

# WHAT IS THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE? A COLLECTION OF STATEMENTS ABOUT THE WORK

Andrea M. Matthews  
Alexander Technique Center at Cambridge  
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## **About Asking the Question:**

*A university professor once visited a Zen master, asking many questions about Zen. The master served tea, filling his guest's cup, and then continuing to pour. The professor watched the overflow exclaiming that the cup was full without room for any more. "Just like this cup," the master replied, "you are so full of your own views and opinions that there is no room for any new understanding. To experience the truth you must first empty your cup."*

## **About Answering the Question:**

*Many of you have asked how to tell other people about the Dharma. One of the most important qualities to develop in sharing on all levels is to learn very skillfully how to listen, to be sensitive to the situation and to the other person. In that silence of mind, when we are really paying attention, the proper mode of communication becomes apparent. Do not hold on to any particular conceptual expression of the Dharma, or any preconceived way of being. Don't hold onto anything. Sometimes what is called for is very ordinary conversation, relating in a simple and easy way. There is a great skill involved in learning how to listen. Be open and accepting of others. Receptivity and emptiness of self make possible a wide range of understanding and sharing.*

from Joseph Goldstein, *The Experience of Insight*, pp. 158 & 168

**PREFATORY NOTE:**

My initial aim in assembling this collection of quotations was to enhance my own ability to present and discuss the Technique and to refine my thinking about the work by reflecting on what I found (and did not find) persuasive in such statements. To that end, I included every definition of the Technique available to me in print (and from one workshop). Thus the inclusion of a given statement here is not meant as an endorsement of either its meaning or mode of expression, although there are many with which I am quite satisfied. I'll leave the endorsing to you.

**STATEMENTS FROM BOOKS:**

Michael Gelb, *Body Learning*:

(p. 1) "The Alexander Technique eludes precise definition because it involves a new experience — the experience of gradually freeing oneself from the domination of fixed habits."

(p. 2, quoting Frank Pierce Jones) "...a means for changing stereotyped response patterns by the inhibition of certain postural sets."

(p. 90) "The essence of the Alexander Technique is to make ourselves more susceptible to grace."

Donald Weed, *What You Think Is What You Get*:

(p. 3) "You see, I don't think there is any one right answer to this question..."

(quoting a student, p. 4) "The Alexander Technique is the study of thinking in relation to movement."

(p. 15) "The One Thought that I want them to remember is this:

the poise of a person's head  
in its dynamic relationship with his or her body  
in movement  
is the key to freedom  
and ease of motion."

Frank Pierce Jones, *Body Awareness in Action* (now *Freedom to Change*):

(pp. 1-2) "...[the Alexander Technique] doesn't teach you something to do. It teaches you how to bring more practical intelligence into what you are already doing; how to eliminate stereotyped responses; how to deal with habit and change. It leaves you free to choose your own goal but gives you a better use of yourself while you work toward it." "[It is]...a method...for expanding consciousness to take in inhibition as well as excitation ('not-doing' as well as 'doing') and thus obtain a better integration of the reflex and voluntary elements in a response pattern. The procedure makes any movement or activity smoother and easier.... a 'means-whereby' principle in which inhibition of stereotyped responses opens the way for conscious direction and control."

(p. 4) “The Alexander Technique opens a window onto the little known area between stimulus and response and gives you the self-knowledge you need in order to change the pattern of your response — or, if you choose, not to make it at all.”

(p. 4) FPJ implies that the Alexander Technique is the “escape from the monkey trap.”

Richard Brennan, *The Alexander Technique Manual* (1996):

(p. 18) “The Alexander Technique is . . .

- A way of becoming aware and letting go of tension throughout your body.
- A re-education, so that you learn how to use your body in a more appropriate way, and avoid putting stress on the bones, joints and internal organs.
- A process by which you get to know yourself better, not only physically but also mentally and emotionally as well.
- A way of making real choices in your life, rather than reacting habitually to any given situation.
- A way of understanding how the body is naturally designed to work, and learning how to stop interfering with these natural functions.
- A technique which you can practise, with the help of lessons, that can bring about harmony and contentment in your life.”

Richard Craze, *Alexander Technique* (Teach Yourself Books series):

(p. 4) “And just to clear up a popular misconception, the Alexander Technique isn’t a *technique* in the strict sense of the word. It is simply a way of learning to move our bodies in the way that they were designed to be moved. The way we are brought up combined with the stresses and strains of modern living set us in ways of moving that cause us excess tension and misalignment. The Alexander Technique helps us to *unlearn* those habits and regain the supple poise and grace we had when we were young. Once our physical structure is free from tension and aches we automatically adopt a more positive outlook on life and an increase in our emotional well-being; our mental powers improve and we benefit from an all round improvement in the quality of our lives.”

(p. 19) [quoting STAT] “...when the natural subconscious mechanisms for balance and posture are disturbed by habitual misuse or injury the standard of our physical and mental functioning can be adversely affected. However, the appropriate muscular activity for posture is not something we can regain by simply trying harder. It involves ‘automatic’ reflex responses that, when working well, appear to support the body almost effortlessly.”

(pp. 20-21) “The Alexander Technique is about choices. We sit in chairs because we believe we have no choice, that’s all there is to it. And that’s partly right. We also sit down and stand up in a certain way because that’s the way we do it — we believe we have no choice.

“The Alexander Technique will give you an alternative. Once learnt you will have choice — conscious choice — in everything you do for the rest of your life.”

John Nicholls and Sean Carey, *The Alexander Technique*:

(p. 2) “[What Alexander discovered was] Basically, that all of us, when making efforts to do even the simplest things, physical or mental, impose on ourselves harmful tensions that restrict our performance. These tensions are not random but follow a definite pattern, compressing the whole body, making us actually shorter and narrower.

“In the process, the column of the spine is compressed and the flexible balance of the major components of the axial column, the head, the neck and the back, is disturbed and distorted. This inter-relationship of head, neck and back was identified by Alexander as being a key factor, a ‘primary control,’ in determining the distribution of muscle tension throughout the whole body.”

(p. 3) “In a series of Alexander lessons, the teacher will work with someone individually, one-to-one. He will use his hands to perceive chronic tensions and conflicting muscle pulls and then encourage the muscles into better balance and harmony. The touchstone of muscular harmony is that flexible balance of neck, head and back which we will look at more closely later. The student will not be required to undress; loose, comfortable clothing is fine, and there will be no forceful manipulations, as Alexander teachers do not attempt to re-position joints directly. Usually, the only equipment involved will be a firm, upright chair and a firm couch or trestle table cushioned with a blanket. The chair enables the teacher to work on the student while he is sitting and standing, and he will frequently move him from the chair to standing and vice-versa. This simple, everyday movement of standing up or sitting down is a useful tool for teaching someone to support himself and to move with less effort and tension than usual. Further work is done on the couch or table, with the student lying on his back, knees bent, feet on the table, and head slightly raised on a support.

“The student’s job in all this is very easy: do nothing, simply allow yourself to be guided by the teacher’s hands. This is learning at a non-verbal level, by direct body experience, but the teacher will also explain over a number of lessons how you can best help yourself between lessons. This is not done by giving you special exercises to do, but by teaching you how you can consciously avoid (‘inhibit’ in Alexander jargon) harmful tensions, and encourage (‘direct’ is the jargon word) more natural posture and movement patterns to emerge.

“It is a slow and gradual process. Each lesson lasts 30-45 minutes (the optimum learning time) and teachers strongly recommend having some lessons close together at first, to help you gain something of lasting value. The aim is for you eventually to become your own Alexander teacher, able, with growing awareness, to monitor your own ‘use’ and improve it indefinitely.”

Wilfred Barlow, *The Alexander Technique*:

(pp. 3-4) “The Alexander Principle states: that there are certain ways of using your body which are better than certain other ways; that when you reject these better ways of using your body, your functioning will begin to suffer in some important respects; that it is useful to assess other people by the way they use themselves.”

(p. 7) “The Alexander Principle says that USE AFFECTS FUNCTIONING.”

Richard Brennan, *The Alexander Technique: Natural Poise for Health*:

(p. 2) “The Alexander Technique is often viewed as a technique of breathing and posture, but this is only a small part of what it really involves. It is, in truth, a method of becoming more aware of ourselves as we go about our everyday activities. We soon begin to notice, when performing the simplest of tasks, that we may be putting an enormous strain on our bodies without realizing it.”

(p. 3) “An Alexander lesson consists of two parts:

1. To help the pupil detect and let go of excessive tension that has been held unconsciously in the body.
2. To help the pupil find different ways of moving that are easier and more efficient, thus reducing wear and tear on body structure and internal organs.”

(p. 4) “The teacher will then take you through a series of movements so that he will be able to find out when you are tensing your muscles unnecessarily. You will explore new ways of moving to bring about a more natural coordination of the body....

“The Alexander Technique is referred to as a re-education rather than a therapy, because the practitioner is teaching you about yourself. If any disease is cured in the process then it will be by you that is curing yourself.

“Although the effects of the Technique can be far reaching it is, at the same time, simple and can be understood by everyone. The important qualities to have are patience and a willingness to learn about oneself. In some cases people cannot grasp some of the basic principles because they are looking for something more complicated.

“The Alexander Technique is often grouped with various forms of complementary medicines, but it stands in its own right, being quite unique. This is because it gives each and every one of us the responsibility for our own well-being. We are encouraged to think for ourselves, so it is a useful tool for awareness and self-development....”

“When we begin to apply the principles in our lives we see that we are not learning anything new; rather, we are unlearning. Alexander was often heard to say, ‘If you stop doing the wrong thing the right thing will happen [(p. 6)] automatically.’”

Robert Rickover, *Fitness Without Stress*:

(pp. 18-19) [quoting Barlow] ““The Alexander Technique, briefly, is a method of showing people how they are misusing their bodies and how they can prevent such misuse, whether it be at rest or during activity.””

Glynn Macdonald, *Alexander Technique*:

(p. 7) “The Alexander Technique is about learning *how* to change. It is not a magic formula but a careful method of learning about our mind and body so that we can begin to eradicate the faults and habits that are holding us back.... We can begin to watch how we stand, walk, speak, sit, work at our

desk or at the kitchen sink. We can observe how we deal with our children, parents, partners and friends; with success, failure, disappointment, anxiety, competition and fatigue. We can change ourselves and learn how to work as a unit so that we can have more time and space. We can gain the freedom of choosing how we operate, both within ourselves and in the outside world. The Alexander Technique is about making life easier by working *with* our mind and body, not struggling against them.... the Alexander Technique is the means of achieving one's purpose in relation to finding a better way of using oneself."

Judith Leibowitz and Bill Connington, *The Alexander Technique*:

(p. xv) "The Alexander Technique is a subtle method for changing habits and attitudes, which releases the body and mind, enhances body awareness and functioning, and gives the body new freedom, coordination, and energy."

(p. xvii) "The body functions with maximum efficiency when all its parts are in dynamic balance with one another. When excess tension is released, it is as if a heavy weight is lifted off the body; there is often a sense of relief and of wonder at how much easier movement can be. This letting go of excess tension helps the body release to its full height without straining, thus taking weight off of the joints so that they can move more freely. The Alexander Technique helps you achieve this freedom, not through programmed exercises, but through a mind/body awareness of how you are functioning in daily life."

John Gray, *The Alexander Technique*:

(p. 13) "The Alexander Technique is a process of psycho-physical re-education: by inhibiting automatic habitual responses it allows you to eliminate old habits of reaction and mis-use of the body and, through more reliable sensory appreciation, brings about improved use and a more appropriate means of reaction.

"As teachers we are often asked what we do and what the technique is. The explanation given above is quite a mouthful and tends to shut people up, so it is often better to stick to simpler terms like 'kinaesthetic re-education,' 'a way of teaching you to react more appropriately,' or 'a way of eliminating unnecessary tension in the way we move, react and use our bodies.'"

Barbara Conable, *How to Learn the Alexander Technique*:

(p. 1) "The Alexander Technique is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support, flexibility, and coordination. It enhances performance and is therefore a valued tool for actors, dancers, and musicians. Practice of the Technique refines and heightens kinesthetic sensitivity, offering the performer a control which is fluid and lively rather than rigid. It provides a means whereby the use of a part — a voice or an arm or a leg — is improved by improving the use of the whole body."

Judith Stransky, *The Alexander Technique*:

(p. 4) “The Alexander Technique is *not a cure*. It is *not a treatment*.”

“The Alexander Technique is a series of lessons that *teaches you how to move* in all activities, from the simplest to the most complex, in the most natural and easy manner. It teaches you a basic pattern of good use, which gradually becomes your natural and constant way of moving. It teaches you to unlearn the poor habits that you have developed, caused by tension and causing more tension, and to experience again the free, easy and natural way of moving that you once had before the poor habits set in.”

Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It*:

(nn) “It is the discovery by F. Matthias Alexander of the natural rhythm within the human body which exists in the sensory and motivating nerve circuits. This essential rhythm has become distorted in most people, and such distortion becomes the principal cause of most of the ill-health and distress of many so-called mental and physical diseases.

“The Technique sets out to re-educate the sensory and motivating nerve circuits of the whole body by means of a series of half-hourly lessons during which time the teacher, by a number of simple limb and body manipulations, allows the pupil to become aware of the correct sensory awareness in how to use the whole body. This sensory awareness grows stronger and stronger until the pupil is able to use the body correctly and to put the body into the best position of advantage in all daily activity so that any lapse into the old habits of misuse can be avoided.... If one’s sensory appreciation is false — *all else is false*.”

Steven Shaw and Armand D’Angour, *The Art of Swimming*:

(p. 22) “Built on the principle of developing *self-awareness in action*, the Technique is a system of *psychophysical re-education* – a means of increasing our control over the way we act and think...an awareness of how our thoughts affect our actions.”

An idea from reading J.V. Fenton, *Practical Movement Control (Choice of Habit)*: AT is attention without tension.

## **FROM BROCHURES AND FLYERS:**

From the ATI Website:

[following a discussion of use of AT by actors, athletes, persons of renown in various fields; also of particular health benefits] “The common factor in all these aspects of life is that how we are using ourselves — the way we do things — affects the results we get. The Alexander Technique is a means

of improving that use. It has been called a ‘pre-technique’ which people can apply to furthering their own special skills and activities. It is also essentially a preventative technique with which we can learn to improve and maintain our health.

“...basically you will learn an attitude of not trying to gain your ends at any cost and at the same time how to prevent your present harmful habits that cause unnecessary stress and restrict your capabilities.”

Soho Center for the Alexander Technique:

“...Alexander’s method challenges the mind/body dichotomy, teaching us to live life at the juncture where mind and body meet. The Technique helps us to recognize the unconscious physical impedance we bring to every action, and teaches us how to create greater freedom so that we may be more effective in the world.”

“...FM Alexander uncovered a mechanism which governs coordination of the body: he called this the primary control. He also discovered how to access that mechanism through thought...The scope of the Alexander Technique is no less far-reaching and profound than the capacity to choose how we exist within our own skin at each moment of our waking lives. When we activate the primary control through our thinking, our body and mind achieve a level of integration that makes activity easier, while improving the quality of performance. This applies not only to performance in the usual sense, but also to how we execute all daily activities such as sitting and walking.”

1994 Sweet Briar Workshop flyer:

“We are designed for movement. Inherent in this design is an incredible capacity for ease, flexibility, power, and expressiveness.... All too often we unwittingly interfere with this design as we perform our daily activities. Energy, delight, and grace give way to effort, tension, and fatigue.

“The Alexander Technique offers us a joyful, systematic look into the underlying principles which govern human movement. When applied, these principles guide us to a dynamic experience of kinesthetic lightness, wherein thinking becomes clearer, feeling accessible, sensations livelier, and movement more pleasurable. Within this fluid, more conscious condition, we find our actions and interactions strengthened and refined, our sense of time expanded, and our rapport with the environment restored.”

1989 TASP Brochure (Fertman School, Philadelphia):

“In Alexander Technique classes we learn how to consciously sense and relinquish our ineffectual movement patterns. In the absence of these patterns, we become sensitive to the presence of a deeper, more primary pattern of co-ordination ... Integrally connected to this process is the refining and enlivening of our kinesthetic sense. A more reliable kinesthetic sense heightens the use of our other senses. Thinking becomes clearer. Feelings become accessible. Movement becomes integrated. We explore how this improved use of ourselves influences the quality of our actions and interactions and how it affects our relation to the environment, our sense of time, and ultimately, our sense of ourselves.”



1993? The Alexander Foundation (TAF) flyer (Fertman School):

“The Alexander Technique is a joyful, systematic inquiry into the underlying principles which govern human movement. When applied, these simple and profound principles guide us to a dramatic condition of kinesthetic lightness wherein thinking becomes clearer, feeling accessible, sensation livelier and movement more pleasurable.

“The Alexander Technique offers us a reliable means for consciously sensing and relinquishing ineffectual movement patterns. In the absence of these patterns, a deeper, more primary pattern of coordination emerges. The quality of our actions and interactions improve[s]. Our rapport with the environment, with time, and with ourselves expands, and becomes heightened, strengthened, unified.”

1993 Conable Workshop Brochure (Columbus, OH):

“The Alexander Technique is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support, flexibility, and coordination. It enhances performance and is therefore a valued tool for actors, dancers, and musicians. Practice of the technique refines and heightens kinaesthetic sensitivity, offering the performer a control which is fluid and lively rather than rigid. It provides a means whereby the use of a part (e.g., voice or bow-arm) is improved by improving the use of the whole body.”

1993? Performance School flyer (Seattle, WA):

“The Alexander Technique is usually described at first in terms of its benefits: greater flexibility and comfort, increased energy and ability to deal with stress, more effective and efficient performance of both daily and professional activities, etc. The benefits of the Technique are far reaching because it offers a process for making the way in which we interact with and learn from our experience more constructive.

“The basic discovery of FM Alexander can be stated briefly: The poise of one’s head in relationship with one’s body in movement is the key to freedom and ease of movement. The process for applying that discovery uses and develops observation, questioning, experimentation, clear thinking, and a tolerance for the unknown.

“The Alexander Technique is an indirect approach to making change in and gaining more control of our lives. It offers no set program or new set of rules to follow. Instead, in applying the Technique, we gain more control by becoming more knowledgeable about how we do things, by educating our sense of feeling, and by eliminating the unnecessary interferences we unknowingly place in our way, so that we can begin to approach every activity more wholeheartedly and with a new sense of freedom.”

1990? “Two to Go” Productions Flyer (Carlson & Weiss):

“Somatic Studies investigate the relationship between thinking and moving....

“The Alexander Technique is a simple, practical method that teaches people to redirect unnecessary tension into useful energy. It involves learning how to recognize and prevent unwanted movement patterns and muscular holdings that interfere with our inherent vitality, expressiveness and grace. The principles of the technique are basic. They can be applied to any activity, from ordinary everyday movement to highly specialized performance skills, such as dance. The long-term benefits derived from The Alexander Technique are pervasive, significantly influencing how we attend, move and react in any given situation.”

1989? Mayara Fagundes flyer (White St. Center, NYC):

“The Alexander Technique promotes the release of tensions, allowing the body to move more efficiently.

“An educational method to improve and change patterns of movement....

“It is a method for experiencing and understanding how the body-mind continuum relate[s] to the manner [in which] an individual moves in a balanced and well coordinated way.”

1988 NASTAT Statement included in IRDEAT (NYC) flyer (1995?):

“FM Alexander (1869-1955) demonstrated that the difficulties many people experience in learning, in control of performance, and in physical functioning are caused by unconscious habits. These habits interfere with your natural poise and your capacity to learn. When you stop interfering with the innate coordination of the body, you can take on more complex activities with greater self-confidence and presence of mind.

“The Alexander Technique provides a concrete means for overcoming these impeding habits, and for helping people learn better and do things more freely — from learning to play a musical instrument to moving with more comfort and ease through your daily life. From back pain to learning blocks, whether you are a musician or an office worker, Alexander lessons remain fundamentally the same: You are guided through simple movements and learn to develop more control in your activities.

“The Alexander Technique, however, is not a therapy that treats a passive patient. It is for the person interested in working towards his or her goals with increased awareness and practical intelligence. Although the Alexander Technique does not treat specific symptoms, you can encourage a marked improvement in overall health, alertness, and performance by consciously eliminating harmful habits that cause physical and emotional stress, and by becoming more aware of how you engage in your activities.... [AT is recognized as] an effective aid in improving physical and psychological well-being.”

From Julie Ince Thompson flyer:

“The Alexander Technique provides, through a combination of hands-on work and verbal instruction, a means, whereby the student can reclaim on a conscious level an integrated use of self, and return to a way of being more fully present and available in life and life’s demands....

“The Alexander Technique is a powerful tool for recognizing and ‘undoing’ the layers of stress that can lead to injury, performance fear and an absence of artistic generosity in the individual.”

TAG [The Alexander Guild, preceded ATI], 4.20.92:

“The Alexander Technique is a process of observing and changing HOW we organize ourselves to achieve our intended actions. This process is based upon the discoveries of Mr. F.M. Alexander regarding the use and functioning of the mechanism controlling human balance and coordination. This educational technique can be employed in the performance of familiar activities and in the learning of new ones to reduce tension and promote general well being.

“People study the Alexander Technique to improve their coordination and to learn to use an appropriate amount of energy for a particular activity. The Technique has been employed by performing artists since the early 1900’s to improve the quality of their performances.

“The teaching of the Alexander Technique is accomplished through demonstrations, discussion about the basic principles of Mr. Alexander’s discoveries and the application of the principles in activities. The application of the principles in activities results in improved psychophysical coordination, that is, energetically a more efficient use of the individual.

“It is the simplicity of the principles and the complexities of the ramifications of the applications of Mr. Alexander’s discoveries that alert us to the fundamental nature of what Mr. Alexander called ‘the work.’”

*Relating AT to other work:* Movement Education Studies Chair, Coalition for Professional Association of Body Centered and Body Oriented Psychotherapists and Counseling Bodyworkers — Definition of Movement Education Studies (found in ATCC office files):

“Movement Education shall mean methods that educate to improve psychophysical awareness, unity and integration. Through sensory motor learning, proprioceptive awareness is increased, thereby offering the student/client the availability of non-habitual choice in everyday activities and specialized skills. Touch is used in an individual or group setting to enhance verbal instruction and to communicate coordination, balance and ease of movement.”

## **NOTES FROM THE 1996 SWEET BRIAR WORKSHOP:**

Frank Ottiwell (FO): The Technique *is* the inhibition.

FO quoting FM Alexander (FM): AT is *not* doing, but it *is* an act of volition.

FO: “Think *clearly*.” [meaning also, energetically]

FO: “We’re interested in talking to the little muscles near the bone; hence the ‘subtle, delicate’ quality of AT.”

From FO: FM at the window, looking out at the people in the street: ‘Look at those people — no knee thrust!’

FO: “Alertness activates the ‘primary action.’” (FM’s earlier term)

Michael Frederick (MF) quoting Marj Barstow (MB): “This work is about all of us waking up.”

MF quoting MB: “Learning not to re-create a feeling, but to re-create a delicate movement.”

MF: “What wakes you up? This question opens the door: how can I be a little bit easier?”

MF: “Alexandrian principles are like awareness of that hand; they exist now; awareness exists now.”

MF: “AT is *not* primary control — that exists in nature; AT is learning to recognize and remove interference with the primary control.”

MF quoting MB: “Inhibition is actually movement.”

FO: Patrick MacDonald (PM) and MB, asked for last and first “pronouncements” (respectively) in San Francisco, both said essentially: “You people have got to learn to separate your heads from your necks!”

FO: We have the ability to move the head slightly away from first vertebra; this is MB’s “delicate movement” – “just thinking” your way into a response, activating the so-called “involuntary” muscles. (may not be verbatim, my summary from notes)

FO: Find out what’s the *same* about what AT teachers teach.