

Being more you in your body

Andrea Hughes

Andrea is an Alexander Technique teacher with a background in Television Art and Design. Email: andrehugat@gmail.com

ABSTRACT: Alexander Technique is a method for self-improvement and increased efficacy. The author describes how learning it has transformed her life and flute playing.

KEY WORDS: Alexander Technique, emotions, music

The Alexander Technique developed by Frederick Matthias Alexander in the 1890s, is a way of thinking in activity and recognising harmful tension within the body. It teaches the ability to apply the appropriate amount of effort for a particular task and to use the body in a balanced and coordinated manner.

It can be applied to any movement or thought and is often used by musicians to prevent or address problems created by long hours of practice and the pressure of performing. By understanding their own body and moving with awareness, unnecessary tension can be reduced, posture improved and the musician can perform with greater ease and confidence.

I was 13 when my flute teacher introduced me to the Alexander Technique. I remember crawling on the floor, feeling embarrassed and bemused, wondering how this was ever going to improve my flute playing. I didn't return but revisited the Technique 30 years later and by the end of that lesson I was captivated. I became so engaged in the new physical feeling of lightness and so altered personally that I decided to train to be a teacher.

Previously, I worked as a television Production Designer which was thrilling, stressful and frenetic. As my mind was always busy, I didn't know how else it could feel but I was aware of my anxiety and lower back pain. With each lesson, I was able to calm my

racing mind and became conscious that I held my breath, pelvis and lower spine tightly in response to stressful situations. I could now recognise when unnecessary tension occurred and change my response such that my anxiety and back pain melted away.

Learning to think about how you want your body to be while performing an activity is a difficult concept at first but a fitting comparison is it's like learning to drive a car. Initially, it seems impossible to hold onto dual thoughts but with practice, the brain adapts. My experience of learning the technique has brought a meditative quality to my mind. A friend exclaimed one day after a lesson, "*it's like meditation in movement*" which I thought was a lovely description. My thoughts are calmer than before and I feel open to possible outcomes rather than operating within a rigid framework of thinking. The Alexander Technique has taught me to adopt an open mind to my physicality and this has altered and created more space in my thinking generally. Previously when playing the flute, I was conscious of my arm position and the discomfort that came from holding my instrument in the air. Today, I would rather prioritise harmony and space within and my arms find their place in a less rigid way. It is not about a correct position or posture, but it's deciding how you want to be within yourself.

As teachers we are taught to work with the whole person. If the student has pain in their knee, we do not address the area directly, but observe how the person coordinates themselves. We invite them to be more consciously aware of their body and to notice how they use it. Often, a person's attention is drawn to the location of the pain and they become more physically unbalanced or held around the area which is not helpful to them. This becomes their familiar position which feels right so it becomes difficult to change.

My son began saxophone lessons when he was six years old and was so small that his right hand couldn't reach the keys. He wasn't able to hold the instrument between two hands, so he pushed his thigh forwards and used that as a ledge. Years later, he uses the same stance despite no longer needing to, with the result that his body is twisted when he plays. A system that worked well for him years ago no longer serves him but he doesn't want to change the position because it feels comfortable in its familiarity.

Playing an instrument is very much an act where mind and body are required to harmoniously work together to create a sound. Held notions of body position and undue tension used to hold an instrument can become harmful after many years of playing. If physical pain is combined with the pressures of performance, the situation can become debilitating. There are many therapies that improve mobility or alignment in a specific part of the body but Alexander Technique educates individuals to attend to their entire system; it addresses physical responses to thoughts in conjunction with a more natural use of the body.

Traditionally, Alexander Technique has been a part of the curriculum for drama and music students. It is known to improve performance and ease stage fright. If a person's ribs are free to move, their lungs can expand more and air intake is increased.

Shallow breathing exacerbates anxiety so maintaining the ability to breathe fully whilst under the pressure of performing in public benefits the performer personally and the performance overall. For the woodwind musician, breath is part of the sound quality too; if our body is tense and pulled in then the sound is poorer for it. I have recently picked up my flute again after years of neglect. I was quite good as a child (Grade 8), but after years of little practice, my skill diminished. As I became more frustrated with my poor playing, the tension in my fingers, arms and face increased and my playing worsened further until I stopped completely.

Recently, however, I have begun to be more lighthearted when playing my flute and apply Alexander Technique principles. Whilst I'm not technically much better, there are improvements to how I use myself when playing and to the sound produced. I used to have to breathe in the places marked onto the music by my teacher; knowing that you're not allowed to breathe can create psychological pressure. In later years, I would play, aiming for the breath mark and not fully engage in the music being played.

By applying Alexander principles, my mind is not focused on the breath mark and as a consequence I am more embodied, my mind is calm and free and I allow my ribs to move outwards so my lungs can take up more air. I can be attentive to the process of playing each phrase and merely arrive at the breath mark without strain. I can choose to be balanced in my feet, to maintain a spine which isn't compressed and which helps to support the weight of my arms and instrument. My fingers are now able to move freely and effortlessly as my arms are not overly tense. Finally, a strange observation perhaps, but if I think of lengthening and widening the front of my face, I can create space within the inner structure and this has a profound effect on my embouchure. Alexander principles I've found, are a natural antidote to tightening.

In a lesson, we traditionally use a chair and a firm table, though it is a creative process and the lesson is tailored to the student using a variety of activities to demonstrate the key principles, including crawling. I now understand the purpose of crawling; there is a lot to coordinate when moving one's body in a cross-pattern whilst holding the head in line with the spine. With the help of a teacher, proprioception (a sense of where one's body is in space, where it is moving and how fast), can be improved.

Some teachers have specialised in their area of expertise as any activity can benefit from its application; this ranges from swimming, horse riding to modelling (an ex-model teaches walking in high heels). The idea of the chair is to simply sit and stand while exploring the notion of not carrying out the activity until the student is satisfied that the way they will do it is with the least effort and physical distortion. The desire to carry out an action ensures that our focus remains on the end goal rather than with the preferred use of ourselves during the activity. By choosing not to commit to completing an action but instead to maintaining thoughts of length, width, and mobility as a priority, we help to prevent reducing space within. In this momentary pause of intention, we can learn to

choose how to carry out the action rather than submitting to a subconscious movement pattern or what we call inhibition (Johnson, 2019).

Table work is used to help people identify and let go of held tension. As their body is supported and therefore safe from falling, the student is encouraged to release the tension in their structure but not in the same way as we would if given the instruction to relax, which would be to release all tension. We need tension to move, but it needs to be in the right place and at the right time and this work helps to identify where we might be tightening with habit. Often, a student's stomach will rumble during this part of the lesson which may be an indication of an individual's nervous system coming to balance and changing state from the sympathetic to the parasympathetic as they release tension (Sendic, 2020).

I have often felt the restorative effect of lying in this position (known as Active Rest). A good analogy of how this feels within might be that it's like I start with my foot on the pedal of a car, revving the engine, waiting to drive. After lying in Active Rest, I find I am poised in front of an idling engine with my foot lightly resting on the pedal. Both approaches are ready for action but the idling engine is using less energy and is less impatient, but it still has the same capacity for movement. We can still achieve and move at speed when applying the principles of Alexander Technique but the journey is much more healthy and enjoyable.

Emotions and postural patterns are also intimately connected; a person's well-being is affected by how they think, move, and feel about themselves. Veenstra et al. (2016) write:

“Negative emotional states are associated with a stooped body posture...When people are metaphorically feeling down, their body posture is prone to be literally oriented downwards.”

If a stooped posture creates and maintains negative thoughts then is it reasonable to assume that an open, uplifted posture could increase confidence and personal value?

A lack of self-judgement, improved sense of autonomy and a joyful feeling in myself is my personal experience of the Technique. Being an introvert who had learned to be more extrovert, I used to feel that social situations were unbearable though I disguised it well. I would excuse myself from parties at the first opportunity to escape the tension that I was carrying within myself. I have learned to recognise my habitual patterns of thinking and responding and choose not to keep them if they're not helpful to me. As a consequence, I can now sit in group situations and thoroughly enjoy them as I feel at ease. I understand that I had subconsciously created an internal pressure within, and this created so much discomfort that I would have to remove myself from the stimulus in order to decompress my body and mind.

In summary, Alexander Technique is joyful for me. I feel embodied and it has

enabled me to maintain my energy even when life is challenging. It is about creating choice within my thought patterns. It is deciding not to lose sense of myself or make my physical self smaller when intimidated. It is deciding not to change my breathing or compress my torso when stressed. It is thinking thoughts that do not change who I am and how I perceive myself. And if I do think them, it is about being kind to myself and acting without judgement. It gives me the ability to choose how I would rather be. The Technique is not a therapy but is a method of thinking, it can be applied to all activity and response to stimuli, including playing a musical instrument.

When I play the flute now, I enjoy it and am more present, not leaping ahead mentally to the end result. My feet distribute my weight into the ground while my arms and flute are supported; being able to absorb the weight of outstretched limbs into my body. My arms no longer ache with strain so my mind doesn't have to think about them which allows more focus on the technicalities of playing. My vision is softer and lets the information come to me instead of my seeking it out. Applying the principles of the Alexander Technique to flute playing has enabled me to make friends with music again and is a kinder, more integrated place for me to be.

References

1. Johnson, P. (2019). The Science of Inhibition and End-gaining, Peer-reviewed Research on Mind, Movement, and Posture. Available at: <https://www.alexandertechniquescience.com/general/science-of-inhibition-end-gaining/#AT-inhibition-experiences> [Retrieved on 1st May, 2021].
2. Sendic, G. (2020). *Parasympathetic nervous system*. Available at: <https://www.kenhub.com/en/library/anatomy/the-parasympathetic-nervous-system> [Retrieved on 1st May, 2021].
3. Veenstra, L. and Schneider, I.K. and Koole, S.L. (2016). Embodied mood regulation: the impact of body posture on mood recovery, negative thoughts, and mood-congruent recall. *Cognition and Emotion*. 31(7). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2016.1225003>