



Alexander Technique International



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Using NLP and Positive Reinforcement to Teach the Alexander Technique

By David Owen



Part 1: Introduction

Some of the ways I teach the Alexander Technique are unorthodox and may not suit everyone. However, please give this a fair reading and take from it whatever you find useful.

My origins in the technique come via the Carrington and MacDonald traditions via F. M. Alexander's trainings in London. I then discovered Neuro-Linguistic Programming and started questioning some aspects of the Technique. Next I started minimising negative feedback and developing deliberate positive reinforcement which required a very verbal approach. This is similar to John Gorman, Tommy Thommpson and Don Weed's approaches, all via Marjorie Barstow, Frank Pierce Jones and A. R. Alexander in America. I am still open to new ideas and methods and to having my work constructively questioned in order to refine it.

After maybe a year of lessons I had reasonable use of myself, but it took about five years, including most of my training to have a clear understanding of what the technique really is and how it actually works. I can usually get my pupils to this stage in ten one hour sessions over about ten weeks.

In the upcoming 13th International Congress in Dublin, a burning topic is: *What is the future of the Alexander Technique?* If we are to develop a thriving, lively future for the technique, it needs to be quicker to learn, easier to understand and more affordable so that it can be accessible to a much broader public than it is now. To keep true to our principles, we need more efficient teaching methods. A 'Better. Faster. Cheaper' approach should also provide more work for teachers in the long run, many of whom cannot currently sustain themselves through teaching the Technique alone. I aspire to assist these aims.

NLP and Conditioning

NLP™ (Neuro-Linguistic Programming™) and positive reinforcement, part of Operant Conditioning have had a bad rap over the years. Like water, air and electricity, they can be misused, the usual accusation being that they are manipulative. 'Manipulate' from the Latin: 'mane' means hand, and 'pele' the root of plus and poly (many) means to fill; so it means hand-full. By 1827 the word was used to mean to move skillfully with your hand. By 1864 it was used to mean "To manage by mental influence," especially for one's own purposes. However, we are already influencing the people around us unconsciously, often with unintended results. In fact, we cannot not manipulate. We can only learn how to do it consciously, intentionally, effectively and above all, respectfully.

Of course, we already use conditioning when we teach the Technique. We start to lift an arm and stop as soon as the pupil starts to assist. If they stop assisting or do not assist, we continue. This is negative and positive reinforcement, and for those teachers who verbalise very little, it is a major teaching tool. My teacher used this for nearly three years and it was implicitly taught

during my training. It works, but without explanation, it takes a long, long time.

NLP

I came across NLP during my last year of training from the book Using Your Brain for a Change by Richard Bandler, its originator and co-creator. It is based on the principle of modelling. You observe someone who does something well and try to replicate it to get similar results. Bandler, a maths and physics graduate, working on early computers at the University of Santa Cruz in California, met psychiatrists who were using the computers to process their statistics. He noticed there were many therapeutic theories, but few effective practitioners at that time. Being inquisitive, he decided to study two effective practitioners, Fritz Perls who practised Gestalt Therapy and Virginia Satir, a very effective family therapist. He later worked with John Grinder, a linguist and together, they deciphered the language patterns of both the practitioners and their clients. This developed further to tease out thinking patterns, especially in terms of how people were thinking visually, verbally, their internal and external tonality and sound processing, and how they thought and processed sensations, tastes and smells.

For instance, you are reading a menu. You see 'Chickpea salad.' You might say "Chickpea salad" to yourself inside your mind, or go straight to seeing what that would look like in your imagination. You know within your mind, what it would smell like, taste like and how it would make you feel to eat it, and you say "Hmmm" to yourself, with either a positive, neutral or negative internal tonality, and that tonality gives you a feeling of whether you want it or not.

As the field developed, it studied major differences in how we process within each of the thinking senses (or modalities) known as 'submodalities' for instance:

Remember a time when you felt wonderful.

Remember it as if you are back in the memory, seeing what you saw at the time.

Notice that this brings back a lot of the good feelings of this time.

Now 'step out' of the memory and remember it as if you are looking at yourself from some distance outside at that time.

Notice how the feelings associated with that memory are now a lot less.

It is the same visual memory, but seen differently in your mind's eye. By changing how we see, hear and feel things internally, we can change our mood and increase mental functionality. These differences then led to codifying how eye movements indicate how people are thinking, which lead indirectly to the development of EMDR– Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprogramming –as used in the UK National Health Service to treat traumas. NLP also studied how our external voice tone, facial expressions, gestures and actions also communicate and influence other people.

NLP in my Teaching

Although the physical procedures I use are much the same, NLP is otherwise intricately woven into how I communicate my teaching. Obviously, it is not the therapeutic modalities that I use, but the principles, especially language patterns, gained from modelling some of the most successful people in the world. So, for example: Everything I say is carefully thought out beforehand to convey exactly the right message. I will often use clarification patterns (Meta model) to be very specific, and hypnotic patterns such as ambiguities, presuppositions and so on (Milton model, based on Milton H Erickson MD) to gently introduce ideas into my pupils' minds, especially during table work. Also my voice tone and intonation are consistent with what I want from my pupil: soft, calm and relaxed, when I want them to relax, strong and assertive to encourage their buoyancy, or to get them moving, and reassuring, enthusiastic in order to praise and encourage them.

I have also analysed many aspects of the technique within present day conditions, reduced them to their components and rebuilt them to be understood and taught more easily and efficiently. As NLP is based on modelling the best of what some people already do, you probably consciously or unconsciously do at least some of what I do already. I took many courses to learn NLP in great depth. However, like driving a car,

you do not need to know how everything works in order to control it. I will do my best to briefly lay out how I have integrated it into my teaching and explain several of the differences to the orthodox approaches of teaching the Technique.

Conditioning and Positive Reinforcement

My first pupil had back pain. Working twice a week for half an hour, after about 20 sessions, his pain was improving. However around lesson 25 he seemed to slip back about five lessons. However, he was mostly pain free by the thirtieth lesson. My second and third pupils also had setbacks at about the same stage and I suspected it must have been (similar to what Alexander said): Something ‘I’ was doing’ in the manner of my teaching that was causing the problem!

In going over their lessons, I pinpointed that I had given some ‘constructive criticism’ after which they looked and sounded awkward and their bodies felt awkward to me. Of course, we need to give constructive feedback, but we need to maintain a relationship of rapport, trust, and ease with our pupils.



My first source for behavioural training was Ken Blanchard’s The One Minute Manager. In it, his mythical manager can spell out the job description and duties of new employees on one side of a sheet of paper and deliver it verbally within one minute. The manager then surreptitiously stalks the new worker, ignoring anything that is not in the job description, like hanging round the coffee machine and talking

with colleagues. However, as soon as the worker starts to do their actual job, he praises them immediately, specifically and briefly, within one minute. This continues with each new thing that they do or get right for the first time, until the worker has had enough positive reinforcement that they can be left to do their job happily on their own. Only when there is a serious problem, does the manager intervene again, first taking responsibility himself as manager for allowing it to happen, then checking with their worker how whatever it was that went wrong, and then working with their employee to find a solution that they can *both* put into practice. It is delivered in the form of the *Feedback Sandwich*—praise, feedback, investigation and solution, and then more praise. All this takes just one minute (though a bit of an ask, but the principle is clear.)

So the idea is to frequently reinforce what my pupil is doing right and rarely correct what they are not. Combined with some NLP principles, I determined that I had to:

- Have a very clear outline for my pupils of what the Technique is and how it works—And have very clear instructions for them as they progress, so they can only achieve my stated ‘Ends’ by following my stated ‘Means whereby.’ This requires that I am very verbal
- To totally ignore what they are doing ‘wrong’ in the early stages, while only gradually introducing new concepts and objectives as they progress.
- To positively reinforce anything they do right for the first time, and less and less so as they gain proficiency, until they no longer need it. However an occasional recognition of their progress and proficiency is a good additional reinforcer.

Positive reinforcement might be a soft “Good!” when they first start to release their neck while I work with them on a table. This can be unobtrusive enough to just slip into their unconscious mind if they are not yet aware of any release. Or, once I sense they can detect release, to ask “Did you notice that release just then?” and if they say “Yes” then reply “Good!” If not, I just say “Fair enough.” and explain that it is usual for people to not notice any release in the early stages, but that there definitely was one. This validates both the not noticing and the release. This also focuses their

attention on being able to sense any release when it happens.

- Finally, I determined to almost never criticise. Rather to ask if they noticed if they did something unintended and then complement them for noticing.

For example “Did you notice you started lifting your arm?” If “Yes” then reply “Good!” If not, then “Fair enough” and just leave it, without any blame. Better still, if I start to lift their arm and they start to assist, I simply stop lifting it. However, if they then stop lifting, I praise them: “Good! You noticed you were lifting your arm and you stopped doing it!” Rarely do I need to take my pupil to task. Afterall, as Pat MacDonald would say: “It’s always the teacher’s fault” and “You (the teacher) are here to do the impossible!”

I later came across Don’t Shoot the Dog by Karen Pryor, a pioneer in training dolphins who later created ‘Clicker training’ mostly for dogs. She claims that positive reinforcement is predictable, but negative reinforcement is unreliable, often reinforcing the unwanted behaviour.

Not Overloading

To always work within my pupil’s capabilities I extensively utilise:

- The Four Stages of Learning
- Seven plus or minus Two’ items of attention and
- Plate Spinning

With these, I gradually introduce new concepts and challenges. This also ensures that I can continue to complement my pupils and avoid having to correct them.

The Four Stages of Learning

Unconscious Incompetence– You do not even know that you cannot do something, just as a baby does not yet know that they can not walk.

Conscious Incompetence– You discover that you can not do something, just like when a baby is trying to walk, but keeps falling down.

Conscious Competence– You have to pay close attention to be successful, as when a baby has to pay full attention to walk and not fall.

Unconscious Competence– You can now do the new thing without thinking about it, just as a baby gets to the point of just walking and can pay attention to other things.

7 Plus or Minus 2

The psychologist George A Miller in 1956 claimed that we could process around seven things at once or have about seven things in short term memory. From his research, the range was from about 5 to 9 items, or 7 plus or minus 2. Now, I usually have to keep a good seven things in my mind at once while I am working, but I aim to only give my pupils five or fewer things to deal with.

So my motto here is:

$$7 \pm 2 = 4$$



Plate Spinning

Refers to the circus trick where someone gets first, just one plate spinning on top of a vertical stick, then gets a second one up and spinning, giving a quick twiddle to the first to keep it going, and sequentially adding more

and more one at a time, while still maintaining the others.

So for each new teaching aspect, I wait until my pupil has reached a certain proficiency with it, so that they have enough attention available for the next. This keeps them within four or five points of attention.

So for example with table work while taking their head, I start by telling my pupil to “Think of your neck being *soft, calm* and *relaxed*” and wait until I feel some softening. I will continue with this for a while before adding “Think of the back of your head releasing away from the rest of your body” and continuing from there. Likewise for homework after the first lesson I will only give the *soft, calm* and *relaxed* thoughts until the next session, after which I will add thinking of the back of their head releasing. Even though I will have given other direction thoughts during the lesson, I will tell them to restrict themselves to just thinking the one or two thoughts as homework until I add others.



Part 2: Differences

As mentioned, there are a number of differences in my approach.

Difference 1: Definition of the Technique

In NLP we know we cannot reliably achieve a goal unless we define it positively and accurately. For positive reinforcement, my pupils need a very clear idea of what the Technique is, how it works for them, and what I expect of them from moment to moment. For this we need a clear definition.

“Look at your back!” a lady friend told me. A difficult task, obviously... But I was reassured that the Alexander Technique would cure me of stooping and straighten out my back. Beyond that, no one could tell

me what it was, even my first teacher– it was shrouded in mystery.

When I graduated in 1990, the definitions were mostly along the lines of “What Alexander wrote in his books.” This is no longer appropriate and the current definitions usually revolve around what Alexander found to be causing his problems and how to circumvent them. I consider this to be too narrow and inadequate.

STAT’s current description includes:

“...teaching you to change long-standing *habits* that *cause* unnecessary tension...”

I maintain however that for most people, the *tension* causes the habits. However, Alexander had specific habits due to breathing difficulties from his premature birth as well as deliberately cultivated habits from his acting training. He will also have been conforming to Victorian social expectations. So it is clear why Alexander’s focus was on habits.

Something Natural

During my first Alexander Technique lesson, my experience of the technique was of something deep and natural within me being woken up and rehabilitated. My teacher stood me up from a chair so effortlessly that I did not even realise it for a moment. This continued as she moved me around the room and sat me down again etc. This sense of returning to “the natural” has persisted with me ever since. So at its most basic, I define the technique as: *A way to return to our natural state and functioning.*

But

What is our natural state and functioning?

What are we returning from and how did we get there?

What are the disadvantages of what we are returning from?

And the advantages of returning to our natural state?

What is unique about the Alexander Technique in achieving this?

And how do we return to our natural state by using it?

Most teachers can answer these easily, but I will outline them briefly.

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Our Natural State

We can best determine our natural state by studying naturally living animals. A cat is loose and lythe and knows how to rest and relax completely. A giraffe is toned and upright without being strained. Incidentally, the giraffe does not have to constantly think “Forward and Up” or of its poise, and neither do I believe, should we.

Both are focussed externally on their environment—looking for opportunities and threats. As Peter Nobes puts it “Imagine yourself on the Serengeti.” Afterall, we originally came from Africa. Wherever we were, we had to stay alert: eyes wide, aware of our surroundings from the ground beneath our feet—snakes, skorpions— the horizon on all sides including behind and the sky above. Aware of the scents, wind and weather, with our ears tuned for anything that might be useful or dangerous. We would have natural poise, which in turn produces clarity, spontaneity, emotional freedom and flexibility including more natural joy, and natural confidence. Confidence is effortless in our natural state.

As one of my trainers would say, “Be alert! Your country needs Lerts!” A giraffe is the perfect example of a ‘Lert!’



Most people's current state

To me, this is background tension. We live in unnatural conditions with rules and expectations which trigger our startle responses without any stimulus to action that would release the muscle contractions involved. We gradually build up a background of unreleased tension. This in turn

interferes with our natural movement patterns, causing poor coordination habits, and it pulls us down, causing poor postural habits and interfering with our natural poise.

In order to move within this background tension, we have to use extra muscle effort. Worse, to try to compensate for the distorted movement patterns and achieve ‘Good Posture’ requires more effort still. So the gentle effort of a natural movement is overlaid by the effort of constant muscle tension, which requires extra effort to perform the movement, which is then overlaid by a fourth level of effort to ‘try to do it properly.’

Disadvantages of our current state

Tension, extra effort, poor movement, poor postural habits and postural collapse all diminish our performance and put extra pressure on bones, joints, cartilage, muscles, tendons and ligaments, causing excessive wear and tear. This also compresses the internal organs and gives them extra work to do to clear up the results of the wear and tear. Our malcoordination may cause us to have accidents and injure ourselves. Our minds are affected by the tension and we are less clear, less spontaneous, lively and joyful.

Advantages of returning to our natural state

Our bodies have the opportunity to reverse damage caused by tension, misalignment and extra load on the system. Additionally, because of Alexander's way of preventing habits, we also have a way of making better decisions. We become more relaxed and calm in ourselves, we improve our physical and mental performance, are able to respond to situations more appropriately, and we are also more spontaneous, lively, and joyful!

What is unique about the Alexander Technique?

To my mind, a valid part of any definition of the technique includes these unique characteristics:

- *Having breathed out completely, to wait for the natural reflex to bring about the inbreath.*
(An early and specific form of inhibition)

(Credit to Penelope Easten and her course *Walking alongside F. M. Alexander*)

- *Recognition of the force of habit.*
- *Recognition of faulty sensory awareness.*
- *To delay doing something until you know you can do it healthily and appropriately, before deciding whether to do it or not.* (Inhibition as we know it.)
- *To make a fresh decision at the point of action.* (Conscious choice.)
- *Bringing about changes without doing them directly.* (Directing.) Though this is similar to a technique within the Delsarte method. I prescribe that we ‘*think*’ of the change that we want and I avoid telling people to direct.
- *Utilising the Primary Control.* Also described in part by Rudolf Magnus and George E. Coghill, which Alexander first wrote about in 1922. (See also Farrell)

How do we return to our natural state?

In my view, this includes:

- Recognising and understanding our current condition and its problems and what the potential of our natural state could be.
- Understanding the principles and procedures of the Alexander Technique, so as to have a roadmap for our return.
- Learning to use thinking to bring about the changes, qualities and optimal activities we want.
- Reducing or eliminating background tension.
- Circumventing both inculcated habits and those that were developed due to the tension.
- Learning to trust our natural poise and coordination, so as to avoid resorting to habits associated with background tension.
- Having the guidance and feedback of a teacher to keep us on track and optimise our progress. This can be in person, with or without hands on, or even remotely. (I am also investigating the feasibility of distance text, audio and video courses, though I would still strongly encourage those who can, to utilise a teacher.)

Towards a Definition

There are many possible ways to define the technique. From above, we could list:

- A way to return to our natural state and functioning, including:
 - Natural poise, fluidity, coordination and optimum performance, with only optimum tone and without any unnecessary background tension or associated coordination distortions.
 - Being fully alert, alive, spontaneous and joyful, with natural confidence.
- A way of thinking to reduce or eliminate unnecessary background tension.
- A way to attain and maintain optimum health, with the opportunity for our bodies to repair as much as possible, any damage caused by unnecessary tension and miscoordination.
- A way to circumvent unhelpful habits and make better choices, leading to a Zen-like inner peace, awareness, openness to possibilities and potential for spontaneous appropriate action.

Depending on circumstances, for many people, my elevator pitch is:

“A way of thinking that enables you to relax below the plateau level that most people think of as relaxation, even when active. This way, your natural poise, fluidity and coordination can reassert themselves and you can stand tall and move, effortlessly and naturally. This relieves pressure on your muscles, bones and joints and even your internal organs so that they can repair themselves as much as possible from any damage caused by tension and miscoordination. You also become more alert and make better choices, and the greater, easier poise makes people feel more confident and alive!”

Difference 2: Relaxation

During my training, I felt that we as AT practitioners were expected to be paragons of ‘Forward and Up!’ Towards the end, I sensed this was causing tension in me and others until one day, John Woodward, the barefoot fell-running Alexander teacher from Lancaster, England came as a visiting teacher. I immediately noticed that his head just floated above his body— and his shoulders moved or rolled as he walked. John was the epitome of poise and fluidity without effort.

Later that day, the head of a psychotherapy training course came in to give a talk. Having had no Alexander Technique work himself, he had good poise and fluidity, presumably through resolving any emotional issues. He brought with him a two week old puppy who was both lively and relaxed. The puppy would lie down and let you pet him, and when you did, his shoulders were loose and just rolled around. The Psychotherapy trainer then talked about how all organisms, even single celled creatures, contracted when they sensed any threat. And that was it– we needed to relax *first* before we could direct and improve our use.

Of course, we knew about the startle response, and had a pretty good idea of how, by not following through and releasing into action, it would lead to a buildup of background tension. But we also knew that F. M. Alexander disapproved of the relaxation techniques of his time.

We did do ‘table work’ (Introduced by Pat MacDonald) which we understood to be easing out this background tension, though we were only allowed to give five minutes at a time and Jeanne Haahr ne Day, our director, would scold me quite harshly if I went over. It seemed to me though, that table work was a most effective first step for most people in learning the technique and I now use it extensively in my early lessons, gradually weaning and tailing off as we progress. Of course, I encourage pupils to stay awake and alert to associate relaxation with that, rather than passivity.

I now know that Alexander was teaching the Delsarte method in 1904, which is effective for relaxation in activity. He also had a very liberal childhood, so may not have had so much residual startle pattern. He does not however, tell us about Delsarte in *The Evolution of a Technique*.

Hence my definition includes:

“A way... to relax below the plateau level that most of us think of as relaxation...”

Difference 3: Thinking

It is known that when we think of a movement, the muscles that would cause that movement are activated, even if not so much to actually bring the movement about. When we ‘talk to ourselves’ inside our minds,

the muscles of the tongue and larynx move slightly. Our moods are reflected in our facial expressions and posture. And when we think of food, we salivate. In fact, whatever we think consciously, produces a physical effect somewhere. Or as the saying goes “What you think is what you get!”

I do not tell my pupils to ‘direct.’ In Neuro-Linguistic Programming, we class such a word as an “unspecified verb,” meaning that we are not told *how* to perform the action. We do not know exactly what Alexander meant. Alexander describes it as “the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms.” This is not very helpful unless you are familiar with Delsarte. This clearly uses thinking, both to relax by thinking of energy withdrawing and for what Alexander here calls ‘directing’ by thinking of energy flowing into the part he wanted to be active. However, here and elsewhere, it is clear that he eventually meant to think of what he wanted without doing it directly.

I personally like to keep it simple: When we point at an object, we have no concept of the muscles involved and yet, by intention, it is as if the finger is drawn towards the thing pointed at. There is also usually no perception of effort when pointing, whereas ‘raising an arm’ to the same position usually does give an impression of effort. An upward direction of the head is analogous to pointing it to the ceiling or sky, and I sometimes use this with my pupils, and there is usually little or no perception of effort once background tension has been eliminated. Please note that I occasionally do refer to people thinking their *directions* or sometimes to me *directing* them.

Difference 4: Re-Wording

Having studied Neuro-Linguistic Programming, I noticed that many phrases we use might have the wrong effect and I am careful to select appropriate phrases throughout my work. The main culprits however are phrases such as:

“Neck free” or “Neck Loose” or “Free your/the neck.”

All are likely to get people to waggle their head and neck to get a sensation of freedom or looseness. This

requires extra muscle activity, and probably will not leave their neck muscles any more relaxed afterwards.

The word 'free' can also be an unspecified verb. We do not know how Alexander intended us to do it. As a verb, it is also an imperative and is likely to produce a physical action. We can de-potentiate it: "*Think of your neck being free*" is better, with 'Think' being the imperative verb, but it is still likely to produce head wagging to get the sensation of freedom.

As Alexander teachers, we know that excess neck tone is maintained unconsciously— The pupil usually has no awareness of it, or that there is a neural process maintaining it. They cannot *do* anything to prevent this. Therefore we require *thinking* of an ideal condition other than the excess tone to modify the neural activity.

As 'Free' produces the wrong result we need different words. In the long run, I settled on:

"Think of your neck being soft, calm and relaxed."

These words neither imply nor require any movement, so can be used to bring about the condition by the neurology adjusting itself to send fewer messages to the neck muscles until it has verified for itself what *soft, calm and relaxed* might mean.

I also tell my pupils to:

"Avoid trying to make it soft, calm and relaxed, or to feel if it is that way, it does not matter whether it feels that way or not. Just think of the idea, only as often as you remember it, and only let it be a quarter of a thought when you do."

I *avoid* saying "do not" as what follows becomes a hidden or 'embedded command.'

Difference 5: Away with Forward and Up!

As distinct to the 'neck free', this is not so much a linguistic objection to Alexander's "Forward and Up" direction, but a recognition that most people's conditions are different to Alexander's own circumstances.

Alexander had breathing difficulties from his premature birth. Unbeknown to me 35 years ago, this would have resulted in him pulling his head back to try to get more breath. However, even back then, I could see that few people were pulling their heads

back, but were more likely to have lost poise or were stooping.

Alexander indicates that he not only had to project his head forward from his habitual back, but also up, to prevent it going forward and down! I believe these directions were specific to him and those like him and that only the "up" is useful to the rest of us. We need a different set of directions that is universal to any condition, position or orientation, and to then maintain an ideal alignment. To find these we need to follow Alexander's processes.

Analyse the conditions of use present

So what is usually happening and what should we do about it?

My understanding is that most people have residual tension from unreleased startle response contractions. In this, the upper trapezius and sternocleidomastoid muscles first relax for a split second, followed by the upper trapezius muscles contracting and pulling the back of the head down and thus rotating the head backwards. The sternocleidomastoids then contract, pulling the head forward and down towards the chest, and in the process, the head rotates forward again.

Reason out the means whereby

Or to quote more fully: "Reason out the means whereby a more satisfactory use could be brought about"⁶

(⁶ UoS Ch1 Note 10)

Upper trapezius release

As the upper trapezius contracts first, I believe we want it to release first, releasing the back of the head away from the rest of the body and allowing a forward rotation. So having told my pupil to:

"Think of your neck being soft, calm and relaxed."

I will tell them to:

"Think of the back of your head releasing away from the rest of your body." Using the present tense. Or after a while, using continuous tense to maintain the release:

"Think of the back of your head being released away from the rest of your body."

Sternocleidomastoid release

To get the sternocleidomastoids to release next, if they are lying down, I tell my pupils to:

“Think of the *rest* of your head releasing away from the rest of your body.” Or,

“Think of the *rest* of your head *being* released away from the rest of your body.”

If they are sat or upright, I tell them to:

“Think of your head being buoyant.” Or,

“Think of your head being buoyant, as if it wants to lift up the rest of your body.”

I may also suggest they think of their head pointing towards the ceiling or the sky as mentioned before, though I prefer the idea of buoyancy. Either way, I will indicate the top of their head as the focus of the lift, rather than them thinking of their face or eyes rising.

What if someone’s head *is* pulled back horizontally? Firstly, thinking of their neck being soft, calm and relaxed will tend to relax any muscles that were pulling their head back. There is likely to be excess upper trapezius tension, which releasing the back of their head would undo. If like Alexander, their head goes down when it goes forward, then thinking of their head releasing away from their body, or being buoyant if upright, will undo the sternocleidomastoids.

Coaching Release and Buoyancy

An early procedure of mine is to have my pupil sat into the back of a dining chair, maybe even slumped if this is their habit, and gradually coach them, with the aid of my hands. I coach them to imagine the buoyancy lifting their head, and then their head and body, so that it straightens them out and then lifts their body so that they are sitting upright— all the time encouraging them to keep their neck relaxed and the back of their head releasing. After a few repetitions, they sit up poised without my hands. By stages, I will coach them to use this to stand them up, again quite soon, without my hands.

Difference 6: Clarity and I am Talkative!

As mentioned for positive reinforcement, my pupils need a very clear idea of what the technique is as given above, a clear idea of how the technique could work for them, and a clear idea of what I expect of them from moment to moment. Unlike the mostly silent teaching methods used on me by my teachers and trainers, I need to be quite verbal and tell my pupils what I am doing and why. I like to explain what the purpose and intended outcomes are as well as what I want them to do and avoid doing. I also like to discuss what and how to think etc, and give my pupils feedback as to how well they are doing. This will be more familiar to teachers trained in the Marjorie Barstow, Frank Pierce Jones and A. R. Alexander tradition.



I do not do this all the time— I need to introduce concepts gradually and relieve my pupils of any pressure of too much expectation. I will usually give a rounded explanation of the technique at the beginning of my work with them, checking that they have reasonable comprehension while I conduct the lesson. In subsequent lessons I will only bring up the subjects

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that I want my pupil to work with at that time. When it is relevant, I will gradually explain table work, the various ways I use chair work, standing up, sitting down, walking, ‘whispered Ahhs’ and any application work.

I will often just use their reflexes at first and then check what my pupil is noticing.

I will often repeat particular points, saying “As I have mentioned before...” or “As I keep repeating...” etc. as softeners and acknowledgement of repeating. There are enough aspects to our work, and its principles are sufficiently novel to most people, that frequent reminders are worthwhile and will help the pupil to build a full picture or concept of the technique and its workings over time. I especially avoid expressions such as “Yes, but– as I have already told you...” which blame the pupil for not having understood that point yet. I welcome questions, requests for clarification, and general discussion about what I have been saying while we work together, though making sure we can both keep optimal use while we do so.

Part 3: Teaching Stages and Achievement Criteria

I have a fairly clear idea of my and my pupil’s progressions through teaching and learning, though the stages are layered and overlapped. I am also flexible to address what seems to need attention at any time. Plus, if a pupil has a specific application for the technique, I am likely to include that at the beginning, mostly as a demonstration, but then leave specific application work until later, when my pupil has a better idea how to apply the principles to their application.

My lessons are about an hour long. I aim for two lessons per week for the first two weeks to establish baseline reduction of background tension. If this is interrupted, the baseline is rarely achieved and three or four lessons in quick succession are still needed. I then space out lessons to one per week for three or four weeks because the frequency is no longer required. As they become proficient, I space lessons further, to encourage them to apply the principles without my prompting and to wean them off reliance on and attachment to me. If they have specific applications or needs, I may extend the number of sessions and be on hand for specific occasions. Otherwise once I sense

my pupil can and will continue applying the technique for themselves, my work is done. I may invite them back for a workshop from time to time, but otherwise, that is the end of our time together.

Introductory Lesson

I take an initial case history. I make observation and examination of my pupil in activity. Additionally, I give an initial explanation of the Technique. I give a demonstration of chair work, walking, and shortish table session. I do not count this as a lesson so much as a taster.

Criteria for a successful outcome:

I receive feedback that my potential pupil understands the basics of what I am telling and demonstrating to them.

Early Sessions and Table Work:

The intention over the first four lessons is to get rid of background tension and gradually introduce the basic principles.

I aim to achieve neck relaxation, followed by torso and back or arm release and lengthening. Most people are not shortening and narrowing their backs. I may not get to legs or shoulders in the first lesson, and usually not to flying arms till even later. I may let them nod off, in the first lesson, as this is often the deepest they have relaxed in a long time. However I will very soon encourage them to be awake and alert in that first lesson in order to associate the relaxation with alertness.

I will plate spin: Even though I talk them through relaxing various parts and introduce concepts, I concentrate on just one or two aspects at once until they are fairly proficient.

I introduce *Inhibition* at some point when I am lifting their arm. First I will tell them I am going to lift it, but that I want them to ignore it and to “leave all the work and *weight* for me.” This is a deliberate ambiguity with: “leave all the work, and *wait* for me.” I explain that we cannot expect to change until we are able to not do what we would ordinarily have done.

I will acknowledge spontaneous breathing, sometimes jokingly saying “Ah! He/She is alive!” In the early

stages I will not discuss or coach breathing unless they have a specific problem or application for it.

I will use their eyes leading to get them off the table, pointing out how their eyes follow their interest and their head and body follow.

Criteria:

I consider table work accomplished when my pupil is completely loose and relaxed in their neck, body and limbs by the end of a table turn and they are already as loose at the start of a table turn in the next session.

This will then be a short test table turn, though I may continue to give short turns from time to time, just to keep those plates spinning. Table work is also a success when my pupil stays alert throughout the session, has easy natural breathing, and they no longer assist unless asked.

Chair, Standing Up, Stood Up, Walking, Sitting Down, etc.

I have several sequential, though overlapping aims for this work. I want to ensure that my pupil can:

- Keep their neck relaxed and the back of their head released throughout these procedures.
- Follow my hands with minimal cues without resistance or anticipation.
- Recognise and then use their buoyancy, to sit them upright from resting on the back of the chair—initially with my assistance and progressively of their own accord. Then think of it while I stand them up, and again have them incrementally use it more until they can use it to stand of their own accord. Then obviously, maintain their buoyancy while stood still and moving about or doing tasks, and then when being sat down by me and then sitting down into the chair of their own accord.
- While my pupil is stood, I will demonstrate how their eyes guide them into following their intention and how their weight shift takes the weight off one

leg and foot, so they can move and allow the initiation of walking.

I aim for my pupils to stay relaxed and alert during all this.

The mechanics for this are all standard, but I will tell my pupil what I am doing as I assist them through each stage. I also communicate what I expect of them and complement them on their successes until it is second nature, at which point I will complement them on this also.



Criteria:

I am looking for evidence that my pupil can achieve all the aims above at the same time with ease.

Conscious choice

Once my pupil is developing inhibition during activity, I will start to add the concept of conscious choice. Usually by about the third lesson and then expand it gradually. The practical stages are:

- My pupil is able to maintain state and sit or stand of their own volition, or just not = 2 choices.
- While stood, my pupil is able to do nothing or walk or sit = 3 choices.
- My pupil recognises a choice of in-line or spiral standing or sitting or moving = multiple choice.

- My pupil is capable of catching or not catching balls– With me giving last second instructions at first, then by their own choice.
- My pupil is able to accomplish their own chosen graduated tasks– as above.
- My pupil is able to demonstrate ongoing inhibition and openness.

Opportunities to coach conscious choice are already present during table work, though chair and application work are the more obvious stages to coach it.

Criteria:

Success in this stage is when my pupil can both explain and demonstrate conscious choice to me in person, and when it is clear to me that they can exercise continuing inhibition, conscious choice and ongoing openness in their life away from me.

Breathing & Voice work

Generally, breathing and voice work will be left until later lessons unless my pupil has specific problems or applications. Nevertheless there is an order in which I typically introduce and teach this aspect of the work:

- I am first looking for natural breathing on the table.
- Otherwise I will probably introduce ‘whispered ahhs’ fairly early on.
- I will then have them breathe out fully, though not forced and wait for the natural reflex in-breath. According to Penelope Easten, this was Alexander’s very early innovation that seems to have actually solved his breathing problems.
- With their neck relaxed, I will coach my pupil in having natural in-breaths without sucking or gasping.
- I will then have them turn whispered ahhs into voiced sound half way through the out breath and then incrementally move the voicing earlier in the breath until all the out breath is voiced. If they are a singer, I will have them sing continuous scales on the out breath
- Especially if they have had breathing or voice or speech difficulties, I will coach them in applying the principles of the whispered ahh to their speaking or singing, ensuring they are clear about what the means whereby of the whispered ahh are

and that they can use inhibition to keep to that means whereby.

I will repeat all this while they are sat, when they are stood up, and then with hands on the back of a chair (i.e. Monkey.) I will then also coach them in voice production in these orientations.

Criteria:

As with other stages, once my pupils can achieve all of the above by the end of a lesson, and achieve it easily at the beginning of the next with little or no coaching, then I consider this achieved. As before, I will return to it occasionally to keep the plates spinning.

Application Work

As with voice work, during the introduction I will give my pupils a demonstration of how the Alexander Technique can be beneficial to them if they have a problem or specific application. Otherwise I will leave it for later lessons and encourage them to learn the basics– though I will probably let them do a little application as we go along, so they can track their progress.

With prior awareness of the proper techniques for the task, I want them to maintain their condition, use inhibition and conscious choice, all without anticipation or being drawn into the task, or *settling in* to their habits on completion. This is with mostly external awareness and minimal thoughts for their directions.

One pupil wanted to be ‘shown’ how to get in and out of a low driving seat of a car. Rather than just show people directly how to do something, I prefer to guide them in how to use the principles of the Technique to work it out for themselves– teach them to fish, rather than just giving a fish. I need to avoid stretching them beyond their current capabilities though, but coach and suggest if necessary. I also want to see how they have been recommended to do something in the past, like holding an instrument. I can then suggest how to use the principles to achieve this better, or to improve on it.

Criteria:

For individual applications, when my pupil can use the principles to achieve it appropriately without having to think about it too much, then I consider this

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accomplished. I am looking for unconscious competence. Ultimately, I want to see that my pupil routinely stops and considers how to do any task using the Technique's principles, and then of their own accord gains proficiency in applying them, perfecting the task and gaining unconscious competence in it.

Part 4: Summary and Invitation

True to Principle

My first Alexander Technique teacher, Tasha Kjeldsen ne Miller (1954–2015) constantly emphasised that the principles of the Technique are for the whole of life. We needed always to analyse the situation present, to reason out the best 'means whereby' to attain our desired ends, and to apply those means whereby to attain them rather than attempting to gain them directly. This is what I did when something seemed wrong with how we were teaching, learning and applying the Technique. I took example from John Woodward, the puppy, the psychology lecturer and his notional single celled creatures. I took note of how language influences people, how our minds process thoughts and produce actions, and I applied the many ramifications of these that I noticed. I took stock when I set my first three private pupils palpably back by several sessions and reasoned out a means, whereby I could not only prevent that in future but gradually greatly accelerate my teaching and my pupil's learning.

I am now aware of many of the iterations that Alexander went through in developing his work via the Delsarte Method, learning from many actors, physical culture teachers and voice coaches. How even in London, his work continued to change direction and develop. Therefore, however different my methods are to what F. M. was teaching in London, I consider them still to be true to principle. I am sure if he were alive today, he would not accept my methods without a great deal of consideration, though if they are achieving his ends appropriately, I would hope he would consider my means and how I arrived at them to be valid.

Invitation

I attended my first ATI Conference this last October 2024. Having had little contact with other teachers for many years out of concern that they might be over-critical of my work, I was a bit tentative, taking in the atmosphere and soaking up many useful insights. Without imposing my ideas, I sensed that my work might be considered constructively within ATI and the wider teaching community, and that some may find it useful.

To this end, I have put myself down to present my work at the Dublin Congress this August <https://atcongressdublin.com/presenters/david-owen/> at 2pm on the Tuesday. If you are attending, I invite you to be there. If you cannot get into my talk, then button-hole me. I will have a shirt or nametag with Loosen uP.org on it.

I am also producing a series of videos of how I teach, some of which will be available for free via my <https://loosenup.org/> site (still being updated.) I also intend on teaching workshops, both on line and in person.

My ultimate aim though is to promote the Technique to a much wider public. By being able to teach more quickly, easily and more understandably, it opens the Technique up to many more people with less inclination, time or finance and provides many more pupils for teachers everywhere. I will be aiming at getting people to seek out lessons from local teachers, and I will be publishing lists of teacher's organisations, with emphasis on ATI. However, for teachers who are at least agreeable to my methods and especially have had some training in those methods, I will be maintaining a specific list. I would love to have you on my list.

In the current climate, where inhibition, considered judgements and wise decisions seem sadly lacking, the Alexander Technique is needed more than ever.

I wish you happy teaching.

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David Owen enjoyed a career in industry, medical physics and as an engineer in the BBC. He had lessons in the Technique for 2½ years before training with Jeanne Haahr (née Day) (STAT/Carrington) in Totnes, Devon UK. While training, he also studied counselling and psychotherapy. He then trained in Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) to Trainer level, including with Dr Richard Bandler, the originator of NLP, and assisted on his trainings. He has used NLP in therapeutic practice and as a trainer, and has taught the Alexander Technique since 1990. He lives in Plymouth, UK with his wife and two cats.