

# Psychosynthesis and the Alexander Technique

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## Introduction

After many decades as a practising scientist in the realm of molecular biology (DNA replication and repair, cell signalling, gene expression in development, epigenetics, embryonic stem cells, diagnosis of genetic disease and cancer), I felt a need to expand my occupations in life into the realms of art and spirituality. Although since childhood I was aware of the three realms of knowing and being as mind (objective truth), body (subjective truth) and soul (transcendental truth), I was aware that my science was taking up a disproportionate amount of my time. So, after many years of sampling the various approaches to self-exploration offered by the personal growth movement, I chose to train in the Alexander Technique. I had done the rounds of individual and group work, seminars and the different alternative and complementary therapies and treatments available. But for me, Alexander technique seemed to be the answer because it enabled me to *take responsibility to work on myself* each moment of my waking day and in every activity, whether mental, emotional or physical. Today, I still have great faith in the technique and see it as a valid approach to self-mastery. Yet something still seemed to be lacking. During my own training in the technique and while working with my pupils, I found that release of tension in the body would sometimes be accompanied by overwhelming emotional upheavals. At such times, fellow trainees would simply notice with understanding and compassion and continue with their own work. As a teacher, I have learned to be with pupils during periods of emotional release, to wait quietly and sympathetically, and then proceed, perhaps more slowly, with the teaching. The philosophy is that as the physical back becomes stronger it is able to support more opening of the body over the regions of chest, heart and stomach and, in my experience, this is what happens. Opening the front of the body is equated to opening to vulnerability. It is also quite a courageous confronting of the world outside ourselves.

I believe that psychological and emotional disturbances are slowly resolved during Alexander training. Nevertheless, I have always felt the process to be incomplete, in that we do not directly deal with the roots of our basic emotions – grief, terror, rage, shame and despair. In our training, we are taught that we may have emotions, but our primary concern is about the choice as to whether or not we let these emotions pass into the body. Many people criticise Alexander teachers for their apparent lack of visible emotion and associated body movement (hence the label, 'Alexandroid'). However, these critics may be lacking in perception and awareness. They may not be able to see that the greatest depth of passion and emotion can be felt and portrayed in

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stillness. The Alexander teacher is taught to trust that emotional upheavals resulting from release in the body will resolve in their own good time. Alexander technique is certainly not in a hurry. My own inclination, perhaps born out of so many years of scientific discipline, is one of leaving no stone unturned. I am impatient and unwilling to wait for the answers to come so slowly. I felt the need to look more intensely into my own emotional status and its history. Hence, after completing the Alexander Technique training, I decided to train in Assagioli's Psychosynthesis. Each training takes place over three years.

I have been aware throughout the Psychosynthesis training that it is wonderfully complementary to the Alexander Technique. I hope I can convey a flavour of this in this brief article. The Alexander training is concerned with psychophysical awareness and conscious constructive control in the use of the self. Although, Assagioli's Psychosynthesis claims to be concerned with the body as well as with the emotions and transpersonal dimensions (a term often used when avoiding the word 'spiritual'), its attention to the body falls far short of that provided by Alexander Technique. On the other hand, it directly addresses the aspects which Alexander Technique leaves students to resolve by themselves – the psychic and emotional disturbances. I consider that these two disciplines together provide a complete and integrated approach to self-realisation.

## Life is Essentially 'Good'

*For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so. Shakespeare.*

One of the basic tenets of Assagioli's work is that life is essentially good. This is perhaps a difficult concept for a Judeo-Christian community indoctrinated with the duality of heaven and hell, good and evil, right-doing and wrong-doing. Yet alongside our Judeo-Christian dogmas runs a stream of myths and fairytales, familiar since childhood, which hint that this duality may not be the only truth. Certain myths and fairytales portray apparent evil as simply the absence of goodness. It is the familiar question as to whether darkness exists of its own accord, or whether darkness is simply the absence of light.

While watching Disney's version of Hans Christian Andersen's *Sleeping Beauty*, it seemed to me that it was all very well for Princess Aurora – young, beautiful, loved and cared for by all. She would have no problem at all in expressing, or reflecting, pure love. But my heart went out to the 'evil' fairy, Carabosse; shunned and rejected, uninvited to the party. Self-destructive, resentful, seething with hatred and seeking revenge – all clearly brought about by the absence of love. Recently, too, on the underground in London, I noticed a poster advertising the ballet. Again, I was struck by the cruelty (and the ageism) with which Carabosse is portrayed – old, arthritic, wrinkled and sallow. No doubt she would also be toothless if she were allowed to smile. But there are no smiles for Carabosse.

Is evil the absence of love? So, I must look further into my experience into the question of the duality of good and evil. The resolution comes not from my thinking on this question, but by way of direct experience of the workings of the Alexander Technique. The experience, simply stated, is that *when I eliminate the wrong-doing, the right comes through of its own accord*. You will notice that I say the 'right', and not the 'right-doing', because the 'right' may not necessarily be a

'doing' at all. As we proceed through this article, we might find a better term for 'right' – maybe 'harmony', 'poise' or 'balance' – but for the moment, I wish only to make the point that the experience is something that seemingly comes as a gift, or a state of grace, and not something we can do or attain by a certain set of activities of the body. Eliminating the wrong-doing is more akin to 'un-doing' or 'getting out of one's own way', as we shall see below.

Are there other arguments that life is essentially good? I often look to the creatures of existence for answers. Certainly, I consider that the concept of evil is human; it is a human thought construct. The trees, the birds, the foxes and squirrels in my garden do not operate in a world in which evil, – in terms of a force which means them harm, – plays a part. They may sometimes suffer from cold or hunger or 'designs' on each other (the threatening call of the tawny owl and the squeaks of his captured prey are common night occurrences) but, to my eyes, the 'default' state is one of celebration. That is, like Newton's second law of thermodynamics, the creatures of existence will rest or play (visibly enjoy their aliveness) unless propelled by some external force to do otherwise. In my own case, not feeling particularly enamoured with the status of human being (in fact, I feel rather the reverse), it is a simple step, born of observation, to see that there is no evil but that "human thinking makes it so." One memory from the teachings of a spiritual master, Shree Rajneesh, which is indelible upon my being, is his saying, "Existence is not against you. Existence has given birth to you. She loves you." This means to me that to grow, to flourish, and to be in harmony with all – this potential is my very birthright.

We come into the world with all that is required for harmony and balance in the life ahead of us. Small children, when they first begin their physical activity in play, are beautifully balanced. The disproportionately heavy weight of the skull of a two-year old is delicately poised on a perfectly balanced spine in a body that hinges like a little anglepoise lamp in all the right places. What happens to distort this balance – even by the time we are six years old? Alexander maintained that 'wrong-doings' multiplied thousands of times become indelibly imprinted, or 'wired in', upon the developing being, resulting in distorted patterns of responses to the constant stream of stimuli in life. Distortions result from physical, mental and emotional 'wrong-doings' in response to a world that seems to be against freedom, against authentic true being. The conveyers of the 'right-doing' (parents, priests, teachers, politicians) believe that their impositions are for the best. They are oblivious to the possibility that 'imposed doing' of any sort may be stunting the child's natural growth. Very few people in our society consider that the task of the mentor is primarily to enable the new being to flourish in its own unique way.

Although distortions inevitably accumulate, the birthright for fulfilment of potential, though latent, miraculously survives. This is the positive, good news part of the story. And it is where F. M. Alexander and R. Assagioli had much in common. Both believed that goodness and right-being were the essence of human existence, and that a latent sense of a harmonious self could be revealed by stripping away the psychophysical and emotional distortions built up since birth. Alexander's tenet was that in all walks of life, in all human activity (mental, physical, emotional), there is a misguided emphasis on trying to get things right and too little attention paid to what has gone wrong in the first place. He maintained that 'getting things right' places an undue emphasis on gaining an end, rather than on paying proper attention to the 'means whereby' the response to a stimulus is activated and performed. This state of 'doing too much' and end-gaining inevitably overlays natural functioning with super-imposed tensions to the system which in turn distort

the natural balance of the psychophysical being. Even trying to see, or trying to think, can interfere with the efficient functioning of eyes and mind (memory). In a similar way, Assagioli asserted that individual human beings carry within them unspoilt qualities of peace, harmony, joy, radiance and wisdom; and that these pure qualities become layered with distortions built up by early trauma and continual disturbances throughout life. The approach of both men is to bring the distortions into the light of consciousness and, at the same time, to make clear the potential of the latent pure qualities needing to emerge once again. Their methods are different but their intentions to encourage the emergence of the inherent best being in each of us are the same.

## Taking Responsibility

*God helps those who help themselves. Mum and others*

Nowadays, we look to the medical profession as a service. It is there to provide a 'quick fix' to our ailments – those things that go wrong in the body. The same approach is taken by many towards the complementary health therapies. We tend to go to the doctor or therapist with our depression, fatigue, headache, stomach pain, respiratory disease, skin disorders and many other symptoms of stress (tension), and ask for help to alleviate our suffering. The doctor may prescribe pills, ointments, medicines and treatments of one sort or another. But how would we feel if the doctor said, "Well now, how have you done this to yourself?" Yet, in many cases, this approach would be the most true and the most helpful for, more often than not, we do not take the time to consider our own relationship to the age-old basic rules for good health: – appropriate diet, exercise, rest, sleep and avoiding stress. Nor are we educated to take responsibility for our own health and well-being. Modern medicine is about illness, not health. It is interested in disease and takes the responsibility (and fattens the drug companies) for prescribing 'fixes' for ailments that are primarily caused by our own lack of care for ourselves. Today's human beings are not remarkable for taking responsibility. That is why the story of F. M Alexander's struggle to find the solution to his own particular ailment is so inspiring for us all.

Frederick Matthias Alexander was born into a large rural family in Tasmania, Australia, in 1869. He was a separate, and perhaps somewhat difficult, child with a passion for acting and reciting on stage. In his late teens, however, his passion to act and to recite was severely compromised by a tendency to lose his voice. He visited many doctors and specialists of throat disorders, but nobody could find an anatomical or physiological defect to explain his loss of voice. He was advised to rest, and in so doing, his voice would return; but as soon as he would recite again, his voice would become hoarse and weak. Alexander made a simple observation that many of us would be unable to make (although we may not like to admit it). He saw that *it must be something that he was doing when engaging in this activity that was causing his problem*. This initial step of taking responsibility for his problem was the starting point of a determined, thorough and painstaking scientific investigation by Alexander of his own use of himself.

'Use of the self' is an Alexandrian term that may need qualifying. The best approach to understanding use of the self is to consider the way we use various tools in life. We pay attention to the shape and feel of a pen, a saw, a toothbrush, a golf club, and so on, and consider whether the tool will function well in the task intended. After purchasing a food processor, a new car, or a video recorder, we will read the instruction manual and give some time and thought to the proper

use of the new equipment. We pay attention to proper use since we are aware of the simple universal law, 'Use affects function.' Its colloquial addendum, 'Use it or lose it', is also important. Examples of this, well-known in biology, are vestigial organs (tonsils, appendices, ear muscles), lack of development of blocked or 'blinded' organs in new-born animals, atrophy of unused leg muscles, and so on. Proper use of ourselves is vitally important for maintenance and appropriate function. But do we pay any attention to the way we use ourselves in daily activity? The means whereby we use ourselves – whether distorted, tense and unbalanced, or poised, flowing and free – will profoundly affect the possibility of continued function as well as efficiency of function and, just as importantly, pleasure in activity. Poor use of the self is a constant force for deterioration in muscles and joints, and in mental and emotional well-being. Good use of the self is progressively enhancing to overall health and well-being. Evidence for the effectiveness of Alexander training on health-enhancement is rife – for example, increased lung capacity, lowered blood pressure, less expenditure of effort in activity and more balanced emotional and intellectual presence.

Alexander observed that in response to the self-given stimulus to recite, his pattern of response in taking up a 'reciting stance' was to pull the heavy weight of his skull back and down on the top of his spine. This resulted in a shortening and narrowing of the back and a gripping with the feet that distorted overall balance. The second stage of Alexander's enquiry was to try to change this pattern of response. The frustration of trying to break a habit of this sort would be enough to deter most of us, but Alexander's determination was quite remarkable. He first tried imposing the "doing" of something different – *trying to do it right*. However, thrusting the head forward caused more problems – more tightening of the throat and restriction of breathing and of the diaphragm. He then realised that he must simply eliminate the wrong pattern and not try to superimpose what he thought might be the right pattern. The third stage of his investigation might be considered as a still more difficult hurdle. He had to *break his conditioned response pattern to the stimulus* to recite. After many months of perseverance, Alexander had finally developed his method. Stated simply, he had learned to put a pause between stimulus and response and, in that pause, to give himself mental orders both to release any unnecessary tension and to encourage new direction. He mentally ordered his neck to be free to *allow* his head to go forward and up in relation to the top of his spine (thus freeing the joint between head and spine). As a result of these mental orders, he would experience his back lengthening and widening as if of its own accord (in response to his having 'got out of the way'). This experience is due to the natural postural reflex (through the spine) mechanisms now able to come into play. The job of the natural postural reflex mechanism is to govern a lengthening process in the body in response to gravity – the very experience of lightness of being that is so often reported by the Alexander pupil.

The pause, or hiatus, inserted between stimulus and response and the releasing of inappropriate tension is called *inhibition*; the new mental orders are called *direction*; and the proper relationship between head, neck and spine, undergoing delicate readjustments moment by moment, is called *primary control*. Thus Alexander had solved his problem and, moreover, he found that the same principles could be applied to solve or eliminate any problem in human functioning where the individual concerned was willing to seek out the wrong-doing in activity and to apply new conscious control over his use of himself. We will now look at the principles of Alexander technique in relation to the main principles of Psychosynthesis in order to observe the ways in which they are parallel and complementary.

## Inhibition and Dis-identification

*Give thy thoughts no tongue, nor any unproportion'd thought his act. Shakespeare.*

A common hypothesis to both Alexander Technique and Psychosynthesis is the existence of a unique *self*, with pure qualities of love and will, needing to emerge from underneath the covering layers of accumulated distortions. Distortions, according to Alexander Technique, are the habitual patterns of faulty psychophysical use in response to stimuli; in Psychosynthesis, they are inappropriate, exaggerated or damaging behavioural responses. It is also common to both disciplines that the *self* needing to emerge is always present, so, in a sense, the emergence is one of re-membering. In fact, Alexander technique is classified as *re-education* of the individual in proper use of the *self*. It is also common to both that the process of stripping away the layers of accumulated distortions requires 'conscious constructive control' (Alexander's term). By this, we mean that the work is done initially through a properly trained mind aided by the engagement of conscious will, or intention.

Another term used by Alexander is 'inhibition'. There are many ways to see the concept of inhibition. Perhaps the simplest representation is that of saying 'no' to immediate (and therefore habitual) response to a stimulus: The telephone rings; there is a shove in a crowded place; there is a move to sit, stand, write or play a musical instrument, switch on the TV or hit a tennis ball (the reader will get the idea of any and every daily activity). The response must be to say 'no' to responding at all. This is in part 'inhibition' – it is the first step towards breaking the habitual wrong response pattern. Even when I think I am doing nothing, I must practise inhibition because, in fact, there is never a time when I am not responding to a stimulus. It may be a thought or an emotion and, if I remember, I can say 'no' to that thought or emotion entering my body to change it in some way. For example, if I feel 'down', then I say 'no' to the response of pulling down in the body. So 'inhibition' is simply staying very aware of the constant stream of stimuli that come into the mind – stimuli wanting a mental, emotional or physical response – and saying 'no' to responding to a stimulus in any way other than noting it. (I, myself, assume that all emotional and physical responses also start with a thought).

Of course, this is a very tall order, and often I am not aware that I am carrying thoughts, feelings and muscular tensions that are a pattern of response to a *previous* stimulus until a clear new stimulus attracts my attention. Then the task of 'inhibition' is to release all aspects of the old pattern, as well as saying 'no' to responding immediately to the new stimulus. The practice of 'inhibition' means that I do not carry over a psychophysical pattern belonging to a previous event into my response to the new event. I clear the system. Before responding to the new event, I also must practise the next Alexander principle: 'direction.' The practice of inhibition and direction means that my response will be from a more balanced and clear space and therefore it is more likely to be an appropriate response. It will also mean that my neck will be free to *allow* my head to go forward and up in relation to the top of my spine, which will be lengthening back and up. Another way of seeing inhibition in more physical terms is that I will stay back (the physical back stays back) from the stimulus. I will not be pulled into it. This will all become clearer when I say more about direction and choice, below.

In the practice of Psychosynthesis, one of the key principles is *self* identification – a conscious and disciplined process of dis-identification from the mind, the emotions and the physical body. In my own experience, practising dis-identification is very similar to the concept of inhibition. In affirming that I am more than my thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, I am visualising myself as so much bigger than the content of these faculties that the content itself diminishes in significance. Indeed, combined with meditation (releasing tension, staying alert, watching, non-censoring and letting go of desire for a particular outcome), the practice of dis-identification can approach the same state of still and silent readiness that comes about in the practice of inhibition and direction in Alexander Technique. This is the state we yearn for, i.e., 'nothing happening but anything possible', – and that is so beautiful to see in the total 'being-ness' of a young child.

## Direction, the Will and Choice

*This above all – to thine own self be true. Shakespeare.*

In a small child, the natural orientation of the head to the neck and back is such that the joint between the heavy skull and the delicate top vertebra of the spine is free (the jaw is also jointed here and the position of this joint is between the ears). Over 90 per cent of stimuli are received in the head (sight, smell, taste, sound, thought) and, if the head is delicately balanced and free to respond, the lengthening back follows this response in a flowing and free way. Alexander found that it was necessary to give a powerful positive mental order to will this natural orientation to come back into play. Combining 'inhibition' and 'direction', we say, "*Let the neck be free to allow the head to go forward and up in such a way that the back lengthens and widens.*" Note that the instructions do not imply that the pupil will **do** anything. The pupil is instructed simply to give mental direction and *trust* that the thought will be understood and translated by the body into an appropriate response. The teacher's presence and gentle guidance with the hands will confirm this. Inhibition and direction practised in this way ensure the best possible poised and balanced place from which to make a response. It is clear that a free and balanced psychophysical self is more likely to respond appropriately to any stimulus. Alexander maintained that a contorted, distorted body would result in distorted mental, emotional and physical perceptions of the events occurring in the outside world.

Now, and only now, the individual is ready to respond and now there is choice. Simply put, – the individual may choose not to respond at all; to respond in a completely different manner than usual; to do something completely irrelevant (a useful choice with adolescent kids); or, of course, to respond in the old habitual way (although in the latter case, now there is something very different – a *choice* to do this has been made).

Alexander technique is therefore a form of self-mastery in that its practice allows me to have a choice from a free and balanced place of how to respond moment by moment to the constant stream of happenings in my world. It also *allows the possibility of change*. Not that it is *about* change; but, in unlinking habitual response from stimulus, it opens the possibility of responding differently. Ingrained habit is the most difficult barrier to change.

Now, how is this aspect of direction and choice seen in Assagioli's Psychosynthesis? Clearly it is in Assagioli's concept of the 'Will' in all its forms. Primarily, the Will is an intention (mental

image) that translates itself into physical embodiment and action. The Will in Psychosynthesis has a directive and regulatory function, balancing and integrating the energies of the being. Alexander's own words, "conscious constructive control," could as equally apply to the Will of Assagioli as it does to primary control. The main aspects of the Will as strong (intensity of energy for action), skilful (effective strategy with least effort) and good (appropriate expansion into the outside world) emanate from the *self*. Right use of Will is associated with a sense of harmony and choice, akin to Alexander's direction and primary control. The Will directs with energy, mastery and purpose; but it is *effortless*.

## Grounding and Self-realisation

*Individuation only takes place if you first return to your body, to your earth, only then does it become true. Jung.*

It is perhaps paradoxical that the aspect of grounding in Alexander Technique is strongly related to the sense of a higher self. The Alexander teacher uses gentle guidance with the hands together with quite insistent and intense verbal instruction (remember, thoughts have to be trained and the Alexander teacher must be holding, and even staying ahead of, the pupil's habitual thought patterns). With the engagement of the pupil's will, the teacher helps to bring about a new state of poise and balance in the pupil. Then the pupil will often say that they are suddenly aware of the fact that they have feet. They feel their feet on the ground solidly supporting them. They are grounded. Although they are free and flexible, the teacher will be aware that they are very strong and together (I found that the same supple, grounded strength is developed in Tai Chi). At the same time as being grounded, the pupil is aware of being in alignment with a lengthening process streaming up through the body and a sense of lightness, expansion and well-being. Every part of the bodymind is now in communication with every other part. This 'suspension structure', grounded by gravity, is also very sensitive to the world around and communicating openly and freely with this world. Pupils will often say that they feel that they are simply who they are; that they see clearly; and that this experience is very welcome. On the way to this place of togetherness and poise, the student has had to pass through many unfamiliar places, often feeling very off-balance indeed. Remember that what feels familiar feels right and whatever the pupil's habitual distorted patterns of holding, these will seem right, even if the tension is very disabling. Thus, the process requires some courage. The pupil must be willing to enter the unknown.

A similar passage may happen during the course of Psychosynthesis counselling. During a phase of intense work, the client may feel quite lost and on very unfamiliar ground. The Psychosynthesis guide will hold the true identity of the client through these lost periods and provide support and encouragement to the client to continue the exploration of who he or she really is. The realisation of a new insight or truth closer to the real self comes with grounding of these new experiences into daily life: – practising re-calling the new clarity of vision; noticing how harmoniously it fits with life; taking on new aspects of self-identity in a stable and actualised way. Thus, in Psychosynthesis too, grounding is associated with a greater sense of *self*. It opens new doors and expands the sense of being by integrating more and more acknowledged aspects of *self*, thus strengthening self-identity and lightening the burdens of daily life.



## The Meaning of Change

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time. T S Eliot.*

Of all complementary health therapies and treatments available, Alexander technique and Psychosynthesis are special in that they ask the adherent to take the opportunity to *work on themselves* in daily activity. They are not treatments administered to a passive recipient. In addition to working together, teacher and pupil also work on themselves alone. In fact, the process of giving an Alexander lesson is that of the teacher working on themselves and transmitting their own good use and strong direction (intention, Will) through non-interfering hands to the pupil. Both disciplines ask that the pupil or client be responsible for his or her own well-being and unique flowering into the best possible being that they can be, free from the imprisoning constraints of accumulated distortions superimposed on the finer qualities of his or her self expression.

But here I think lies the greatest pitfall – the desire to change. In Psychosynthesis, it is essential to stress that the goal is one of uncovering the essential qualities of the pure *self* that is *unique to that individual*. Unfortunately, this is often interpreted as trying to be a different *self*. In Alexander Technique, the emphasis is on eliminating the wrong-doing, not trying to get it right. But no matter how often this is stressed in lessons, I find that the pupil is still trying to get it right. To my mind, this is the worst affliction – wanting to change – and the danger of these disciplines is that they may *create a desire to be different or better*.

It is a common cry heard from many who have worked on themselves for years: – that they are seeking to become better or different, seeking peace, harmony, clarity, wisdom, radiance and love; but that – this is not happening. Why is it so difficult? How is that we can still be so destructive to our selves when, after so much work, we *know* what is needed and what is not needed moment by moment? Simple wrongs of excess or obsession – staying up late, eating too much of the wrong foods, not getting enough rest, not meditating when we mean to, being tired and irritable – behaving destructively despite our best intentions. What is the nature of this destructive force? Evil? Have I come full circle to disprove my starting premise? I do not think so. Instead, I believe that the destructive aspect is actually *created in response to the desire to be better or different*. Only human beings create this polarity. Does the rose want to be a lilac; does the cat want to be a dog; does the horse yearn to become a unicorn? I like to believe that the rose wants to be the best rose that it can be – a full flowering of colour and fragrance and beauty of its own true form. Life is not normally self-destructive. All desire to be other which brings destruction and frustration belongs to humankind. Desire of any form means frustration. In fact, I see satisfaction as simply the alleviation of frustration, not the gaining of the object of desire.

Our goal then is to drop goals beyond our reach and to live fully in the moment, *fully accepting and loving our unique selves*. We must let go of the wrong-doing of striving to superimpose some projection we have of who we might be. Paradoxically, coming back to who we really are opens a greater potential for who we might be; but this is not a promise. We are

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simply in with a chance to receive a gift which may shine through when we get out of the way. This will not be something we have tried to achieve, but a gift that was ours from the beginning.