

What is the Alexander Technique?

by Catherine Kettrick, Ph.D.

If you look at websites about the Alexander Technique, including mine, you will find varying descriptions of the Technique. All of them list benefits: being able to move more freely and easily, think more clearly, improve performance in various activities, have better posture, live more comfortably and pain free, etc. This makes sense, as benefits are why people are thinking about taking lessons in the first place.

None of them, however, say what the Technique *is*.

Sometimes teachers, if you persist, will say it's teaching the principles of the Technique. Others, including Alexander, believe that it is using their hands and "giving the pupil the correct sensory experience" (because the pupils, with faulty sensory appreciation, can't do it for themselves). Most teachers do use their hands while teaching, and depending on their teaching model, do more or less for the pupil, i.e. give them more or less responsibility for thinking independently.

I think the Alexander Technique is the Three Part Plan in *The Use of the Self* (p. 39). This is the first plan that Alexander devised to help him overcome his vocal problems. (Spoiler: it didn't work).

The plan is:

1. Analyze the conditions of use present;
2. select (reason out) the best means-whereby a more satisfactory use could be brought about;
3. project *consciously* the directions for putting the new means into effect. (Italics Alexander's).

For Alexander, the plan didn't work because he hadn't practiced for long enough to be skilled in using his conscious direction to change the habitual way he moved, particularly when reciting. However, this is the plan we all use when we have developed that skill:

1. We notice, kinesthetically, how we are moving (even if our moving is sitting or standing "still").
2. Then, we select the means to improve how we are moving (hint: it's those directions);
3. and lastly, we consciously project the directions for the new means.

Alexander practiced giving these directions "...for successive days and weeks and sometimes even months, without attempting to 'do' them." He further comments "...and the experience I gained in giving these directions proved of great value when the time came for me to consider how to put them into practice." (p. 41).

We need to do the same thing. With enough clear, intentional practice, we can become so skilled at the Three Part Plan that it will happen in one or two seconds. Really. So try that: begin by practicing

Alexander's directions. Find a time when you don't need to attend to something else—on a walk, where you enjoy just walking and notice everything around you, or listening to music, or falling asleep at night. Just say those directions out loud inside your head, with the clear intention that they be effective. Don't *do* them, just think them, and think them over and over and over and over.... If you do this practice, you will find that eventually, when you just start to think of the first one, before you have time to say it, all the others will follow. Then the Three Part Plan becomes truly easy.

Enjoy!

(For more information see: I've Had My First Alexander Lesson, What Do I Do Now?)