

## Touch in the Alexander Technique for FeldenkraisZeit

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FM Alexander was an actor and reciter of Shakespearean monologues in the late 19th Century. Early in his career he suffered from repeated voice problems and hoarseness that threatened his career. He embarked on a long journey of self-exploration in front of mirrors. His main aim was to improve the mechanical efficiency in the vocal area and in the body in general. In particular, he became convinced that there was a primary relationship of the neck, head and torso region, that when coordinated properly, would improve his voice and the general functioning of his total organism.

He referred to this postural pattern as the Primary Control, and all his instructions were aimed at reconditioning this crucial relationship. Based on his own self-experimentations, he managed to resolve his voice problems and also noted that his overall health and wellbeing dramatically improved.

The Alexander Technique did not begin its journey with touch. Actually, Alexander used to request to his pupils to follow a sequence of verbal instructions to alter their own postural patterns and habits. According to his early students, Alexander pursued this verbal strategy for many years with varying degrees of success and frustration.

The Alexander experience cannot be acquired through words alone, because the written or spoken word, however wise, is ultimately limited. Ideas, concepts and cognitive efforts reinforce the very mental instrument that is the problem in the first place. And we become overly cerebral and disembodied.

This brings us to Alexander's most profound evolution: from words to touch. At some point, Alexander transitioned from purely verbal instruction towards a delicate and highly skilled guidance and communication with hands.

The work is based on the direct transmission of sensory and embodied experience: *the Alexander touch*. This touch is unmediated by memory, imagery and delusions. This Alexander Touch is not contaminated by the limitations and misunderstandings of language.

My understanding of the Alexander touch is that it is not really about postural information. It is a communication of a way of being, or as Alexander termed it: "*The Use of the Self*."

The Alexander touch is a dance of poetry and a symphony of silence. It is non-correcting and non-manipulating. It prevents, not prescribes. It affirms what is, rather than demands what should be. The Alexander touch needs to emanate from the teacher's own condition

of stillness, non-reactivity and non-doing. And out of this deep sense of acceptance, change emerges in the pupil. This kind of unconditional touch is indeed a rare experience.

Indeed, this idea is as far as I know, unique to the Alexander Technique. In usual modalities of physical medicine, manual guidance manipulates the muscles, bony structures and shapes into some kind of preferred condition. A particular troublesome shape is required to change towards a better shape. The practitioner is taught what the problem is, and works towards its correction. In contrast, the Alexander Teacher does not need to know much about pathologies, nor how to correct physiology.

The Alexander Teacher works from the basic assumption of organic and natural functioning that is inherent in all living things. The underlying philosophy is that when certain conditions are provided, the right thing does itself; that there is a self-righting mechanism that is facilitated and reinforced. The role of the Teacher is to provide the conditions where nature is given a chance to recover and recalibrate rather than remain compromised.

My understanding is that there is a natural flow of energy and vibrancy that exists within the organism. In Alexander, we can refer to this flow as a 'vital force' or 'Directions". We interfere with these directions when we are in a condition of stress and reactivity. The prevention or 'inhibition' of our over-reactions to stimuli, maintains or liberates this stream of energy in the body. We don't *do* directions, but rather directions *do* us. Or, as Alexander taught later in his development, *"If only you stop doing the wrong, the right thing will do itself."*

The training of an Alexander Teacher equally has to follow this basic attitude. The Alexander student is not required to learn anatomy and physiology, although a basic knowledge is usually provided. The main engagement of a 3-year full-time training is to develop capacities to evolve and cultivate the ability to remain undisturbed in the face of everyday demands, stimuli and triggers that tempt reactions and adaptations.

Similar to the practice of Buddhist monks, the Alexander Teacher needs to develop a deep measure of equanimity, or what Alexander referred to as "inhibition". In other words, the Teacher is evolving an inner resource of "non-reaction" to all forms of internal and external stimuli. This mindbody evolution and discipline leads to the ability to provide a sensory experience that creates and maintains a particular condition in the mindbody of the Alexander pupil.

When life threatens to overwhelm us with too much pain, we create ways of coping. These can include all manner of addictions and behaviours. We may be addicted to our own internal cocktail of adrenalin and cortisol. We may be workaholics, seeking immediate gratifications, dangers and thrills, enslaved by our electronic devices and social media. Or we turn to external chemistry and become overly dependent on alcohol, caffeine, prescription and recreational drugs.

Equally, our postural patterns operate as coping strategies. Bodily tensions and distortions become fixed and reinforced as we react to the general stimuli of living. We become rigid in the face of danger, we lock our jaws against the need to cry, we contort ourselves against frustration, we pull up against the fear of depression and we compress ourselves to minimise too much anxiety. We oscillate between a squash and a squeeze and a brace and a freeze. And after a while, we may move towards despair and collapse.

Our habits of being, or *misuses* of the self, alienate us from our own true nature. They distract us or anaesthetise us to the reality of our experience. We end up twisted and cut off from the well-springs of our organic and spiritual currents.

It is tempting to view these shapes as a problem to correct at the level of the body. However, The Alexander Technique is at core a mindbody system that views the human condition as a holistic psychophysical system. All these coping strategies serve a survival purpose. They will remain and should remain until we feel safe and secure enough to let go.

This is why the Alexander touch needs to provide the essential experience of safety within a relationship so that these adaptations can soften their defensive and protective hold on the organism. The pupils own automatic and habitual distortions and adaptations are thus challenged, integrated and released.

The unique Alexander touch unravels the body and opens the heart. It reintroduces us to the ground of our being. We let go in faith, albeit with a tremble, and we fall upwards into the ocean of life that sustains us. We breathe out in order to allow the breath of life to enter anew, and we experience a more relaxed and alert quality of attention. Although this new condition may feel unusual, there is a reassuringly deep sense of knowing that we are back on the right path, returning home.

The Alexander touch is a relational event. Like a mother and infant, there is a collaboration of co-regulation. There is a transmission of quality. The nervous system of the mother influences the nervous system of the infant. The infant needs the embrace and holding of a mother who is herself calm and secure. The non-verbal message is speaking words of safety and engagement. The Alexander touch is also a gentle but powerful reminder that in an era of rampant individualism and 'virtual relating', we need each other.

The Alexander touch is much more than a hands-on healing method. The Technique is not a static transmission of some relaxing hands-on experience. The skill of the Alexander Teacher has to include not only the particular Alexander touch, but crucially the ability to maintain this still, quiet and undisturbed touch whilst at the same time guiding the pupil through everyday activities. These activities can include sitting, standing, walking, talking, singing, and thinking; to name just a few.

So ultimately, the Alexander touch and the new quality and way of being that is induced, needs to be present and maintained in the face of life's challenges and demands. This is very much a Technique of 'time in', and not some meditative 'time out'.

In contrast, some somatic modalities seek to access emotional experiences through movement, stretches, imagination and body focussing. This can of course activate a range of suppressed feelings. However, this activation of emotional charge often happens outside of a meaningful therapeutic relationship. For instance, receiving somatic or mechanical instructions in a group setting, or from a video or voice recording, or even a book, leaves the person outside of social engagement, and therefore limited in capacity for safety and integration. There is no dedicated *other* to provide the necessary support for co-regulation and containment.

Even in a 2-person therapeutic situation, the therapist is unlikely to have spent years in the development of the necessary deeply calm and non-reactive nervous system. This powerful relational element seems to be the underpinning of most therapeutic success. And this is precisely the expertise and resource that the Alexander Teacher has cultivated as a primary task over many years.

The Alexander Teacher uses touch to indicate the negation of trying and doing within the pupil. We gradually learn to surrender the ever-so human need to limit and control ourselves. There are echoes here of Zen, mindfulness and the philosophy of non-duality. Indeed, many philosophical systems and idealistic visions do share insights with Alexander's work. However, the uniqueness of the Alexander touch lies in the transmission of immediate experience.

Interestingly, contemporary neuroscience supports this approach. The pioneering research of Stephen Porges on the 'Polyvagal Theory' describes scientifically, the paramount importance of creating the conditions of high levels of safety and social engagement in order to induce change. In the therapeutic relationship he refers to the dynamic of co-regulation between therapist and client.

The Alexander project, as always, is to develop a capacity for inhibition and non-doing, of stillness and quietness in the face of life's challenges. This is the essential purpose of the Alexander touch. We cultivate the ability to be present and responsive to the moment, rather than remaining dominated by the force of our own habitual and unconscious reactions.

The supreme value of guidance with the hands does not mean that there is no place for verbal instruction. Despite the primary influence of touch, there is much scope for accompanying words. Words can clarify misconceptions, explain what is required and support the core work of prevention and non-doing.

But for the Alexander Teacher, words, ideas, knowledge and ambitions will and should remain secondary to the exquisite quality of the liberating, non-doing and non-knowing touch. The real Alexander work resides in the mystery and powerful potential for organic healing.

Finally, it might be helpful to ask who would seek out the Alexander touch rather than other forms of somatic work; those that would like a taste of the Alexander experience; that wish to be guided from the known into the unknown; that understand the importance of gaining some mastery over habitual and automatic reactions in living; that desire to cultivate an embodied mindfulness; that are ready to embrace an enlivened physicality, and that are inspired to embark on their own unique journey of discovery.

### BIO

Anthony Kingsley is an Alexander Teacher and trained psychotherapist who runs an Alexander Teacher Training School in London, ATTS. Anthony has evolved a powerful mind-body approach to the Alexander Technique and describes his private work and Training School as 'Trauma-Informed, and Emotionally Literate'.

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