

I Think, Therefore I Aim by Tom Michel

The Experience

One day I found myself looking at a basketball in my hands, the same basketball that had just gone through the hoop thirty times in a row. Twenty-eight shots went cleanly through the hoop only touching the net and two rattled in. I turned the events of the past few minutes over in my head. How had this happened?

Two significant processes had allowed it. First, I had thrown off my previous experiences of shooting hoops. I didn't think about my form. I didn't worry about whether the shot was going to go in. And I had not given in to the desire to shoot the ball the way I usually would. Second, and more importantly, I was *aiming* my shot. I had focused my mind on where in three-dimensional space I wanted the ball to go. I visualized the spot above the rim where the ball would have to be to actually go in. Then, I waited until I had a lock on the hoop. When I finally formulated my intention - that I wanted the ball to go *there*, not to go *in* - I let the ball fly. Time after time it went in. I took a few steps back, out of my "normal" shooting range to twelve feet. Bang. Fifteen feet. Swish. Even eighteen footers were in all the way. The new process was figuring out where *there* was in space; I call this *spatial thinking*.

No longer was I thinking about the mechanics of how I was going to get the ball in the air. This new process created some interesting side-effects: My shooting form improved: I easily bent my knees, my follow through came naturally, and there was a gentle backspin on the ball, just like the professionals. I noticed that I had stopped watching the ball after it left my hands, letting it go out of my field of vision, while I continued to watch the hoop; this action prevented me from pulling my head back. Furthermore, it seemed as if the basket was closer - somehow *there* became easier to see. I believe I experienced what I have heard athletes describe as "being in the zone."

History

I started playing basketball in 1997 when I was 36 years old. I had a lot of energy, was relatively tall at 6' 1," and could move my feet to play defense, but my shooting game was lousy. So I learned the basic skills of boxing out for rebounds (preventing your opponent from getting the ball on a missed shot), positioning myself on the court to take advantage of the angles, and learning to read an opposing player's body position and motion to anticipate his moves. After many years of playing, however, I still could not get the ball in the hoop on a regular basis – not even layups (shots taken from near the hoop).

Integration

After the extraordinary experience described above, my accuracy shooting hoops in my driveway improved dramatically, but shooting well in a game was still elusive. Despite my best efforts to apply the principles, the up-tempo, intense, and time-limited nature of a real game impeded my thinking. However, I continued to work on my new skills while warming up and practicing.

One day in December 2006, I noticed that the guys I was playing with had stopped guarding me unless I was close to the basket. Since they knew I would be passing and not shooting, they would simply play in the passing lanes. It occurred to me that this was an opportunity for me to give myself time during the game to “warm up” my *spatial thinking*. I positioned myself about twelve feet from the hoop. The next time I got the ball, I faked a pass, throwing off my defender, looked at the basket with my *spatial thinking* cap on, and put up the shot. It went in. The next time down the court, I did the same thing and had the same result. During that morning of play, I made ten of twelve shots from the field - great shooting by anyone's standards.

The Relationship to F. M. Alexander's Principles

F. M. Alexander likely would have considered my experience evidence that his principles are indeed relevant to the performance of sporting activities. One of his most important ideas demonstrated in my story was that how we are taught and how we learn impacts how we perform. I was never coached at basketball; I learned most of what I know from watching and listening to games. For example, I heard "he's aiming the ball" over and over again by the announcers when a talented player was not performing up to par. This comment, as I interpreted it, meant that in order to be successful, I should *NOT* aim the ball. So, if I was not aiming the ball, what mechanism should I use? The answer for me was my *form*, another idea taken from the announcers. I tried to make sure that my preparation and release were consistent, because if my shots were not going in, then my form must be bad. Yet, no matter what I tried to improve my form, my shooting percentage did not go up. By throwing off the yoke of learned experience, I was able to focus on realizing in space where the hoop was. My form then improved with no conscious effort.

A second principle of Alexander's that became clear was the effect of fear reflexes on my performance. Up until that point, I had been missing most of my shots, giving me the *fixed idea* that I was not a good shooter. Thus, when I had an opportunity to take a shot, my fear of missing the shot - given what a lousy shooter I was - would inevitably kick in and influence my body. I would, most often, not shoot the ball hard enough on my first shot and the ball would hit the front of the rim. Next time, I would over-correct and shoot the ball too hard off the back of the rim. After a short time I would just pass the ball to a "real shooter." I would take only a couple of shots over the course of several games.

The final Alexander concept that the experience demonstrated was the conversion of a mental state of *doing* to one where the *act would do itself*. It was the clear formation of

my intention that was my new guiding principle. The goal was no longer to get the ball *in* the basket, but rather to think about the *means whereby* that might be achieved. The plan no longer included concentrating on my form or on specific mechanical manifestations. The new plan called for me to focus on *spatial thinking*, wait until my intention was clear, and then *let* the act of shooting happen. The results have been dramatic. I have gone from having one of the lowest to one of the highest shooting percentages among the guys I play with. The proof of the turnaround has been the guys asking me what I've done to make my game so much better!



Tom Michel is a graduate of the Alexander Technique School of New England who has studied the Technique since 1998. Tom likes to apply his AT skills to athletics, piano playing, woodworking, construction, and gardening. Tom hopes to bring the concepts of the Technique to kids who want to improve their coordination playing sports.

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