choose activities largely based on how I learned to work on myself during my training years. Also, I had read Joe Armstrong's booklet on directing and ordering² when I was a new teacher. I believed without question that anyone studying to become a teacher needed to work on themselves, and that they should continue to work past certification. When I began teaching in 2003, I also hoped my students would work on themselves and experimented with various ways of instilling the importance of it. I have wanted them to understand that their growth was in their hands, not mine (pun

intended). As I began to plan what to write to my students during COVID, I looked for material that would corroborate my beliefs.

What I discovered was that only some teachers understand work on the self as I do. Teachers also differ in their opinions about whether and when to introduce working on the self to students. If they do teach their students to work independently, they also vary in what specific activities of thought and movement they suggest. I found no published evidence indicating that any teacher of the Technique believes that students should *not* work on themselves. However, many who write on this subject imply that some teachers understand their role as being the sole provider of experience and learning, and that students of those teachers will improve their conditions without needing to do any independent work on themselves.

I assume that there is value and even necessity in students working on themselves. But I accept that teachers vary in their understanding of what this work entails. In this article, I explore the following questions:

- How is working on the self understood in the Alexander community?

¹ Marjory Barlow, 'The Teaching of F. Matthias Alexander', in *More Talk of Alexander*, ed. by Wilfred Barlow (London: Mouritz, 2005), p. 12.

² Joe Armstrong, *Directing and Ordering: A Discussion of Working on Yourself; Working on Breathing and Vocal Production* (London: STAT Books, 1994).

- What did F. M. Alexander say (or others report he said) about working on the self?
- What did students³ of Alexander, who did not become teachers, say about working on the self?
- Why engage in working on the self?
- What experience or character traits might predispose students to working on themselves?
- When are students ready to work on themselves?
- What are key ways people work on themselves?
- What are the private teacher's and training director's⁴ responsibilities in encouraging working on the self?

I reference Alexander literature to summarise my findings and reflections on these questions.⁵ I have not traced in detail the origins of the many terms – ‘working on yourself’, ‘work on the self’, ‘self-work’, ‘working on myself’, ‘practice’, ‘exploration’, ‘investigation’ – within our profession. Some of these might have grown out of Alexander calling what he did his ‘Work’, which he and his brother A. R. did even before Alexander sailed for England in 1904.⁶ And Alexander was not the first or only person to refer to his endeavours as his ‘Work’. Composers have their scores catalogued using the word *opus*, which is Latin for ‘work’. In the study of

G. I. Gurdjieff,⁷ students of this spiritual journey talk about ‘the Work’ and the need to work on the self.⁸ There has been cross-pollination between followers of Gurdjieff and the Alexander Technique, particularly in the 1970s; perhaps the phrase ‘working on the self’ arose out of that connection.⁹

WORKING ON ONESELF, ACCORDING TO THE ALEXANDER COMMUNITY

The Alexander Technique is considered educational, albeit of an alternative kind. In more traditional educational pursuits, homework or self-study (i.e., working by oneself) is assumed to be a necessity, so it is not unreasonable to accept that students of the Alexander Technique need to participate in their learning. Still, Alexander Technique teachers are divided in their understanding of the term ‘working on oneself’. Some use it to mean using the principles and concepts of the Technique in the moment. For instance, the Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT), in its assessment procedure and handbook, under the criteria for ‘work on self’ states the requirement as follows: ‘Ability to inhibit and direct to maintain/renew own quality of use during teaching and in the activities of daily living.’¹⁰ This highlights the skills of inhibition and

³ In this article, I use *student* to mean someone studying the Alexander Technique in private or group lessons. *Trainee* refers to someone enrolled on an Alexander Technique teacher training course. In some of the quoted material, *pupil* will mean someone taking lessons and *student* will refer to a trainee on an Alexander Technique teacher training course.

⁴ This article uses the American Society for the Alexander Technique (AmSAT) label *training director* where the UK Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (STAT) version would be *head of training*.

⁵ I focus here on the role of working on the self in conjunction with hands-on instruction. I wish to acknowledge that *self-study* as used on the internet may refer to learning without a teacher, and although much of the material so named might be suitable for students who have been working with a teacher, I do not specifically reference such instruction.

⁶ J. McVicker Hunt, ‘Introduction’, in Frank Pierce Jones, *Freedom to Change* (London: Mouritz, 1997), previously published as *Body Awareness in Action* (1976), pp. vii–xiv.

⁷ George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866–1949) was a spiritual teacher, philosopher, author, and composer. His method for awakening consciousness is sometimes called the Fourth Way. Followers of his work read and discuss his teaching and practise self-observation, sacred dances called ‘movements’, and meditation.

⁸ ‘Work on oneself, says Gurdjieff, begins with study, observation, and experimentation, and continues as an experience.’ Jon Pepper, email to author, 5 January 2024.

⁹ Jean Clark, ‘Forty Years with the Alexander Technique’, *AmSAT News*, No. 77 (2008), p. 17.

¹⁰ ‘SAP [STAT Assessment Procedure] 2023–2024 Approved by Council 9 Mar 2023’, pp. 10, 19, 26, and ‘Assessment Handbook 2023–2024 (09 Oct 2023)’, pp. 24, 61, Member Portal, STAT, <<https://www.alexandertechnique.co.uk>> [accessed 12 February 2024]. The SAP is used at the end of a person’s training to determine whether they are ready for STAT certification. Of note, AmSAT uses similar language for one of its teacher certification requirements but does not use the term ‘work on self’: ‘Maintaining a high standard of use of the self while teaching the Alexander Technique and during

direction and implies that work on self is something one does while teaching. Carolyn Nicholls offers a similar, more detailed definition in her master's thesis:

Increasing skill in giving directions to self, using classical procedures. i.e. monkey¹¹ [a common position of mechanical advantage]. [...] This involves freeing the neck and sending the head forward and up, lengthening and widening the back, sending the knees forward and away, asking for the widening of the upper parts of the arms and the pull to the elbows.¹²

Likewise, Wilfred Barlow observes that working on the self is synonymous with the Alexander Technique, with *work* meaning 'inhibiting and directing the head forward and up etc'.¹³

The other generally accepted definition of working on the self is the time you spend outside of regular activities to develop thinking skills and improve your use. It is similar to doing homework or rehearsing a skill so that it is readily available to you beyond the practice time. Adam Nott calls this practice period 'formal' work on the self:

I make a distinction between working *formally* and *informally*. *Formal* work is so called because the form is clear. I put aside time which is exclusively for working on myself and propose various stimuli which I respond to in the way I have described. These controlled conditions are meant as a preparation for the important work, the *informal* work where the

stimuli cannot be predicted, in other words what the Technique is for: living.¹⁴

The moment-to-moment, informal understanding of working on the self is sometimes called 'thinking in activity',¹⁵ a phrase introduced by John Dewey. And Marjory Barlow calls informal work 'Alexander on the wing'.¹⁶ She further distinguishes the two types of work by saying that 'formal' means 'to set aside time to do [...] "pure" Alexander', and that 'on the wing' means 'trying to apply it and think about it as you go about your lawful occasions'.¹⁷

But perhaps there is a process to go through before one can work informally and live the Technique. Nicholas Brockbank holds that to be able to think in activity in an ongoing, informal way, one needs to first take the time to learn how to do that. He presents a Möbius strip of meaning – once you learn to work in a continuous manner, ongoing work in life also enhances learning:

'Conscious control' appears to me to rest primarily on this ability to 'keep the directions going' *without* losing track of whatever else is happening. Acquiring this 'informal' skill may depend on having done, and on continuing to do, a certain amount of 'formal' Alexander work. But whether or not this is the case, such work belongs by definition to the 'learning process' rather than to 'real life'. And if 'real life' is ever to become the 'learning' environment at the same time as being the 'living' environment, pupils of

ordinary activity', Member Portal, AmSAT. <<https://americansocietyforthealexandertechnique.org/owthzoneapp.com/MIC/22808118/0/#/ResourceDetail/59220/TEACHERCERTIFICATIONREQUI>> [accessed 13 May 2024].

¹¹ In recent years, there has been a trend away from using the word *monkey* to describe the Alexander Technique procedure of standing with flexed hips, knees, and ankles. Poma, flexed bend, hinge, semiflexion, and tilt are some of the adopted alternatives. With due respect to the reader's sensitivities, quoted material retains the original text.

¹² Carolyn Nicholls, 'Analysis of Training of the Specialised Use of the Hands in Alexander Technique Teaching' (MA thesis, The University of East London, 2003), accessed via <<http://www.alexander-technique-college.com/books-articles/>>, p. 72.

¹³ Wilfred Barlow, 'Editorial', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 5 (1966), p. 2.

¹⁴ Adam Nott, 'Alexander's Discoveries and What We Have Made of Them', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 14 (1995), p. 18.

¹⁵ Alexander uses the term in *The Use of the Self* and *The Universal Constant in Living*. See 'Thinking in Activity' in *F. M. Alexander Quotations* section of Mouritz website, <<https://mouritz.org/library/fma/concept/thinking-in-activity>> [accessed 10 February 2024]. Perhaps Dewey introduced this phrase to Alexander in conversation. Dewey wrote with different words something that may offer insight into why he named Alexander's process 'thinking in activity'. See John Dewey, *How We Think* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1933 [1910]), p. 208: 'He [the child] selects some of the means he observes, tries them on, finds them successful or unsuccessful, is confirmed or weakened in his belief in their value, and so continues selecting, arranging, adapting, testing, till he can accomplish what he wishes.'

¹⁶ Anne Battye, 'Transformation through Regular Work on Yourself', *Statnews*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2013), p. 12.

¹⁷ Frances Oxford, 'Marjory Barlow Interviewed', *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1994), p. 18.

the Alexander Technique will necessarily have to learn to work ‘informally’.¹⁸

Kathleen Ballard, too, implies that working on the self through repetition of certain activities exercises the brain and gradually leads to the mental stamina needed to apply the Alexander Technique to the ‘difficult challenges in daily life’.¹⁹

Using the word ‘practice’, Walter Carrington suggests a relationship between learning and action: ‘It is not a technique to be used only on occasion, as circumstances require. It is a technique to be practised and put into practice, to be lived.’²⁰

ALEXANDER’S (REPORTED) VIEWS

We need only look to the story of Alexander’s discovery and his other writings to understand that he used or encouraged both kinds of work on the self. He describes the formal work that led to his findings: ‘I would give the new directions in front of the mirror for long periods together, for successive days and weeks and sometimes even months.’²¹ We also have a story of A. R. Alexander working on himself to recover from a riding accident: ‘for eighteen months he lay in a darkened room with nothing to do (he could not read) but practise inhibition and directive orders.’²²

Alexander was confident that informal work on oneself was possible and could support a student’s growth:

It is possible for a person to learn to give due attention continuously to – i.e., to ‘keep the mind’ on the ‘means-whereby’ of the satisfactory use of the psycho-physical mechanisms, whilst employing these mechanisms in the round of daily life, whether this be a business or professional life or any other, and with the desirable result of a continuous development in general psycho-physical health.²³

Even if he did not use any of the terms we use today, we have records that Alexander was in favour

of people practising. In a number of letters from around 1917, he reminds his wife, Edith Page, to do her ‘Ahs and exercises’.²⁴ Also, Louise Morgan published journal entries of lessons that her friend, Miss GR, took with Alexander. Morgan recounts that Alexander gave instructions to Miss GR after two or three lessons about how she could work by herself until she returned for more.²⁵ Marjory Barlow likewise recalls her uncle talking about students needing to do the work: ‘Everyone must do the *real* work for themselves. The teacher can show the way, but cannot get inside the pupil’s brain and control his reactions for him. Each person must apply it for himself.’²⁶ She mentions elsewhere that Alexander encouraged his students to work on themselves when he was not around. After a few lessons he would make specific suggestions:

Now when you get ready for bed tonight I want you to go about your business very slowly. When you’re doing your teeth, taking your clothes off, and all the other things you’ve got to do I want you to go much more slowly than you are used to and give your orders all the time. Then when you get into bed, I want you to start off by lying on your back with your knees up as long as it’s not too draughty. Lie there for a while and give your orders before turning over and settling down. [...] Then first thing in the morning when you wake up, don’t leap out of bed otherwise it will be 11 o’clock before you even think about freeing your neck. Stay there for a while with the knees drawn up and give your orders. Then get out of bed slowly – don’t rush it. [...] Then you can work out the times in the day when it’s easy for you to think about inhibiting and directing. I don’t expect you to think about it all day long – nobody can. But if you link up thinking about inhibiting and directing, say, when you stop for a meal and you’re not under any pressure then you’re on your way – you’re off to a good start. Gradually you can expand your repertoire to other times during the day.²⁷

¹⁸ Nicholas Brockbank, ‘Learning to Apply the Technique’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 10 (1989), p. 18.

¹⁹ Kathleen Ballard, ‘Kathleen Ballard’s Response to Mervyn Waldman’s ‘On Eyes’ in Forum’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 17 (2001), p. 31.

²⁰ Walter Carrington, ‘Alexander and Emotion’, in Walter and Dilys Carrington, *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique: Selected Writings*, ed. Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Sheldrake Press, 2017), p. 157.

²¹ F. Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (London: Orion, 2001 [1932]), p. 41.

²² Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 69.

²³ F. Matthias Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (London: Mouritz, 2004 [1923]), p. 174.

²⁴ Letters 4, 6, 8, and 10 in F. Matthias Alexander, *F. M. Alexander Letters*, Vol. I, ed. by Missy Vineyard and Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 2020), pp. 7, 11, 13, 16.

²⁵ Louise Morgan, *Inside Yourself* (London: Mouritz, 2016 [1954]), p. 21.

²⁶ Barlow, ‘Teaching of F. Matthias Alexander’, p. 12.

²⁷ The quote is Marjory Barlow remembering what Alexander said. Seán Carey, *The Alexander Technique: The Ground Rules; Marjory Barlow in*

Clearly, Alexander wanted working on oneself to become an integral part of learning and living the Technique. He thus recommended integrating it into daily activities but also suggested consciously working on oneself while in positions of rest, even in bed. Alexander also emphasised, as other teachers do, the need for those who train to become teachers to work on themselves: ‘I must point out that would-be teachers of my work must be trained to put the principles and procedures of its technique into practice in the use of themselves before they teach others to do likewise.’²⁸

STUDENTS OF ALEXANDER ON WORKING ON ONESELF

Although there is evidence that Alexander encouraged students to work on themselves, Robert Best, an early supporter, wanted more instruction in learning how to work:

I suggest therefore that Alexandrian teachers would be well advised to develop a technique in which *part* of the lesson would be like a singing or archery lesson in that no manipulation would be used. It would be designed to show the pupil how to *practise*.²⁹

Although Best voiced frustration, he also tenaciously worked with a mirror. Seven years after he began, Best asked Alexander to observe how he worked on his own; apparently Alexander approved of the independent work.³⁰

The following diary excerpt from Miss GR was written after her twenty-sixth lesson and shows that she had practised: ‘I go over my lessons every day in the hotel, trying to do what he expects of me.’³¹ Venkataraman Jagannathan also recalls Alexander teaching, in the course of perhaps a dozen lessons, ‘all the essentials of the Technique, that would enable me to carry on with the work by myself’.³²

It is interesting to note that Best did not feel Alexander gave him enough instruction to work outside a lesson, but Miss GR and Jagannathan did. We do not know whether this contrast speaks to the differences between students, variations in how Alexander communicated to them, or a bit of both.

Regardless, these students, and likely others, recognised the value of working on themselves.

WHY WORK ON YOURSELF?

If we accept that inhibiting and directing, i.e., applying the Alexander Technique in life, form at least a part of the meaning and purpose of working on oneself, we can then explore what people expect to gain by it.

New students frequently have goals related to health and well-being. A beginning student often wants to reduce or resolve chronic pain; they want to stop suffering from performance anxiety; they wish to improve balance and coordination. With lessons, they may observe that they have habits and learn that in order to sustain change beyond what they learn with their teacher, they need to work on themselves. The Alexander Technique usually presents a new, experiential approach to change. Part of a teacher’s job is to help their student understand this indirect approach.

In addition, the Technique offers broader and deeper life lessons that teachers – who have worked with the principles for a long time – understand in a variety of ways. Therefore, the benefits of working on the self, when expressed by teachers, may include many more aspects than the resolution of pain, the reduction of performance anxiety, or improvement in balance and coordination.

TO IMPROVE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Some teachers come to the Alexander Technique to manage ill health, and they continue to deal with that throughout their lives.³³ Their relation to this work reflects the nature of the Alexander Technique; it does not always resolve a problem, nor is it a magic bullet. Practitioners must commit to sustained use of the work for steady improvements in health and efficiency.³⁴

Many find that the work helps them find inner quiet, resilience, and emotional maturity that they

Conversation with Seán Carey (London: HITE, 2011), pp. 64–65.

²⁸ Alexander, *Use of the Self*, p. 117.

²⁹ Robert Best, ‘Technique in Industry’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 5 (1966), p. 13.

³⁰ Jean M. O. Fischer, ‘Gaslighted: The Experiences of Robert D. Best, an Ashley Place Pupil’, *Poise Journal*, Vol. 2 (2024), p. 5 [accessed 13 April 2024]

³¹ Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, p. 19.

³² Venkataraman Jagannathan, ‘Alexander and the Alexander Technique – Reminiscences’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 18 (2002), pp. 22–23.

³³ Adam Nott, ‘Marjory Barlow Obituary’, *Statnews*, Vol. 6, No. 21 (2007), p. 18.

³⁴ Patrick J. Macdonald, ‘The F. Matthias Alexander Technique: A Short Introduction’ (London: The F. Matthias Alexander Foundation, n.d.), p. 4.

bring to both daily life activities and teaching.³⁵ The inner quiet may even lead to a feeling of well-being and greater sense of consciousness.³⁶ Elizabeth Atkinson found relief from depression:

A few months before I came back to London I had a period of depression which, although not long-lived, was very debilitating. I found the Technique extremely helpful in dealing with my state, and I would hazard a guess that it would have been far more long-lasting if I hadn't been able to work on myself; keeping my breathing free and full for one thing was a daily struggle.³⁷

TO ENHANCE USE OF THE SELF

Several teachers employ principles of the Alexander Technique to improve their use and then to sustain the improvements. They speak of 'correcting habits of misuse'³⁸ or of first maintaining 'the use of yourself as a whole', and if the work is ongoing, to 'foster a constant general growth and development'.³⁹ Other teachers describe the Technique as a 'deep work on themselves, consisting of the inhibition of habitual reactions and the direction of conscious ones'.⁴⁰ Some articulate more specifically the habits of interference that need changing: 'With practice, we can stop doing the underlying activity that gets in our way – such as "pulling down" and stiffening – just as we can decide not to do inappropriate "external", overt acts.'⁴¹ Others credit the Technique with giving them the freedom to choose their reaction to a stimulus.⁴²

TO APPROACH CONSCIOUS CONTROL

Not only can a continual process of work help one change, but it may even help one recognise the *need* for change.⁴³ The change can be as far reaching as to affect one's philosophy of life.⁴⁴ Indeed, Alexander described the ultimate way of working moment to moment as 'conscious control'.⁴⁵ Following from this, some teachers consider work on themselves as a means to reach that plane of existence. They endeavour to prevent interference so that the organism works as an integrated whole.⁴⁶

TO GO BEYOND THE EXPECTED

Continued work on self can take practitioners beyond the expected, to the 'edge of their competence, and facilitate exploring balance, movement, and thinking in new ways'.⁴⁷ Jean Clark worked out of sheer curiosity, not knowing what to expect but discovering along the way: 'I explore sliding my feet on the floor while bending my knees, both simultaneously and one after the other, without resorting to my hands for balance. As a result, my sitting bones become much more lively and intelligent.'⁴⁸

WORKING AS A TRAINEE

When it comes to training to become a teacher and then teaching the Technique, work on the self is vital. Trainees must work not just to get on and off a chair during class and to put a non-doing hand on someone but also to apply the skills in life. If a new trainee has not yet understood this, they will during training, as did first-generation teacher Erika

³⁵ Diana Devitt-Dawson, 'Original Teaching in a New Era: Time to Promote the Principles', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 26 (2017), p. 62.

³⁶ Daniel Cheifetz, 'Exploring A New Possibility: A Fifth Term Talk', *Statnews*, Vol. 4, No. 16 (1996), p. 16.

³⁷ Elizabeth Atkinson, 'Some Different Viewpoints on an Alexander Lesson', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 22 (2008), p. 13.

³⁸ Adam and Rosemary Nott, 'Afterword', in Carey, *Ground Rules*, p. 144.

³⁹ Vivien Mackie (in conversation with Joe Armstrong), *Just Play Naturally: An Account of Her Study with Pablo Casals in the 1950s and Her Discovery of the Resonance between His Teaching and the Principles of the Alexander Technique* (Boston: Duende, 2002), pp. 109–110.

⁴⁰ Marjory Barlow in Catherine Kettrick, 'In Our Hands', *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 10 (2002), p. 12.

⁴¹ Malcolm Williamson, 'Beyond Words', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 26 (2017), p. 22.

⁴² Barlow, 'Teaching of F. Matthias Alexander', p. 14.

⁴³ Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 172.

⁴⁴ Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 199.

⁴⁵ See Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, p. 8: 'In this connection I wish it to be understood that throughout this book I use the term "conscious guidance and control" to indicate, primarily, a plane to be reached rather than a method of reaching it.'

⁴⁶ Malcolm Williamson, 'Constructive Conscious Control', *Statnews*, Vol. 6, No. 18 (2006), p. 15.

⁴⁷ Francesca Greenoak, 'Editorial', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 17 (2001), p. 1.

⁴⁸ Jean Clark, 'Are You Sitting Comfortably?' *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1993), p. 29.

Whittaker: ‘It was all very alive and with the idea that you carry the Alexander work into the things you are doing. You are observing and not just standing around “doing Alexander work”.’⁴⁹

The main benefit of this work on the self during training is improvement and maintenance of the trainee’s use so that it is not disrupted once they put hands on and verbally instruct a student.⁵⁰ Carolyn Nicholls includes working on self as part of the curriculum she designed to improve use during teacher training.⁵¹ And Gabriella Minnes Brandes makes a similar assumption that work on the self is an essential part of learning to teach others.⁵² Apparently, Alexander allowed his trainees to put hands on only once they could ‘maintain good use of themselves relatively continuously with clear understanding of conscious self-inhibition and of giving conscious self-directions’.⁵³ Many training course directors would concur that a trainee needs about a year to get to that skill level.

The value of work on the self while in the teaching role can become clear to sensitive trainees:

As I understand it, the feeling of tranquillity that can appear while being worked on stems from the teacher’s own consistent work on himself or herself at the same time letting me be as I am but giving me inviting impulses to change, if I wish to. [...] If a student working on me was more concerned with working on me than on himself or herself I would experience it as an encroachment in an unpleasant way – even to the extent of becoming dizzy and having to stop working.⁵⁴

It is perhaps most crucial to continue to work after becoming a teacher.⁵⁵ And there is indeed a loss if one ceases to work: ‘We continue to live in the same society with the same pressures and tensions and physical conditions so, if we stop

working on ourselves, life will force us again to lose our good use.’⁵⁶

In sum, people work on themselves with or without a clear outcome in mind. They work to diminish pain and anxiety, to feel better, to improve their use, their balance and coordination, to learn about themselves in a deep way, to curiously venture into the unexpected, to change their philosophy of life, and to bring themselves to a better condition before putting hands on another, ensuring a good experience for their students.

CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAKE STUDENTS READY TO WORK ON THEIR OWN

Alexander was optimistic, as are many teachers, that the Technique was ‘within the grasp of anyone who will take the trouble to cultivate it’.⁵⁷ But are there certain character traits in students that motivate them to work long enough to derive benefit from the Technique? Patience may be one element. Alexander describes successful learners as ‘patient and observant’ pioneers.⁵⁸ Patience allows one the time to develop ‘sensitivity and understanding of process’.⁵⁹ Taking time is important; we need to make time to work on ourselves so we can do our work, growing and widening our understanding of ourselves.⁶⁰ If we hurry, we might sabotage our ‘true understanding and reeducation’.⁶¹ Unfortunately, most present-day learners may not have the upbringing that prepares them ‘for the kind of contemplative, self-reflective thinking it requires, nor the opportunities to engage in it’.⁶² Of course, some appreciate the Alexander Technique for the very reason that it

⁴⁹ Erika Whittaker, ‘Alexander’s Way’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 13 (1993), p. 8.

⁵⁰ Mary Holland, ‘Letting It Happen’, *Conscious Control*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2008), p. 35.

⁵¹ Nicholls, ‘Specialised Use of the Hands’, p. 69.

⁵² Gabriella Minnes Brandes, ‘Learning, Teaching, Music-Making and the Alexander Technique’, *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (2016), p. 5.

⁵³ Robin Simmons, ‘Teaching Hands-on in Training Alexander Teachers’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 24 (2014), p. 48.

⁵⁴ Nicola Hanefeld, ‘Greater Awareness in Pregnancy’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 10 (1989), p. 20.

⁵⁵ David Alexander, ‘Interview: Shike [sic] Hermelin’, *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 4 (1989), p. 154.

⁵⁶ Misha Magidov, ‘A Personal View of the Alexander Technique’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 12 (1992), p. 10.

⁵⁷ F. Matthias Alexander, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (London: Mouritz, 1996 [1910, 1918]), p. xviii.

⁵⁸ F. Matthias Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living* (London: Mouritz, 2000 [1941]), p. xxxvi.

⁵⁹ Williamson, ‘Constructive Conscious Control’, p. 15.

⁶⁰ Alexander, ‘Interview: Shike’, p. 155.

⁶¹ Walton White, ‘On Doing What Alexander Did’, *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 4 (1989), p. 54.

⁶² Williamson, ‘Beyond Words’, p. 22.

involves working on themselves – it is empowering.⁶³

Another motivating factor in working is curiosity. This makes students more likely to ‘continue their own self-observation and exploration’.⁶⁴ Someone who is willing to work is taking responsibility for themselves. The teacher points the way and opens up new possibilities, but ultimately, the student becomes their own expert,⁶⁵ their own teacher.⁶⁶ Lessons demonstrate to students that they have choices, and it takes a depth of commitment to make new choices.⁶⁷ Practitioners must remain persistent;⁶⁸ that is how they can hope for lasting change.⁶⁹ Pedro de Alcantara talks about commitment, persistence, and taking responsibility as doing ‘homework’:

Homework doesn’t mean only the little bits of technical practice you have to do in order to learn your pieces. It means to work on yourself in multiple dimensions, facing the various tasks at hand without avoiding them, without fudging, without fooling yourself or other people. Homework is permanent and immediate; it takes place *right now*, not later. And because I finally agreed to do my homework, everything in my life – including my cello practice, my writing schedule, or my own pedagogical skills – has changed for the better, because I’m here, now; not there, later.⁷⁰

Clearly, what might help to work includes taking the trouble, having patience, being observant, setting aside time and not hurrying, taking responsibility, committing, being persistent, having discipline, willpower, curiosity, or a wish for self-empowerment. But aside from specific personality traits that one needs to take time to work, we can also acknowledge that many Alexander Technique

teachers, starting with Alexander himself, come from performance backgrounds. Performing artists spend time developing their craft, so it is not difficult to grasp that they are already inclined to working on themselves.⁷¹ Using the Alexander Technique to identify and change habits is particularly helpful for artists, who are already accustomed to looking for strategies to capture their individual ways to express human nature.⁷² Using the Alexander principles can become one such strategy to support their explorations. What might also work in the performer’s favour is to take some of their practice time to observe their use rather than to focus on just the artistic activity.⁷³ On the other hand, some performers learn that they can work not just in the practice room but in life, becoming instruments themselves.⁷⁴

Given all this potential for positive outcomes, why do some students stop lessons before they can help themselves? Perhaps those that fear ‘self-knowledge’ or have a ‘deep-seated reluctance to change’ might not continue with lessons.⁷⁵ The Technique may also not be for everyone in the sense that some people might lack the perseverance that is needed to benefit from it.⁷⁶

Although this section has primarily discussed what is needed to work formally, the same characteristics are needed to work informally. It may take even more dedication to remember that work is possible in everyday life.

⁶³ John Woodward, ‘“Teaching” and the Alexander Technique’, *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 4 (1989), p. 100.

⁶⁴ Dorota Orczyk, ‘The Beginning of a New Chapter’, *Statnews*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (2022), p. 16.

⁶⁵ Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 207.

⁶⁶ Jean Clark, ‘Eavesdropping’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 9 (1988), p. 14.

⁶⁷ Lester W. Thompson, ‘The Teaching of Frank Pierce Jones: A Personal Memoir’, *The Alexandrian*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1982), p. 5.

⁶⁸ Dorothea Wallis, ‘A Ring at the Door’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 1 (1962), p. 25.

⁶⁹ Nelly Ben-Or, ‘A Pianist’s Adventure with the Alexander Technique’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 11 (1991), p. 12.

⁷⁰ Pedro de Alcantara, ‘Beginner at the Piano’, *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (2016), pp. 26–27.

⁷¹ Selma Gokcen, ‘Rehearsing the Orders: From a Musician’s Point of View’, *Statnews*, Vol. 7, No. 8 (2012), p. 24.

⁷² Gabriella Minnes Brandes, ‘Music Making: Communication and Creativity’, *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 10 (2016), p. 19.

⁷³ David Gorman in Seán Carey, ‘On Fitness: Extracts from a Conversation with David Gorman’, *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 4 (1989), p. 60.

⁷⁴ Ron Dennis, ‘Reflections on the Alexander Method’, *The Alexandrian*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1983), p. 3.

⁷⁵ Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 163.

⁷⁶ White, ‘What Alexander Did’, p. 54.

WHEN STUDENTS ARE READY TO WORK ON THEMSELVES Alexander describes, in the context of employing the means whereby, how a student advances through lessons:

- (1) whether the pupil is in the early stages of his work, where he is asked merely to give orders and to leave the carrying-out of these orders to the teacher;
- (2) whether he has reached a later stage where, under his teacher's supervision, he is gradually developing a reliable sensory appreciation upon which he can rely in carrying out the orders himself; or
- (3) whether he is working by himself at his ordinary activities outside.⁷⁷

From this delineation of stages, we can assume that improving sensory appreciation is key to a student's independent application of the Technique. Hands-on lessons are the classic, dependable way to help students to improve sensory appreciation.⁷⁸ It is unlikely that anyone's sensory appreciation is ever absolutely correct, but taking hands-on lessons develops it. With time, students become more conscious of their interferences. Growing the ability to observe what is happening then allows for independent work without the teacher's feedback.

Teachers differ in how much they prioritise the student improving their sensory appreciation before suggesting that they work independently. Some do not ask their beginner students to work on their own for a while, preferring to monitor the student's standard of use and level of skill before deeming them ready to work.⁷⁹ Marjory Barlow explains how she advises an absolute beginner: 'When I've finished that [first] lesson, I get them up [...] and then I say, "Now, there's no homework." [...] Later on I suggest working at certain times of the day.'⁸⁰ Judith Leibowitz similarly does not specify an amount of time needed but writes that when lessons have 'opened the way to further change', one could continue studying independently.⁸¹ Patrick Macdonald considers that a student with 'no special problems', having gained 'enough knowledge',

could be ready to keep working for 'continuous self-improvement' after twenty lessons.⁸²

While many teachers favour waiting, others encourage students to begin work on themselves at or very near the start. Frank Pierce Jones implies that the student could use what is learned in a lesson to continue improving the 'standard of kinaesthetic judgement' and 'go on to make further observations and experiments of his own' that would add 'greatly to his resources for self-improvement'.⁸³ But if students' self-experiments do not lead to improvement in their use, is the process a waste of time? Perhaps not. Students can discover through their experiments what works and does not work for them.⁸⁴ Mistakes can be part of the learning process:

If we wait until we think we can do a thing well before we even attempt it at all – we might never start. We have got to be prepared to have a go and do things badly and learn from these experiences.⁸⁵

The ability to work on themselves and the effectiveness of that work – whether formal or informal – no doubt grows as a student progresses through lessons. This work is likely to become more effective as the student improves their sensory appreciation and can more consistently inhibit and direct. By working independently, even from the first lesson, students may recognise that they have an essential role to play in their change and growth.

HOW TO WORK ON YOURSELF

I now offer examples of the innumerable ways people work on themselves.⁸⁶

LYING IN SEMI-SUPINE

When a teacher works on a student or trainee as they lie on their backs on a table, it is often called a 'table turn'. The position (and time spent in this manner) has a few names, including: semi-supine, constructive rest, lying-down work, and active rest. Alexander used lying down as an adjunct to or part

⁷⁷ Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, p. 106.

⁷⁸ Nicholas Brockbank, 'What Is Inhibition?' *The Alexander Journal*, No. 11 (1991), p. 16.

⁷⁹ Nott, 'Alexander's Discoveries', p. 18.

⁸⁰ Oxford, 'Marjory Barlow Interviewed', p. 18.

⁸¹ Judith Leibowitz, 'What Does the Alexander Technique Mean to Me?', *The Alexandrian*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1981), p. 1.

⁸² Macdonald, 'Alexander Technique', p. 3.

⁸³ Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 180.

⁸⁴ Carey, 'On Fitness', p. 58.

⁸⁵ Clark, 'Eavesdropping', pp. 13–14.

⁸⁶ If readers wish to be inspired by teachers' explorations, there are dozens of sources. Almost every workshop, conference, or congress write-up, and various how-to instructions in books on the Alexander Technique, might expand any person's repertoire of ways to work independently.

of a lesson, part of early training, and as a way to work on oneself.

After Alexander gave a chair lesson, he often sent students to an assistant (Amy Alexander, Ethel Webb, or Irene Tasker)⁸⁷ for table work. Although many teachers say that he was not interested in working with students in the more passive lying-down condition, it is of particular note that, early on, he did not work with *women* on the table: ‘At the time, it was considered improper for FM, an unmarried man, to give lying-down turns to unmarried women, so these were passed on by FM to his sister for table work.’⁸⁸ But there is at least one account of a man having received table work from Alexander: ‘FM also let me lay on a table where he molded my body and asked me to perform simple movements in order to give me an awareness of what a relaxed condition feels like.’⁸⁹

With changes in mores as time went on, Alexander did give some table turns to at least one woman around 1952, as documented in Miss GR’s diary:

Forgot to note that I’ve had some lessons while lying on a table, to help my legs, I suppose. I am told to ‘think the knees going up to the ceiling’ and I do so. [...] When I lie on the table I have a book under my head [...]. It helps me keep my head from going back. Alexander still goes on tapping my ribs, knees and neck to remind me. This helps me a lot.⁹⁰

Impressions remain among some of today’s teachers that Alexander did not have trainees lie down during class. But Marjory Barlow reports, ‘I remember the day he first let me use my hands. We had somebody lying on a table and he said, “Now, I want you to take her head.”’⁹¹ And Erika Whittaker says:

When F. M. did give us guidance on this work he would have one person at the head whilst he moved the pupil’s leg up or down with deft movements in order to obtain a movement free of tension from the back.⁹²

There is no concrete record of how or when Alexander – or later teachers – came to suggest that students make a practice of lying down outside of lessons, but according to Marjory Barlow, Alexander’s sister, Amy Alexander, had spent time lying down early on in Australia.⁹³ Over the years, since then, semi-supine has become de rigueur in teaching studios: it is often the first experience in a lesson and the first way that students are introduced to working on themselves.⁹⁴ In schools or conservatories where the Alexander Technique is part of the curriculum, such as at the Royal College of Music in London, it is ‘normal to see students in semi-supine on the floor of a practice room or in orchestral breaks’.⁹⁵

But even the seemingly simple procedure of lying down needs to be taught in such a way that non-doing becomes primary. Otherwise, as Walter Carrington suggests, students might ‘be tempted to make some sort of adjustment’ as they become more aware of tensions.⁹⁶ Even so, there are anecdotes describing people gaining benefits by merely lying down without necessarily engaging in any specific thinking. Walter Carrington talks of one such person who had only three lessons and then relieved himself of back pain by lying down twice a day, an hour each time, for three months.⁹⁷ But Marjory Barlow suggests that Alexander wanted students to use the lying down time to work, that is, to think, not just to have a rest.⁹⁸ He understood that because one’s balance was not

⁸⁷ Trevor Allen Davies, *An Examined Life: Marjory Barlow and the Alexander Technique* (Berkeley: Mornum Time Press, 2002), p. 25.

⁸⁸ Adam Nott, ‘Marjory Barlow, 1904–2006’, *Alexander Journal*, No. 22 (2008), p. 68.

⁸⁹ Robert van Geuns, ‘My Contacts with F. Matthias Alexander’, *NASTAT News*, No. 17 (1992), p. 17.

⁹⁰ Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, p. 19.

⁹¹ Crissman Taylor and Carmen Tarnowski, ‘Interview with Marjory Barlow’, in *Taking Time: Six Interviews*, ed. Chariclia Gounaris (Aarhus: Novis, 2000), p. 68.

⁹² Erika Whittaker, ‘England – The First Training Course’, *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1987), p. 25.

⁹³ Davies, *Examined Life*, p. 25.

⁹⁴ There are many discussions of the value of lying down in the online *Mouritz Companion*: see ‘Lying-down Work’, <<https://mouritz.org/companion/article/lying-down-work>> [accessed 5 February 2024].

⁹⁵ Judith Kleinman, ‘Alexander, Music and Education: Paths to Self Acceptance and Self Development’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 25 (2015), pp. 34–35.

⁹⁶ Walter Carrington and Seán Carey, *Personally Speaking: Walter Carrington on the F. M. Alexander Technique in Discussion with Seán Carey* (London: Mouritz, 2001), p. 107.

⁹⁷ Walter Carrington, John Nicholls, and Jerry Sontag, *Thinking Aloud* (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1994), pp. 51–52.

⁹⁸ Carey, *Ground Rules*, p. 137.

challenged, lying down provided ‘a very good opportunity just to give orders – to inhibit and give orders and not do anything’.⁹⁹ And Irene Tasker quoted him in her notebook as saying, ‘On the back *religiously* three times a day – *working*’.¹⁰⁰

USING A MIRROR

A mirror provides objective feedback, once a student learns to employ it to observe their use without judgement. Mirror work is a way of conducting personal research that can lead to constructive change.¹⁰¹ It has become part of the canon of both training and independent work on the self because Alexander used mirrors¹⁰² to observe himself, as he describes in ‘Evolution of a Technique’.¹⁰³

Irene Tasker, during a period when she attended the training course, made a note to herself: ‘Remember to watch mirror for lack of strain in neck muscles. There will be sense of *backness* of head when pull is there. Also of roundedness of back when widening’.¹⁰⁴

Some of Alexander’s students spent a lot of time in front of the mirror,¹⁰⁵ because their teacher had done so: ‘I thought, “If Alexander learnt something from a mirror, perhaps I will.” I did what I had done with him and could see at once that I had lost my length’.¹⁰⁶ Students¹⁰⁷ and teachers who trained with Alexander¹⁰⁸ found particular value in using the mirror when working alone.

But mirror work has its challenges. Some students cannot see beyond their hairstyle or quality of complexion. Others might stiffen in reaction to what they see. In this regard, Walton White is a skeptic – while acknowledging that Louise

Morgan¹⁰⁹ claimed success with using a mirror, he doubts most people can do similarly.¹¹⁰ However, Walter Carrington explains how students can benefit from using a mirror yet cautions against what might happen as they move away from it:

The trick is to direct in the same way without the mirror as you do with the mirror. But people tend not to do that: they direct quite happily in front of the mirror and then, after the withdrawal of the mirror, they go back to feeling.¹¹¹

GIVING A STIMULUS TO MOVE

In Alexander’s journey to improve his voice, the final iteration of his process was to give himself the stimulus to speak, say ‘no’, give himself directions, then stop again and choose whether to speak, to do something else, or simply to continue giving his orders.¹¹² As the Technique developed, however, it broadened far beyond voice work to movement of all sorts. George Trevelyan, a first-generation teacher, describes the process of giving oneself a stimulus to move:

During intensive work at the conditioning of your own reflexes, give yourself a stimulus, say to go on to the toes; inhibit it and really cease to mind whether you get the end; give the impulses head forward and up, back to widen and go on with them until you are bored and beyond. Then walk away and do something else.¹¹³

Marjory Barlow was a constant advocate for working by giving oneself a stimulus to move, which she also learned during her training:

Perhaps I should explain that FM made it very clear to all of the students that they weren’t just supposed to sit there and hope that something might happen. Indeed, there was much more chance of something positive happening if you gave yourself a stimulus to

⁹⁹ Davies, *Examined Life*, p. 234.

¹⁰⁰ Regina Stratil, *Irene Tasker: Her Life and Work with the Alexander Technique* (Graz: Mouritz, 2022), p. 245.

¹⁰¹ Chris Stevens, ‘Scientific Research and Its Role in Teaching the Alexander Technique’, *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 4 (1989), p. 172.

¹⁰² Louise Morgan reports from her interview with Alexander that he used a full-length mirror and a hand mirror. See Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, p. 33.

¹⁰³ Alexander, *Use of the Self*, pp. 26–27.

¹⁰⁴ Stratil, *Irene Tasker*, p. 240.

¹⁰⁵ Fischer, ‘Gaslighted’, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ Cliff Lewis, ‘Recollections by a Pupil of Alexander’s’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 16 (1999), p. 35.

¹⁰⁷ Van Geuns, ‘Contacts with F. Matthias Alexander’, p. 16.

¹⁰⁸ Taylor and Tarnowski, ‘Interview with Marjory Barlow’, p. 73.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Sit down in front of a mirror, as Alexander did, for a session of observation and experiment.’ See Morgan, *Inside Yourself*, p. 56.

¹¹⁰ White, ‘What Alexander Did’, p. 44.

¹¹¹ Carrington, *Personally Speaking*, pp. 110–111.

¹¹² Alexander, *Use of the Self*, pp. 45–46.

¹¹³ George Trevelyan, ‘Training with F. M. (Diary, 1933–34)’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 12 (1992), pp. 25–26.

move, inhibited it, went through all the orders, and then moved.¹¹⁴

Teachers who trained with Marjory Barlow – Adam Nott and Mike Cross – also recall working with a stimulus to move when on her training course.¹¹⁵ Perhaps Marjory Barlow emphasised giving a stimulus to move more than others. She has even expressed surprise at its absence when teaching other teachers:

‘Now look, you each have a chair. I’ll come round and give you a turn, but I want you to work on yourselves when I am not touching you.’ [...] None of them moved a muscle the whole time I was on that platform! I thought, ‘Well, maybe they are not used to doing it that way.’¹¹⁶

THINKING

One reason teachers work on themselves is to provide their student with the optimum stimulus from the hands. In a similar way, the teacher’s ability to think in the Alexandrian fashion assists students in thinking for themselves.¹¹⁷ For Marjory Barlow, the work always included thinking, an interpretation she absorbed from her uncle.¹¹⁸ She recalls Alexander saying:

If I stand beside you and give those orders out loud, you can’t go wrong. But the point is, you’ve got to do that for yourself. I can’t go round with you all day long, giving you your orders.¹¹⁹

Teaching students the value of thinking became Marjory Barlow’s priority, and she urged teachers

to give their students, at the earliest moment, this ‘key’ so they could use the Technique by themselves.¹²⁰ Her trainees learned that when working on the self, thinking mattered most.¹²¹

Patrick Macdonald also makes a correlation between working on the self and thinking: ‘In the first place you must learn to think and not to do. After that you must learn to let the doing come about as a result of the thinking.’¹²²

EMPLOYING THE PROCEDURES

Alexandrian principles and concepts can be applied to various procedures. These include positions of mechanical advantage like semi-flexion, lunge, and squat, and activities such as going up on toes, whispered ‘ah’, hands on the back of the chair, wall work, walking, and inclining back and forth while sitting.¹²³ In addition to these classic procedures, many trainees investigate the Dart Procedures,¹²⁴ developed by Joan and Alex Murray.¹²⁵ Furthermore, various directors of training may regularly include other movement disciplines such as yoga, tai chi, or Bartenieff Fundamentals.¹²⁶ Harkening back to the question of readiness to work on oneself, once a student or trainee has been instructed in any procedure, it is usually fair game for them to practise outside of a lesson or training hours, depending on the views of the teacher or training course director.

¹¹⁴ Carey, *Ground Rules*, p. 94.

¹¹⁵ Nott, ‘Marjory Barlow’, p. 70; Mike Cross, ‘The Marjory Barlow I Knew: A Memorial’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 22 (2008), p. 21.

¹¹⁶ Taylor and Tarnowski, ‘Interview with Marjory Barlow’, p. 72.

¹¹⁷ Malcolm Williamson, ‘What Did Miss Goldie Understand?’, *Statnews*, Vol. 6, No. 15 (2005), p. 7.

¹¹⁸ Many teachers will remember Lulie Westfeldt’s story of Alexander announcing he could ‘get it in spite of them.’ The inference is that Alexander could improve the student’s primary control without the student’s help. See Lulie Westfeldt, *F. Matthias Alexander: The Man and His Work* (London: Mouritz, 1998 [1964]), p. 51. This quote, and perhaps other anecdotal evidence, may be the source of debate within the profession: how much does change in the student depend on the teacher’s hands, and how much on the student’s psychophysical participation?

¹¹⁹ Marjory Barlow, ‘The Essence of F.M.’s Teaching’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 15 (1997), p. 17.

¹²⁰ Barlow, ‘F.M.’s Teaching’, p. 16.

¹²¹ Nott, ‘Marjory Barlow Obituary’, p. 18.

¹²² Patrick J. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It* (London: Mouritz, 2015 [1989]), p. 18.

¹²³ This list of procedures is taken from the online *Mouritz Companion*: see ‘Classical Procedures’, <<https://mouritz.org/companion/article/classical-procedures>> [accessed 5 February 2024].

¹²⁴ Raymond Dart (1893–1988) had a few Alexander Technique lessons with Irene Tasker. From them, his vast knowledge of anthropology, and his discovery of the fossil, *Australopithecus*, he experimented with and later described a series of movements in published papers.

¹²⁵ Alexander Technique teachers Alex and Joan Murray developed the Dart Procedures by integrating ideas of developmental movement as Raymond Dart described with principles of the Alexander Technique.

¹²⁶ Irmgard Bartenieff (1900–1981) was a dancer and dance theorist who studied with Rudolf Laban and developed movement sequences called the Bartenieff Fundamentals, which focus on movement integration.

LOSING BALANCE

Since improving balance is often listed among the benefits of learning the Technique, working on yourself can include working on your balance. Pedro de Alcantara takes a fresh view, inviting us to lose our balance. He makes the case, echoing an aphorism of Alexander's,¹²⁷ that 'To work on yourself is to look willingly and gladly for ways of losing your balance and dealing with it.'¹²⁸ Other teachers suggest standing on one leg or trying out all sorts of wobble boards.

EXPERIMENTING

Once they have assimilated the basics, a learner can enhance their ability to inhibit and direct and use their tools to venture further into the unknown.¹²⁹ Exploration – or application work, in which we employ the principles to improve specific activities – can be rewarding. It always provides satisfactory reading when teachers take the time to publish their informal investigations. Teachers have described a wide range of material, from a simple daily life activity such as holding a pencil¹³⁰ to improving a low-crawl during military training.¹³¹

WORKING IN AN ONGOING/INFORMAL WAY

Working on yourself as a moment-to-moment, integrated process of living means that people give themselves permission to stop, quieten reactivity, think their directions, and stay with themselves in the present. Some teachers have had remarkable outcomes from such work, even in the face of life-threatening stimuli. Joan Frost reports one such memorable instance. She was driving approximately 50 miles per hour when a truck attached itself to her car on the driver's side while the passenger side scraped along the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York State. She remembers being 'highly alert and present'. Her 'full attention went to managing the situation moment by moment'.¹³²

I can also report a harrowing experience when, early one morning, alone in my deceased mother's condo, I was preparing for movers when more than a dozen heavy Masonite boards fell on me, forcing me into an asymmetrical kneeling position with the weight of the boards pressing at the side of my larynx and pinning me against a washing machine. I could breathe but only with difficulty, and for what seemed too long, I did not have the strength to attempt to escape. I periodically screamed for help and then rested my voice, not wanting to get hoarse, and waited to see if anyone had heard me (they had not) and to gather strength until I could push the boards far enough away to scrape by into a small free area beyond the washer. Then I gingerly came to my feet and escaped the boards, which had fallen not only on me but also against a door, leaving me with no access to most of the apartment or the door to the public hallway and elevators. Knowing that I would live, I worked on the practicalities of finding my phone and calling for help and then rested on my mother's bed until help arrived.

In less dramatic circumstances, many teachers opt to work by using their directions when their minds are not completely occupied or when they do not need to speak. Joe Armstrong reports that when the demand or stress is great, directing, at best, preserves his conditions.¹³³ As the demand decreases, he can direct with an eye towards improving the integration of his use. Those who can, serve themselves throughout their day by working informally, no matter the level of stimulus.

APPLYING LEARNING AIDS

A few teachers offer hand-outs or audio guides to support their students' work at home.¹³⁴ Others encourage their students to record their process in a journal. Some might loan books from their library

¹²⁷ See F. Matthias Alexander, *Articles and Lectures* (Graz: Mouritz, 2022), p. 265: 'You are not here to do exercises or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and to learn to deal with it.'

¹²⁸ Pedro de Alcantara, *Indirect Procedures: A Musician's Guide to the Alexander Technique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 167.

¹²⁹ Alexander credits his student Joseph Rowntree with introducing a phrase that has become very popular among Alexander Technique teachers: 'reasoning from the known to the unknown'. See Alexander, *Use of the Self*, p. 85.

¹³⁰ Jones, *Freedom to Change*, p. 171. Jones used the term *postural set* (p. 126) and sometimes shortened it to *set*. It means there is a preparation that fixes the posture in advance of the movement.

¹³¹ Joe Armstrong, 'Reconsidering "Forward and Up"', *Statnews*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (2001), p. 16.

¹³² Joan Frost, 'How the Alexander Technique Helped Save My Live', *AmSAT Journal*, No. 3 (2013), p. 10.

¹³³ Armstrong, *Directing and Ordering*, p. 27.

¹³⁴ Sue Laurie, 'Working with Actors', *Direction Magazine*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2003), p. 26.

or email students reminders because, as Walter Carrington used to say, the main difficulty with the Technique is that ‘we forget to remember’.¹³⁵

RESPONSIBILITIES OF TEACHERS AND TRAINING DIRECTORS

Unless a teacher is of the mind that learning only takes place indirectly, solely as a result of hands-on experiences during lessons, they need to communicate to their students the value of working on themselves. Ours is not a therapy profession, so many students need instruction, not only in the skills of inhibition and direction, but also in what part they can play in their learning. Otherwise, they may enjoy lessons and even resolve issues, but will not know how to help themselves in the future. The Alexander Technique truly becomes a means of self-care when students embrace their agency and when teachers show them how to do that. This includes helping the student learn how to remain engaged during lessons so that they can learn to inhibit and direct in the face of the teacher’s hands and words. And if teachers are advocates of students taking time to work on their own between lessons, then they can guide them into doing that.

Teachers frequently discuss the importance they place on making sure the student understands their role in learning. Students might first depend on a teacher to learn to inhibit and direct, but eventually, the teacher needs to help the student find their own way, and the student needs to ‘go through the process of rediscovering Inhibition and Direction for themselves’.¹³⁶ The need to balance offering an experience with giving a student the tools to work independently has been a recurring theme of discussion within the field. In 2000, the STAT Council acknowledged the value of both the teacher’s hands and words.¹³⁷ Their statement identifies the hands as the means to improving a student’s conditions of use, especially their sensory

appreciation, and the words as the means for instructing a student in what they can do for themselves. It does not go so far as to suggest what the student should do between lessons. But as it assigns value to verbal instruction, we can assume that verbalizing what to do between lessons can be part of a teacher’s pedagogy.

Most teachers suggest lying down at home because it connects to what occurs in the lesson. It is simple to learn, can be used immediately, and gives the student a sense of control.¹³⁸ Teachers who support their students in experimenting right away can emphasise the educational value of working independently on themselves and suggest their students explore while lying down.¹³⁹ Misha Magidov told his students he expected them to work on their own by lying on their back and using what they learned in the lesson during daily activities. If the student resisted, he would argue that working on the self was no less important than bathing and grooming daily.¹⁴⁰

Meanwhile, many learners who may already have the motivation to work on their own do not always receive instruction from their teacher. Sheike Hermelin thus asks teachers to show students the key to what they can do for themselves before a student asks, ‘Who is going to do it to me when you are not around?’¹⁴¹ Along similar lines, Adam Nott voices concern about students becoming too dependent on the hands-on work:

I come back to the question ‘Why are we trying to teach what we are trying to teach?’ Is the point of the lesson to enable the pupil to work on himself and use the Technique in his everyday life? If it is then it is essential that we do not neglect the mental process. The danger of the skill which has been developed through generations of learning to use the hands, is that pupils are given something they cannot cultivate on their own and so become dependent on teachers.¹⁴²

¹³⁵ Rodrigo Suarez, ‘Daily Reminders to Pupils’, *Statnews*, Vol. 6, No. 25 (2008), p. 9. See also Alexander’s use of the same, probably Carrington’s inspiration, in *Universal Constant in Living*, p. 87. ‘Where they chiefly go wrong is “forgetting to remember” to inhibit [...]’

¹³⁶ John Hunter, ‘Cult of the Hands’, *Statnews*, Vol. 11, No. 5 (2022), p. 17.

¹³⁷ STAT Council, ‘The Need for the Use of the Hands in Teaching the Alexander Technique’, *Statnews*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2000), p. 9.

¹³⁸ Peggy Ingham, ‘Working with a Cancer Support Group’, *The Alexander Journal*, No. 14 (1995), p. 32.

¹³⁹ Eckhart Richter, ‘The Application Approach: Innovation or Heresy?’ *The Alexander Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1988), p. 36.

¹⁴⁰ Magidov, ‘Personal View’, p. 6.

¹⁴¹ Alexander, ‘Interview: Shike’, p. 155.

¹⁴² Nott, ‘Alexander’s Discoveries’, pp. 17–18.

But if a student is worried about becoming dependent, the teacher can explain to them that their role will become more active in time. The teacher can also support the student's wish for independence by suggesting ways of working between lessons. If the teacher prefers for the student to wait until they are more advanced before working on their own, they can suggest activities like observing how other people move.

The interplay between asking a student to 'do nothing' during the lesson so that they can receive an experience, asking them to learn to think using Alexander's principles, and showing them what they can work on when they go home is complex. Ultimately, the student lives their life outside the teaching studio, so the teacher can help them become first receptive to the instruction and then proactively independent. By failing to teach the student to work on themselves – which in some cases means caving in to the student's wishes to remain passive and have work done to them to 'fix' them – we behave more like therapists and less like educators.¹⁴³

It is up to us as teachers to help students understand how they can contribute to their own growth. There are multiple avenues of inquiry to offer. We could suggest reviewing what was covered in the lesson, spending time lying down, observing themselves (in a mirror or otherwise), watching others, practising the thinking skills of inhibition and direction, repeating the directions accurately and in the correct sequence, experimenting with changing the words one uses to inhibit and direct and observing what changes, listening to instructional recordings, and writing observations, experiences, and questions in a journal. Teachers must convey that through working on themselves, in conjunction with hands-on lessons, students may become responsible for change within themselves.

While work on the self may be considered optional for students who study the Technique, it is expected of those on a training course. Prospective teachers have the gift of spending several hours a week in the company of other aspiring teachers. This can be an ideal, supportive environment for

each trainee to take time to work on themselves. However, some new trainees do not know how to productively spend their time when not supervised until they are introduced to practical ways of working on themselves.¹⁴⁴

A primary goal of training is for the trainee to advance in their use of themselves so that it is not disturbed as they begin to learn the art of hands-on teaching. But not all trainees comprehend this; it is the job of the training director to instill in them that good use comes before putting hands on.¹⁴⁵ Even so, while trainees might understand that their path to becoming teachers includes work on themselves, they may not make the connection that working on the self during training eventually leads to teaching their students to become self-reliant and self-responsible:

In our training we learn how to work on ourselves. The better we can master this the better our teaching will be. Trainees following this line will be teaching the 'strong' version of the Alexander Technique which brings about self-reliance and self-responsibility in their pupils and not the 'please give me a nice experience and fix everything for me' attitude as will be the case of pupils of the 'weak' version [of] lessons.¹⁴⁶

Similarly, Sharyn West suggests that the training course should centre on self-work so that emerging teachers automatically encourage their students to work on themselves.¹⁴⁷ Training directors would surely be wise to offer explicit guidance and encouragement to their trainees regarding this throughline.

CONCLUSION

The term 'working on yourself' is widely used within the Alexander Technique community. Alexander instructed students to work on themselves. For some teachers and students, it means setting aside time to practise, or to think Alexandrian thoughts. Others understand it as using Alexandrian skills – primarily inhibition and direction – to deal with stimuli as they arise during the day. The value of working on yourself is expressed in many ways, and learners work on

¹⁴³ Denis Hayes, 'Letter to the Editor', *The Alexander Journal*, No. 11 (1991), p. 41.

¹⁴⁴ Brita Forsstrom, 'Group Work and Training Alexander Teachers', *Statnews*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (2017), p. 15.

¹⁴⁵ Simmons, 'Teaching Hands-on', p. 49.

¹⁴⁶ Simmons, 'Teaching Hands-on', p. 51.

¹⁴⁷ Sharyn West, 'Unleashing Self-Directed Learning', in *The Congress Papers: Advancing Global Perspectives*, ed. Paul Marsh (London: STAT Books, 2019), p. 282.

themselves with varying goals in mind. The role teachers play in encouraging and supporting their students to work on their own is vital.

Since I didn't find any published sources that voice a preference for students to *not* work on themselves, I think it is safe to assume that working on the self can only benefit the study and employment of the Alexander Technique. This is likely true whether one understands the work as time taken apart from the flow of daily life, or work as ongoing use of the principles of the Technique in life, or both. Surely as a person grows in their experience, the way they work may evolve. If there is indeed value in working on yourself, then both teachers and training directors have a responsibility to clarify what they mean by it and to instruct their students and trainees in how to work independently.

My investigation of this topic and subsequent integration of what I have learned has come far since I first considered blogging during the COVID lockdown. I now pose questions to my students more frequently: What are you attending to right now? What direction(s) are you thinking? What can you think right now to change that habitual reaction? And with some, I talk about strategies to help them remember that they can continue their thinking at home. My personal work on myself has also shifted. Whereas I previously gravitated to formally taking time to work, I now aspire more often to a continual remembering of myself so that my ability to meet the stimuli of my days with inhibition and direction is constant.

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