

The Alexander Technique, Non-Doing, and Expanded Awareness

by Cécile Raynor

It seems strange to me that although man has thought it necessary in the course of his development in civilization to cultivate the potentialities of what he calls "mind," "body," and "soul," he has not so far seen the need for maintaining in satisfactory condition the functioning of the sensory process through which these potentialities manifest themselves.

—F. M. Alexander

The Alexander Technique can be described as a mind/body approach to reclaiming effortless postural balance by freeing ourselves from harmful habitual patterns of body and mind. As teachers, we know that our postural balance affects everything we do and freeing ourselves from harmful habitual patterns of body and mind has the potential to be life changing.

The core of the Alexander Technique is *non-doing*. Whether we are still, moving, or engaged with the world around us, *doing something in a non-doing* way means without excess tension, therefore without mental or physical grasping.

This absence of tension allows the body to release into expansion organically and effortlessly. The mind that makes the absence of tension possible is in a state of *expanded awareness* attending to the unfolding movement. It is present to the moment.

What do we mean when we talk about the *mind*? Do we refer to the *thinking mind*? Let's look at the subtlety of the thinking process when it comes to Alexander directions and let's see how *non-doing*, *awareness*, and the *present moment* are connected, whether we are dealing with fluid and light movement or life in general.

Thinking Alexander directions and *thinking about* them are different. New students of the Technique often struggle to understand the distinction between them. *Thinking* directions is a *kinesthetic experience* bringing about a release into expansion. It is linked to our ability to be totally in the present moment. *Thinking about* directions is an *intellectual experience* that includes analyzing, judging, labeling, or assessing. It is a form of doing because the mind is trying to make the directions happen in the body, thus creating tension, which interferes with the process of release.

For example, let's look at how this works in terms of postural reflexes. In this paper, the term "postural reflexes" refers to the reactions produced by the postural mechanisms that keep us upright. When we think our directions and excess tension is released into expansion, thus bringing about a spreading of the soles of the feet onto their support, an up force or upward movement is stimulated that has the immediacy and effortlessness of a reflex.¹

The release and immediacy of the up response cannot be forced: it is intrinsic to the nature of reflexes at work. However, the response can be stimulated by thinking the directions that bring about the release into expansion. Directions start as *mental thoughts* (a left brain activity), which become a *kinesthetic sense of direction* (a right brain activity). As we think our directions, we release into our space and, through our support, into gravity. Our postural

reflexes are stimulated to do their job and any movement can simply happen. Lengthening, widening, and expanding do themselves!

In this way, the Alexander Technique helps us balance the two sides of our brains for greater whole body harmony. Moreover, by learning to stimulate our postural reflexes, we develop trust in the efficient functioning of our mind and body while we experience the power of being present in the moment. We learn to go from *thinking* to *letting be* and *being*.

In order to access the present moment, we can use our senses: vision, breathing, experiencing body weight in action, awareness of supported areas as well as sounds, smells, etc. These sensory anchors into the present moment are ways of strengthening the "*conscious self*" awareness so we are less likely to be swept away by the thoughts stimulated by the "*unconscious self*." It can take ongoing

persistence to stay plugged into our conscious self because of the dualistic nature of the human mind. However, when we are in the moment, we become the movement as it happens; we experience an unmistakable sense of effortlessness, despite the muscle activity needed for the movement to happen. We have stopped controlling the skeleton with tensed muscles, and we have allowed mind and body wisdom to work beyond the dualistic nature of our minds. This is often the source of the "Wow" experience during a first lesson. Anchoring ourselves in the present moment is the first step towards an increasing sense of freedom and ease that can lead us to a quality of presence we may not have consciously experienced before.

Peripheral vision puts things into perspective and takes us into another dimension. Humans have an almost 180-degree forward-facing field of view, but often we do not utilize our full field of view. As we go about our daily activities, when we choose to embrace peripheral vision, another world opens up to us, and suddenly we are no longer separate from our surroundings.

Instead, we are included in the environment we are moving through. This visual and kinesthetic experience helps us to step outside our *monkey mind*—a Buddhist term referring to the racing thoughts of the mind. The space the monkey mind inhabits is where tension is created. Stepping out of that space while aware of our breath gives excess tension a chance to dissolve on its own. We become available to see the color of the sky, listen to the sound of our heart, or the song of a bird on a branch nearby.

How does non-doing manifest itself when we deal with pain? If tension, discomfort, or pain arises in us, we can notice it and choose not to label it, as we realize it is neither good nor bad in itself. Pain



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just *is* and we can choose to just *be* with it. Repeated complaining about pain is a common way to deal with it, a way to vent our frustrations. And it may help to do that in the moment. The repetitive nature of venting, however, can be seen as fighting with what *is*. Whichever way we look at it, obsessing about pain only creates or increases unnecessary tension and suffering. In fact, the thoughts we entertain around pain can hurt us more than the pain itself. Initially, they enhance physical pain by adding mental pain to it. It is natural to react to pain by tensing the affected part of the body. However, *guarding*, or protective tension, adds to the initial hurt, making healing more difficult and often turning a manageable problem into a chronic condition. If pain cannot be avoided, why add to it? Inhibiting unnecessary thoughts about pain creates space for it to be only what it is. That space allows for the most efficient healing condition. As the “conscious self” chooses to surrender to what is, the voice of the “unconscious self” fades away! In allowing this to happen, we strengthen our level of mind and body awareness.

Awareness is a wide field of many colors. We might be extremely aware when it comes to our favorite subject matters yet our awareness remains on the surface for other subjects we are not drawn to or are not ready to explore deeply. We may understand and appreciate something intellectually and not be emotionally ready to integrate it. For instance, we may be aware of the importance of meditation yet we do not do it, or we reduce it to a routine exercise. We may be aware of the healthy way to eat, yet make many exceptions, not fully benefiting from what we know. We may be engaged in regular exercise yet go about it in a way that is harmful by creating excess tension while we practice. We do not need to rate where we are on the scale of awareness. It is what it is at this point in time. We do the best we can. No one consciously chooses to not succeed. Deepening awareness is an ongoing process spanning a lifetime if we are interested and open to it. The Alexander Technique promotes the deepening of awareness as we stay involved with the process. Increased freedom from physical pain and mental suffering is one of the many benefits.

Many religions include some sort of non-doing practice and include non-doing days in the calendar. Non-doing is the most important concept in Taoism. Sunday in Christianity and Saturday in Judaism are meant to be days of quietude and reflection in contrast with the hurried working days of the week. Free from daily duties, time and space are created to just be for a day; thus promoting balance between *doing* and *being*. There are special holidays like Yom Kippur (Judaism) or Ramadan (Islam) devoted to fasting; non-eating being a form of non-doing. Many people practice periodic fasting either as a way of deepening a spiritual practice or for health reasons. Choosing to experience a non-doing day outside the daily busy-ness of body and mind can be a special experience within which we can experience the depth of our own being.

In essence, meditation is also the practice of non-doing. The online Wikipedia Oxford dictionary describes meditation as “A mental discipline by which the practitioner attempts to get beyond the reflexive thinking mind into a deeper state of relaxation or awareness.” This thinking mind is the one reflecting about the past and anticipating the future. It is the one assessing this or that. In so doing it becomes a form of *intellectual doing*. On the other hand, the state of *awareness* is a form of *intuitive knowing* we can access when we are present to what is happening while it is happening. The former is akin to talking, the latter to listening. Talking gets in the way of listening. The ongoing practice of meditation involves going

back and forth, to and from a state of deep awareness until the monkey mind surrenders itself and we experience the silence left by the non-thinking mind. The practice is to choose non-doing over and over. And so it is with daily life. The efficiency of a practice shows in how we feel at the end of a meditation session and in how it affects our non-meditation time. This applies to any self-awareness discipline, such as Alexander Technique or Yoga.

While F.M. Alexander was aware of the importance of his work for the human potential of “mind,” “body,” and “soul” to manifest more thoroughly, he did not especially focus his attention on the “soul.” Nonetheless, the Alexander Technique has within it the potential to awaken or strengthen our spirituality as we let go of intellectual and physical overdoing to integrate the intuitive knowing dimension of the non-grasping mind. Like meditation and the spiritual practices of various religions, the Alexander Technique takes awareness inward. Through observation, inhibition, and direction, the means whereby used to re-educate our sensory perception and whole body functioning, we learn about non-doing, awareness, and being in the present moment as a daily practice. This not only enhances the quality of our life but it can lead us into a state of expanded awareness. A kinesthetic experience unfolding without involving the intellect but with great presence is a simple yet deep human experience, akin to holding a newborn baby or exchanging a warm mindful hug.

This “thought-less” presence within each of us can be called our true nature or our spiritual self. It is the pure consciousness of the newborn baby before he or she develops a conceptual self through the thinking process and the learning process of the human mind—before the personality is shaped by identification

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with biological and cultural factors. Our true nature is unique, pure, natural, and fully-formed at birth; it is not learned, and it is not man-made. As we grow up, we learn to engage in linear thinking based on the concepts of past, present, and future. When we obsess about something, we are stuck in circular thinking, tending to go back over and over to a specific point in time. The pure consciousness of our true nature is timeless. Every time we access that part of us through the door of our linear conscious mind, we are in the timeless verticality of the present moment and free of the circular motion of the monkey mind. Unfortunately, for some people the word *spiritual* has a negative connotation due to its misuse in popular culture and its association with New Age movements. The word *spiritual* need not be associated with the common use of the word *God*, which means something different for each and every one. *Spiritual* can be used to describe our depth of awareness. It can describe everyone who is true to his or her unique and authentic spirit, the spirit of others, and also mindful of the Earth. This authenticity means that a person’s individual consciousness is aligned with the collective consciousness, whatever we want to name it.

According to Walter Carrington, in his book *Personally Speaking* (London: Mouritz, 2001) while FM could have been described as an agnostic, “in many ways, he had a strong religious attitude, because he not only valued and respected life but also had what we nowadays call a holistic outlook.” Walter adds that FM’s favorite quote from Shakespeare was: “To thine own self be true.” (*Hamlet*). This quote reveals the authenticity FM aspired to for himself and for the students of the Alexander Technique.

FM was concerned with what he called “Conscious Control of the Individual,” which he viewed as “Man’s Supreme Inheritance.” He clearly was pointing towards our ability to function from an

expanded awareness, as compared to the more common unconscious self which tends to control the individual. But within that expanded awareness, is there not another dimension beyond the conscious self and its intellectual knowing, beyond its controlling dimension and accumulated knowledge? What about *Consciousness* itself: that unrequested voice that speaks to us through intuition, especially when we are quiet and we listen to the silence left by the non-thinking mind?

The state of non-doing can be one of the most profound experiences for a human being. It allows us to experience the effortlessness and peacefulness of being in a state of intuitive awareness. By practicing the Alexander Technique and teaching it to others, we can help ourselves and others stop over-using our minds and bodies, over-processing everyone and everything. For our own benefit and the benefit of the world we live in, we can promote freedom from the harmful habitual pattern of unconscious thinking and acting! In doing so, we are nurturing the inner flowering of consciousness within each and every one of us—which is the central message of all the great wisdom teachings of humankind.

Endnote:

1. However, the phrase “postural reflexes” is not considered an accurate term from a scientific perspective because the phenomenon is not truly a reflex.

*After working on a PhD in French Literature, Cécile Raynor trained as an Alexander Technique teacher with Michelle Charron in Paris, France, certifying in 1992. She has taught the Alexander Technique for 18 years, mainly in Brookline, Massachusetts, both in private practice and also for Lesley University and Brookline Continuing Adult Education. She has presented the Technique to numerous institutions including Dr. Herbert Benson’s Mind/Body Clinic at Deaconess Hospital, Faulkner Hospital, various music schools, and New England Dance Camp. Cécile has practiced meditation for 22 years and helped translate Thich Nhat Hahn’s book *The Sun, My Heart into French*. Trained as a Thai Yoga Therapist, she is also a graphic artist and a member of the Brookline Artists Open Studios.*

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