

From Symptoms to Solutions: The Alexander Technique and Musicians

By Heather Walker

We all have the ability to be balanced and poised without stiffness and to move gracefully with less effort. We are designed with an anti-gravity reflex, which allows us to be upright with fluidity of movement. If you doubt it, watch little children of two or three years old before they have started to develop habitual tension and movement patterns. They are unconsciously using their innate ability to be well coordinated. Over the years, habits of tension will often be layered over this natural ease of movement and will prevent us from functioning well. This is especially true with cultivated habits, such as those that musicians establish through hundreds of hours of practice. The Alexander Technique is a simple and practical method for changing these habits through conscious awareness and re-education. The process of regaining this ease has more to do with “un-learning” these habits than adding anything new. A great musician once told me in a masterclass that playing my instrument should be like carving a sculpture – constantly taking away that which wasn’t needed until all that was left was the pure beauty and form. I think the Alexander Technique fits this image beautifully – it’s a process of increasing awareness, in order to let go of unneeded habits that interfere with our natural coordination.

As a music student, I suffered from chronic muscle tension, spasms, pain, and general discomfort. It would come and go throughout the year, depending on what I was doing and the overall work load of playing. I tried a number of remedies; massage, chiropractic, physiotherapy, shiatsu, exercise, and anti-inflammatory drugs, to name a few. These remedies all affected the symptoms more or less, but didn’t take away the cause of my problems. It wasn’t until I started studying the Alexander Technique that I was able to discover the overall physical and mental patterns that I was repeatedly practicing, and how these patterns were manifesting themselves in specific symptoms. Basically, I had to understand what I *was doing to myself*, and then learn to stop these ingrained habits so that my ability to function well would not be affected.

When I started taking Alexander Technique lessons one hour per week, I noticed significant changes in the weeks and months that followed. The Alexander teacher never worked directly on the symptoms that were affecting me. Instead, she gradually taught me a better overall coordination and use of my whole mind and body. My tendonitis went away, I became much more pain-free, I grew taller, and my shoulders widened significantly enough for me not to fit in my shirts anymore! But the changes were not just physical – F.M. Alexander was always specific about the impossibility of separating mental and physical – stating that we are “psycho-physical beings,” involving the whole self. I noticed a huge shift in my mental and emotional patterns, involving my ability to focus, self-confidence, and overall well-being.

It is strange that as musicians, we are often trained to pay attention to certain senses to the detriment of others. We train our ears to hear the subtleties of

tone, intonation, and attacks. We train ourselves to visually read music and relate it to rhythm, range, and pitch. We even train ourselves to work on technique – fast fingering, tonguing, breathing and all sorts of other skills. But often we are very unaware of general co-ordination, tension, and movement patterns that are a prerequisite for overall good functioning.

There is a sixth sense, the kinaesthetic sense, which is the ability of the body to feel movements, tensions, and other internal sensory experience. If you close your eyes and raise your arm up in the air you will be able to feel that your arm is extended out from you. It is this kinaesthetic sense that lets you know what you are doing with different parts of your body. It is different than touch, which is a tactile sense - the contact of the nerve endings in the skin with any outside source. Our awareness of the kinaesthetic sense is often dormant or faulty in many people and needs to be “woken up” and educated. Just as some people can’t distinguish between different pitches and timbres through their sense of hearing, most people can’t accurately tell what’s going on in their bodies through their sense of kinaesthesia. It is the job of an Alexander Technique teacher to help with this awareness and re-education. Our bodies and minds are completely interconnected, and this is what F.M. Alexander referred to as “the self”. Over-engagement or under-engagement in one area always affects the whole being. For example, if your feet are tucked under your chair and you are not allowing them to support you while sitting, then some other area has to over-engage as a result (it might be that sore back or hips.) If you lock your knees back while standing, you have blocked a part of the natural fluid movement pattern that allows you to be upright against gravity. In a corresponding sense, if you react to a certain stimulus with a habitual emotional pattern, the “physical” side is also engaged in this reaction. It is not that we don’t want to experience emotions, but that we don’t want our reactions to be unconscious and habitual, and therefore potentially damaging to good functioning in the long run. There is automatically some other part of you that must compensate for this over or under-engagement. If you are not aware of what the feet, knees, or any other part of you is doing, then your awareness is too narrowed and your kinaesthetic sense needs educating. We do not just play our instruments with our hands, mouths, and breath – our entire being resonates to allow the unique vibration that is our own personal sound.

It is possible to introduce the Alexander Technique through a workshop or a series of group lessons. This helps the students become aware of the principles of the Technique and what habits they can start to change. However, the Alexander Technique is most effective when taught privately in a one-on-one situation. The teacher uses guiding touch, what we call “hands-on work,” to help re-educate the student through the nervous system. It is the combination of kinaesthetic education with the teacher’s verbal guidance that allows the student to direct their thinking and process the information through their whole self – not just intellectually, but experientially, so that change can happen at a fundamental level. The lessons start with very simple ideas and movements such as standing, walking, sitting, and bending. We very rarely need to start directly with playing an instrument, since the ingrained tension patterns are there all the time. In fact, students often benefit more from working without their instruments at the beginning. This helps take away the

tendency of focusing too much on the end result at the expense of taking time to pay attention to the process. Most lessons also include some “lying-down work,” using a massage table so the student can learn how to prevent and release tension in a different relationship to gravity. The Alexander Technique is a lot like music in the sense that while you are learning and progressing, you are also developing a deeper awareness. There is no “end state” of perfection – it is simply a fascinating process, teaching you how to use your whole self to the best advantage, and to change long-standing habits so you can function more efficiently.