

An Introduction to the Alexander Technique for Pianists and their Teachers

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A student enters the studio for a lesson in the Alexander Technique. Before her is a chair, perhaps a table and a mirror. The teacher guides the student to the chair, his hands perceptively, gently cradling her head. He says, "neck free, head forward and up."

What does this instruction mean? What is the purpose of this extraordinary event?

The words are an attempt to clarify a new language--that of kinesthesia, the sense which involves tension, position and weight. The kinesthetic sense is stimulated by shifts in bodily movements and so informs us of the ongoing quality of our movement as we participate in our daily lives. During the Alexander lesson the student experiences particular internal movement which she associates with the words that are spoken while the movement is elicited.

The purpose of the lesson is to teach her to achieve a heightened sense of awareness so she may be able to respond to the directions being given. Thus, she will learn to influence herself to achieve a degree of freedom and ease in movement and thinking which otherwise may not surface.

Alexander teachers are common on college music faculties, and the interest seems to be increasing in proportion to the number of injuries suffered. I find this unfortunate because, although cure very often results, the Technique itself is an educational process. The Alexander work encompasses much more than body mechanics and is invaluable to a performer and teacher on many levels. I also believe that students respond to this work more readily when they are not in pain. It makes more sense to teach it to musicians before they experience any difficulties and perhaps prevent the trouble altogether.

A brief history of F. Matthias Alexander and his discovery will help you understand the nature and ramifications of the Technique he developed. Alexander had been a successful

reciter in Australia for several years when he began to experience difficulties with his voice. When he recited, he became hoarse. He audibly gasped in air, and occasionally lost his voice. Naturally, he sought medical help for his problem. He was given inhalants and told to rest his voice. The problems subsided for a while until he began to recite again.

Every time he performed the problems recurred. I am sure this sounds familiar to anyone who has dealt with performance-related injuries. Alexander's first significant discovery was that while he was reciting he was doing something to himself which caused the difficulties with his voice. He used mirrors to observe himself reciting. He noticed himself pulling back his head, depressing his larynx, and sucking in air through his mouth (which produced a gasping sound). When he compared this to his ordinary manner of speaking he observed himself doing the same three things but to a far lesser degree. It is important that Alexander noticed his use during recitation far more easily than he did during ordinary speaking because it was only with excruciatingly close observation that he was able to detect those same patterns of use present during *both* manners of speaking. He discovered that when he did not pull his head back, his larynx was not depressed and he did not suck in air.

While these initial observations were profound, they were not sufficient to satisfy Alexander. In his determination to find a complete solution Alexander devoted many years to perfecting his technique. (He describes his journey toward his discovery in his book *The Use of the Self*.) He eventually realized that there was a critical relationship between the head, the neck and the back, such that when the neck remained free from being held in a fixed manner, the head would move, in response to gravity, in a direction he called "forward and up." This would elicit length along the spine, width within the torso, and contribute to a magnificent ease and lightness in being. He termed this the *Primary Control*.

This direction, "forward and up," may need some clarification. "Forward" is the movement of the center of gravity of the head. It is a direct result of the freeing of the neck muscles as they attach both to the head and the upper torso. The movement "up," resulting from the movement forward, calls forth a length along the spine and movement through the whole body which allows the student to experience natural length and width. Though these movements follow one another, they feel as though they are happening at the same time. Alexander described this as "all together one after the other."

The Primary Control is not a posture. It is a dynamic relationship that is constantly changing as we move throughout our day. The challenge in learning the Alexander Technique is not so much to activate the Primary Control, but to avail ourselves of this relationship during our life, whether we are playing the piano or teaching or sitting at a computer--right while we are living, doing whatever we are doing.

We achieve this, in Alexander's words, by inhibiting our habitual reaction to any stimulus. By this, Alexander referred to our ability to intercept any habitual response to any stimulus. For instance, in the art of playing the piano, the pianist who always misses

a particular note in a piece has a particular way--a habitual way of preparing to play that note.

If the preparation can be addressed, the control over the note will be addressed also. The Alexander student, through an increased awareness, detects the habitual response (to the always missed note) which is present before the note is missed. She "inhibits" her usual response to that section of the music and directs herself in the fashion she has learned from her Alexander teacher, i.e., neck free, head forward and up, etc. This aids her ability to elicit the Primary Control, which allows new insight into her dilemma. All of this can happen so fast that the inhibitory process is actually renewed again and again with no beats lost. Inhibition is crucial to the learning of this technique. We continually respond to stimuli from a familiar, habitual frame of reference.

True inhibition requires us to be constantly open and attentive to ourselves so we can recognize our habits and perhaps replace them with unknown and unfamiliar responses. The process is beautifully improvisatory. "In Alexander's usage, inhibition releases rather than represses spontaneity by suspending habitual responses to stimuli long enough so that intelligent guidance and reasoning can intervene." [note1](#).

People who study the Alexander Technique do not have fewer "bad habits" than those who don't study the Technique. What they do have is a way of recognizing their habits and a way of addressing them. The Alexander Technique seeks a particular freedom from habit (and tension) which leads to a feeling of movement potential rather than one of weight and fatigue. Descriptions of the results of the work are always insufficient. Words fall short of the actual experience of a hands-on lesson. With this in mind, I would like to present some specific applications of this work. These are examples of ways in which I use the Alexander work in my teaching of piano, and in my own performances.

Tone Production refers to the quality of sound that is produced by descent into the key and is completely dependent upon freedom of the arm. Achieving freedom in the arm is not an unusual request from a teacher. It is even a common phrase among pianists. What is usually overlooked, however, is the way to do it! Arms do not free by themselves. In fact, a totally free arm would be weighty and uncontrollable. What is really expected is a poised and light arm, one that is supported by a back which is connected through a whole body that is fully grounded. Expectations of the arm alone will narrow the thinking (kinesthetic and intellectual) to that area of the body. With the guidance of an Alexander teacher a student can learn what it means to free the arms relative to the use of the entire organism. How can I free my arm if my head is thrown back (face up toward the ceiling), my shoulders raised, my back tight, and my feet not grounded?

The Primary Control is one way to address this. The teacher helps the student to free the neck, allow the head to move forward and up, and lengthen and widen the back all of which grounds the feet. The internal movement is sensed all the way to the floor as well as away from it. Now the teacher lifts the student's arm. The release through the arm adds length to the back and more freedom in the neck region. The head subtly moves forward and up again. In a continuous loop, one area frees in relation to the whole person, which,

in turn, invites more freedom and so on. The student internally feels the arm as longer, freer, and more connected to the rest of her. Unlike the isolated instructions to the arm, this type of instruction allows the teacher to address the arm's function relative to the other arm's function, the foot that is pedaling, the ears that are listening and so on. The tone produced from this state of being is always more full and beautiful than the previous attempt. I have never known it to fail! Equally exciting is the student's recognition of her new sound and an eagerness to produce this tone on her own.

As the work becomes more internalized, the student learns to welcome her own Primary Control even more and to more enjoy the sound, of her own playing. She learns to hear more keenly the differences in tone quality that are produced.

Rhythm is the single most important ingredient in communicating music. It is truly organic. The heartbeat is one pulse of the body. There are also pulses in the fluid that moves from the top of the spine to the sacrum. The body's natural pulses need the freedom to work in order to perform music with the rhythmic integrity that takes advantage of the body's own stable rhythm. Anything we do to obstruct this flow will directly influence the rhythmic flow of the piece. Sometimes we are anxious about performing and this prevents rhythmic stability. The Alexander lesson tends to have a calming effect on the student and so can address this particular problem. Sometimes we are inattentive while playing; the Alexander lesson helps us find our vitality and keep us more alert to our rhythmic pulses.

Pedalling is an area of piano study that I find very neglected in teaching. Our ability to operate a pedal freely is dependent on where we sit (how high or low, how far away) and how we are grounded through the floor or pedal extenders. If we are not grounded we need to hold ourselves up in a way that usually tightens the back and prevents the freedom of the arms discussed above. One of the activities I work with is a simple repetition of damper pedal movement while my students guide themselves away from interfering with the Primary Control. There is no need to pull down through the chest and lower back in order to operate a pedal. Far too many students pedal with the movement of their arms rather than in response to the arm movement. So the student's physical balance is totally dependent upon the pedal they are unable to release the pedal without throwing their balance off (which leads to missed notes and uncontrolled sounds). Through the Technique I have seen students change this lack of balance and this division of the workings of the arms and feet to a cooperation among them. The limbs move in concert with one another. I will never forget a student who came to me with the following common dilemma: "I practiced my right hand alone, and my left hand alone and then I tried to add the pedal. I can't seem to think of all these things at the same time." In his lesson I convinced him that the only dilemma was that of separating his body into parts instead of seeing the parts in relation to each other. He had not seen each part related to the integrated whole. In no time he was able to coordinate all the movements. It was an important lesson for both of us!

Arpeggios tend to create panic for many pianists. Those with small hands are usually the most concerned. I have never understood this because while a large hand span may feel

secure, the notes of the arpeggio are not all played at the same time. It seems that the ability to move quickly and freely from one note to the next is important; no two notes are so far apart that they cannot be connected. One of the aims of the Alexander Technique is to help a student to respond appropriately to a given stimulus. The best way to inhibit a habitual response is to catch yourself as you are about to make the response. The best way to catch yourself is to be open and responsive to your environment. If we focus on a small part, we are not prepared for the larger demands that might be coming. That is the problem with arpeggios. Many students restrict their vision to one or perhaps two octaves. Their vision is directed toward the fingers that are already prepared to play. By reminding them to expand their field of vision--which tends to happen as we free out and up into the space around--the student is prepared for what is coming instead of what she is already playing. The inhibitory process leads us to the future. It asks us to respond to what is coming rather than what has passed. It sounds so simple. It really is.

We often fail to convey the *emotional* content of a piece of music because we translate the emotion into physical gestures instead of the appropriate sound. How many have you seen a performer raise her shoulder during a climactic moment in a piece only to close your eyes and hear no excitement in the sound? The score is marked "agitato". The performer can feel the excitement building but gets lost in her own emotions. If she recognizes this and intercepts her response to the tension of the music, she can free herself to produce the sound she wants. The extraneous movements we make are often matched with extra effort. When the performer retains her intention (the sound she wants) and releases the effort she has needlessly added, she frees herself to produce the sound she desire--whether agitated, tranquil or whatever. Now the performer can detect the difference in sound as distinct from the difference in physical sensation. What before felt agitated to the performer now sounds agitated to the listener.

This example of emotional content addresses many difficulties surrounding *musical interpretation* in general. There are so many times when we think we are conveying our interpretation of the music when all we are really doing is feeling the effect of what we are trying so hard to do. Some students sound as though they *haven't* thought about their music in the least. What is often the case is that they *have* thought about it. They have even made some astute observations that they are trying to communicate. What seems to be the trouble is not their musical ability at all. It is their inability to get the sound they hear through their body and out of the fingers without impeding the flow of this movement. In this instance the Alexander Technique can be a way of liberating the student to communicate all that she has wished to communicate for so long.

The Alexander Technique is used in injury rehabilitation. Many pianists who complain of hand, wrist, and arm pain are suffering because they have become accustomed to using themselves inappropriately. I have worked with several pianists who have been diagnosed with tendonitis. Their problems often stem from the stressful conditions they have placed on themselves. The Technique has provided a way for them to observe themselves in a new way. This observation leads to change in many cases. When the student truly makes the changes, the pain usually disappears.

I would like to clarify what I mean by "change." A student who notices that her right shoulder is tense and raised up may try to produce "change" by putting her shoulder down. This may temporarily relieve the previous discomfort. In time, however, a new symptom will most likely occur. A student who notices the same shoulder tendencies and sees how the constructive use of the Primary Control can effect change will be more successful than the first because this student is examining the relationship of one part to a whole structure.

We must address the entire human being. Alexander carefully chose the words *use of the self* (not use of the body) because he was addressing the habitual responses of the entire person. An injured musician is injured psychologically as well as physically. There is a tendency to protect an area of pain in the body as well as protect the dignity of the individual. All of these factors must be addressed in the rehabilitative process.

The teaching of the technique is an art form in itself. A lesson usually results in the student feeling lightness and ease. There is enormous value in this. The student learns that these feelings are actually possible and, very importantly, also begins to recognize her response under these new conditions. We have all had piano lessons in which the teacher continually coached us on particular pieces of music. While we learned to play certain pieces well, we were never given the tools to examine music on our own. We were not encouraged to make our own decisions about interpretation. The real value in the work is the process through which we travel in order to reach the results that "feel" and sound so good.

The true teaching of the Alexander Technique is to show us how to really see ourselves--to recognize little idiosyncrasies without passing judgment on them--to truly hear the sounds we make; to help us recognize the things we do to ourselves that cause our dilemma; to help us understand that there are other choices that can be made besides our habit; and to guide us into realizing that the choices definitely are available to us. It is a wonderful journey toward self discovery.

I would like to add a personal note regarding my reaction to people who first suggested that I study the Alexander Technique. I had worked for some time with a teacher who truly helped me to become unencumbered physically and intellectually. I had previously tried to play the instrument quite stiffly for years. Releasing muscular tension while playing was a completely foreign idea to me. During my study with this teacher I learned how to "relax" with my playing. When it was then suggested by friends that I study the Alexander Technique, my immediate response was "I don't need it. I am most relaxed when I play the piano." I, like most others, had no idea that the Technique would offer me something other than relaxation.

The Primary Control has nothing to do with relaxation as we usually understand it. The clarity I experienced in myself with my very first lesson was stikingly new to me. I could address any issue (use of an arm use of the pedal, rhythmic integrity, etc.) through the Control. For this reason I urge anyone with the tiniest interest in this work to seek out a teacher and experience it. Words only go so far.

Some piano teachers seem to fear that the Technique is a piano technique meant to replace the technique they are teaching. It is not. This Technique deals with the workings of the human being in relationship to his environment. It is not meant to replace your teaching but to enhance it, to help its interpretation, and to help your students do what it is you wish them to do. Many of us are afraid to challenge our own ways of thinking. We become comfortable teaching in a particular way because the responses are predictable. The Technique helps us to respond to the unpredictable while allowing our perceptions to be fresh and insightful. We can be a learners as well as real participants in our students' learning.

"Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it." [note2](#)

Pooh was right. There is another way. We need only be open to finding it and accepting it.

Endnotes

Note1

Frank Pierce Jones, *Body Awareness in Action*, Schocken Books, 1979, p. 195.

Note2

A. A. Milne, *Pooh's Bedtime Book*, E. P. Dutton, 1980, p. 4.