

## DOING NOTHING

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Some of you might remember the episode of Seinfeld in which George and Jerry are pitching an idea for a T.V. pilot. When asked by T.V. executives what the show is about, George replies, proudly, “It’s about *nothing!*” Not exactly the answer they were looking for, though it might be an appropriate response to the question of what the Alexander Technique is about. It is about learning to do nothing, so that the self is in an available state, one that is not committed to any particular action through unnecessary stability, but one that is free and alive, and from which all actions are possible.

When Alexander described his process of discovery in “The Use of the Self”, he wrote at length of how he had to spend considerable time deciding to do nothing, in order develop the ability to send directions that he could sustain when confronted with the decision to carry out an action. Most of us who have taught the technique for a few years have recognized that patterns of fixity or misuse do not simply appear in preparation for an action. They just become more evident as muscle tone is increased preparatory to movement. In other words, the misuse is evident to the trained eye (hand!) in the student’s postural tone when they are doing nothing. Then, when the postural set occurs, when the unconscious response to a stimulus manifests, we see it obviously demonstrated in the head being pulled back and down.

So if we look at a definition of the Alexander Technique such as that of F.P. Jones: “A method for changing stereotyped response patterns through the inhibition of certain postural sets,” we see that it is incomplete. If this were all there were to it, then we would all be doing the application approach. As the practitioner participant in Fernande Girard’s Master’s Thesis study on the experience of Contemporary Modern dancers studying the Alexander Technique, I recorded in my journal the following:

When one inhibits the immediate response to a stimulus, one stops the postural set preparing one for a particular act, and returns to a kind of neutral or habitual resting state. Generally speaking, the postural set reflects the habitual resting state, in that the tendency to pull the head back and down while at rest becomes more evident with increased effort. Therefore, someone who pulls his head back and down when moving is usually simply adding effort to a poorly organized resting state. The value of working on an activity is that, in the preparatory set, one can recognize oneself. If one can learn to recognize muscle hardening in preparation for an act, one is halfway to recognizing muscle hardening that is present always. So, after inhibiting the immediate response to the stimulus, in the classical Alexander model, the next step is to decide to do nothing, but to work on sending the directions that will not only prevent the postural set, but will also improve the habitual resting state. So, in the classical model, one spends a fair amount of time, as did Alexander, not trying to do anything, using directions to undo learned imbalance in postural tonus, and only when this is clearly accomplished does one go on to apply the new use in very simple actions, such as moving forward and backwards in the chair. However, it is also possible to learn to prevent the habitual increase in effort preparatory to movement, and then to go ahead and do the movement with the old organization supporting it. One will wind up with a less effortful movement, but one will not change, in any profound way, the underlying organization of the self. This is, I believe, what is happening in the application approach to

the Alexander Technique, in which students are encouraged to immediately apply the technique to an activity. They do in fact see improvement in the activity, but it is simply a diminution of effort, and not the deeper change in global posture that is possible with the classical work in non-doing.

This is not to say that there are not possible actions associated with specific acts that can create problems. The beginning violinist, who lifts his shoulder and stabilizes the violin by contracting his neck, may create a pattern of misuse that will eventually be apparent in his resting state. It is the job of the violin teacher to discourage this as poor violin technique. But once poor technique has become poor use, the way out of the maze is through working on the total pattern that supports violin playing, and only when this is satisfactory, going on to work on the specifics of the act. *Total pattern* is George Coghill's term for the organization of the whole which is solicited in support of particular actions; it is the total pattern that we seek to organize through the primary control. This is where our work lies, not in teaching how to do any particular thing, but in teaching the use of the self which supports action. When Alexander said that if you don't do the wrong thing, the right thing will do itself (or something like that), he could only have been referring to this total pattern, as an act such as playing the violin will certainly not "do itself".

Of course there comes a time when the improved use of the self is sufficiently developed that it is used to support most quotidian activity. But even then, occasionally at least, certain challenging or stressful activities will still solicit the old use. In this case, it seems to me, the postural set that signals the misuse is still an indication that habitual global misuse has been called forth. It is still not the "how" that needs to be looked at, but organizing the whole through the primary control so that better use can support the challenging situation.

One of my close friends, also a teacher of the Alexander Technique, once related to me how her Zen meditation teacher, a leading authority in the world of Zen, had once intimated to her that, of course, Zen is all about the body. That the open state of the self sought in Zen practice is about learning to be alert, alive and unfixed, so that, eventually, one can move through the world without responding unconsciously to stimuli. One can be more conscious.

In Zen practice, one spends an enormous amount of time in "non-doing". What is unique to the Alexander Technique is its method for learning to grapple with specific stimuli, through an understanding of the hierarchy of response – the primary control. But after we inhibit the immediate response to a stimulus, we must be careful not to end-gain and leap into doing. We must work on the use of the self in a non-doing manner to improve the resting state, the total pattern. We might not, as Zen practitioners do, sit for hours at a time just sending directions, but we should spend *some* time in non-doing. And if we want to continue to practice the Alexander Technique, and not simply settle into a new, improved habitual condition, we must continue to do this non-doing work.

It never ends. There is always some previously unrecognized misuse waiting to be discovered as we continue to peel away the layers of the onion.

“I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”

[And later]:

“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.”

Both from *Four Quartets* by T.S. Eliot