Why Performers Need the Alexander Technique

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You're running a race, and as you run, you're throwing down stones in your path with one hand that you must dodge, or pick up with the other, as quickly as possible, just to keep going. Your coach is on the sidelines, telling you better and better ways to toss and pick up those stones.

Sounds like a nightmare, yes?

Unfortunately, it's the nightmare that most performers face to some degree each time they open their mouths or pick up their instruments in the studio and onstage, but they just don't know why. They struggle valiantly do what their teachers suggest, and to speak, sing, and play what they hear in their minds and feel in their hearts, but it just doesn't come out that way. They begin to feel strain and fatigue, anxiety about performance, and perhaps signs of wear and tear setting in. "I just need to improve my technique," they think. "A few more lessons, and I'll be all set." It rarely dawns on them that they're doing something to get in their own way, and that the solution might be to stop doing that, rather than adding on more things to do to compensate for the interference they're creating. Or if it does dawn on them, they are at a loss as to how to stop throwing down those stones in their path. It ought to be so easy just to stop—but somehow when they think of speaking, singing, or playing, and then when they start to act on that thought, it seems impossible to leave that interference out. In its various forms, such as the "preparatory set" or "making" a sound happen, interfering has become an integral part of the activity for them, a blindspot, a habit—in effect, a compulsion. In many performers, this interference can lead to discomfort, and even injury through strain. What can they do?

A Way Out of the "Habit Trap"

The Alexander Technique was developed over a century ago by an Australian actor, F.M. Alexander, who was confronted with this very problem. Despite being a success on stage, he found himself struggling with the consequences of this kind of interference—in his case, a career-threatening loss of voice. When doctors couldn't help him determine the root causes of his problem, his love of acting drove him to puzzle them out, along with a solution, on his own. Over several years of intensive self-study, he had a number of ground-breaking insights about the crucial effect of the head-neck relationship on coordination and activity, how we "use" ourselves, the nature of reaction, and the challenges of changing the habits of a lifetime. Many of these insights have subsequently been confirmed by scientific research, and his solution to his own problem has become a way out of the trap of habit for anyone willing to challenge his or her cherished preconceptions, not just about acting, or even performing, but often about life in general. That is because, as Alexander discovered, habit is a matter of the person as a whole, not just a part or a single activity. Like a tide that lifts all boats, study and practice of the Technique can produce greater ease and satisfaction in being and activity generally.

Often people who have heard of the Technique associate it vaguely with improving "posture," but that would be like thinking a still photo fully represents Fred Astaire. "Posture" is just a snapshot of what John Dewey (the renowned American philosopher of science and education, who himself studied with Alexander) termed "thinking in activity." Also called a "pre-technique" to learning any other skill, the Alexander Technique is a way of meeting any demands of life (from studying, to singing, to lifting weights or a baby, to sitting at the computer, to dealing with difficult people) with presence of mind and body, ease, poise, balance, and efficiency—and with all our physical and emotional resources at the ready.

"posture" is only a snapshot of poise in action

What Alexander found, as do students of the Technique to this day, is that what is *familiar* feels *right*, and so goes unnoticed, even if it is wrong or leads to problems. A certain dynamic balance of tension is necessary for any activity, dynamic because it must adapt exquisitely to the many differing energetic demands involved in the course of the action. Excess tensions, however, create interferences that must then be compensated for by other tensions in order for an activity to be carried out at all. The ever-increasing inefficiency of such an arrangement hurts the performance and, over time, the performer. Yet, when such tensions are habitual, or even cultivated in the course of study or performance, they fall below the radar, as it were, of our attention. It never occurs to us to question whether what feels right *is* right.

The Alexander Technique, by interrupting habit and bringing it to consciousness, helps the student to discover what really is appropriate and necessary to bring about the desired result. In doing this, the Alexander teacher will employ various means to engage students' thinking, such as gentle hands-on contact, simple activities such as sitting and standing, and verbal guidance. What students experience as perhaps the greatest challenge of Alexander lessons is letting their attention stay with the "means whereby," the *process* by which their aim will be achieved. It can be a bit shocking to experience how frantically our attention usually races ahead to the result we want to achieve, blotting out awareness of the imbalance and interference that that creates in both our psychophysical systems and our performance.

Performing doesn't just happen in a vacuum—the habits of attention and use we have in daily life are what we bring into the studio and onto the stage with us. In fact, because of fear of the unknown and the high emotional ante of performing for others, we can find our interfering habits enormously magnified, both in their effect and in their resistance to change. Then, as we aim to increase our intensity or expressivity, we simply intensify the pattern of interference; our passion fails to get across the footlights.

The Roots of the Problem

How did we get into such a pickle? Just imagine the difference between the average four-year-old and the average fourteen-year-old. Instantly two images contrast themselves in your mind's eye: the buoyant, open brightness of the younger child versus the posturing, collapsed guardedness of the teenager. Many factors contribute to this "devolution" in use: emotional slights, the desire to "fit in" by imitating adults and peers with less-than-ideal use, unnaturally long hours sitting at the school desk and in front of the TV, grossly overweighted backpacks, a culture that rewards "no pain, no gain" thinking, the assumption

that if we do not *do* something, it won't *happen*…. The list goes on and on. Over time, such distortions become not just part of every activity, but part of the child's (and then the adult's) very identity and sense of self. How could it be easy to drop such habits?

Was it always like this? It could be argued that at least since the invention of the chair, we've had an open invitation to poor use. In times past, however, students had advantages over students today: the culture around them being arguably more supportive of good use and posture than ours, especially for the nobility and the performers that entertained them, and the availability of better aural and visual models for performing than we commonly have available today. Even well into the last century, deportment was an important consideration in a complete education, helping to mitigate the effects of popular culture and social stresses on use. Now it is often only serious athletes that receive the attention to "form" that all people really need to function optimally in life and activity, and usually only in their specific sport. (Understanding this, a number of drama and music schools have already added the Alexander Technique to their curricula, including the Juilliard School and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.)

a "preparatory set" can have scary effects

For example, when modern voice students appear at the studio door in their teens and early twenties, such distortions in coordination are already in place and felt to be perfectly normal. They don't even register at all. Any added demand on such a system is almost guaranteed only to produce greater distortion and interference, leading to a cycle of frustration and anxiety, redoubled efforts, more interference, less satisfaction, and more effort, *ad infinitum*. Or until the heartbroken student gives up, diminishing his or her sense of possibilities and joy in life. Any teacher, then, who attempts to impart "technique" to compensate for such interferences—however well-intended and kindly—is like the coach on the sidelines mentioned above, offering better ways to pick up those stones while running. As challenging as it is for both teacher and student, what is needed is to learn how not to create those interferences in the first place, and how to meet greater and greater demands on energy and performance without reinstating those interferences along the way. In other words, to learn how not to throw down those stones in the first place—or at any point during the race.

How the Technique Helps

So the biggest reason why modern performers need the Alexander Technique is just to get us to the starting line of learning. We need a "pre-technique" that can restore the natural coordination that is a prerequisite to absorbing and carrying out good instruction. It also becomes a lifelong way of working in the studio and in performance, of remaining attentive to the process that will guarantee the desired outcome.

Another contribution of the Technique is preventive: any instruction that cannot be carried out fully in accord with good coordination should be rejected, or at least translated into a form that can. Not all

information from all teachers and coaches will be good information, or appropriate to a particular student, and how is a performer to judge? At the very least, to apply such information ought not necessitate excessive tension or narrowing of attention. Using the Technique makes a performer what I like to call "bullet-proof": able to benefit from the knowledge of any coach or teacher, without fear of being led astray or harmed by it. We also become more able to execute, accurately and without fuss, the technical and interpretive ideas we are interested in trying out.

The Technique also has powerful effects on the quality of a performer's dramatic performance, one that can be registered by both performer and audience. An actor or singer who is not struggling technically has more energy to spare for the life of the character being portrayed, greater access to the emotional and technical resources necessary, and greater satisfaction in the exercise of his or her craft. An instrumentalist who is wasting energy on interfering with himself may feel tremendously involved with the musical intentions of a piece, but he is really just generating intensely effortful feedback for himself, which he is mistaking for control or depth of feeling. The solution is not to make a greater effort, but to lift the obscuring veil of the effort already being made. Efficient use is inherently pleasurable for both the doer and the observer (remember the thrill of watching Mr. Astaire!), and needs no effortful "help." The performance of one who uses himself well is characterized by ease, honesty, flexibility, wholeness, depth, and directness.

From the point of view of the audience, something that seems even more magical happens when a performer uses herself well: as social animals, we respond to and even imitate what we see and hear.

We begin to resonate with the performer and reintegrate as beings. Our own coordination may be impaired, but it is always trying to right itself. A performer's gift of good use can interrupt, however temporarily, our own interferences, literally lifting us out of our seats. This is the true meaning of charisma, and we only experience it because we have it too—we just don't often realize it, thinking only special people have "it," a certain "je ne sais quoi," that flair, that élan. In addition to entertaining, a performer who uses herself well uplifts and inspires her audience *from within*.

Lastly, though it sometimes seems to get overlooked, performers are people, too. We have lives outside the studio and away from the stage with their own stresses and challenges. In dealing consistently with us as whole persons, rather than as a collection of parts, the Technique can help us in the activities and relationships of daily life, so that we can arrive at the studio or stage door in balance, integrated, dynamic, and available. No stones need block the path before us.

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