

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

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Jonathan writes about the Alexander Technique and its application to guitar performance on his blog at mindfulnessinmovement.com.

What is the Alexander Technique?

The Alexander Technique is a method for gaining poise in all our activities. Through a series of lessons, you learn how to recognize harmful patterns of movement and thought and how to undo them.

The Alexander Technique teaches a kind of master skill: the coordination you gain is transferable to any activity, new or old. In this new context, such concepts as posture, relaxation, concentration, connection, holism, and mindfulness gain fresh meaning.

The American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey described the Technique as “thinking in activity.” We have all been told to think *before* we act, and the Technique gives us a means for doing so; but it also teaches us how to sustain our thinking *while* we act—to make a constructive intervention in full flight.

Why do guitarists study the Alexander Technique?

Guitarists will benefit from the Alexander Technique if they are seeking help with any of the following:

- freedom of movement
- relieving pain and tension
- preventing injury
- improving breathing
- gaining a higher standard of sensory awareness in order to answer common questions about technique, movement and posture
- overcoming nerves
- finding a deeper connection with the music
- integrating music with other aspects of life

How do I learn it?

The most effective way to learn the Alexander Technique is to take private lessons from an internationally certified teacher.

The learning process is primarily kinesthetic and experiential. Teachers use their hands to guide the student’s movements. At the same time, teachers use words to help guide the student’s thoughts, instructing them in the fundamental principles—mental and physical—that underly easy movement.

Why the name?

The Technique is named after its founder, F.M. Alexander (1869–1955), an actor who developed vocal problems and eventually overcame them by developing a radically holistic approach. Over about fifty years of teaching experience, Alexander transformed his approach into a subtle and sophisticated teaching method.

SOME PRINCIPLES OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Unity of the self

- Patterns of movement in one part of the body are inseparable from patterns of movement in the whole body.
- Patterns of movement are inseparable from patterns of thought.
- Patterns of thought—including performance anxiety or disconnection from the music—are inseparable from patterns of movement.

Use affects functioning

- When a part of the body is misused, it becomes prone to injury.

Primary control

- The relationship between head, neck, and back is primary. When these are working together in an expansive way, all other parts of the body move more freely.

Faulty sensory appreciation

- Whatever we have become used to feels right. For example, a habitual twist to the left will feel balanced: if we undo the twist, we may feel twisted to the right until the new pattern becomes familiar.
- Faulty sensory appreciation is the biggest obstacle to learning the Alexander Technique on one's own, and the principal reason why teachers work with their hands as well as with words.

Inhibition

- Habitual patterns of movement that cause discomfort or pain must be interrupted before they can be changed. The most effective moment to do this is not *during* the movement, but *before*—before we have reacted to the prompt that sets it in motion.
- The very thought of doing a movement is enough to invoke the automatic patterns associated with it. I can set a new pattern in play, but I need to take a moment to let go of my first reaction and keep my options open. When I am able to stay open in this way, my body can receive the new pattern.

Means-whereby

- Means condition ends.
- By deploying the principle of *inhibition*, new options and ideas for how to achieve our goals open up.

Direction

- Over time, our bodies respond naturally to gentle, repeated directions from the mind, if those directions accord with its design.
- Expansive patterns of movement follow pathways and relationships that are easily described. For example, I will not stiffen my neck, my head will tend to lead my body into its full height, my back will tend to lengthen and widen, and so on. These might sound like positions or specific movements, but in the Alexander Technique we discover that they are impulses and tendencies that can constructively inform movement in any direction.
- Direct, muscular efforts to be “correct,” or even to relax, are counterproductive. Mental direction is enough.