**Teaching Alexander Technique from “Yes”**

**Lao-Tzu –** All action begins in rest

Practice not-doing and everything will fall into place

All of us as Alexander Technique (AT) teachers grow and find our own voices as we proceed in our careers. Each of us is affected by our cultural background, life experiences, and view of reality. I’m here to give you the benefit of my journey, the advantages I’ve seen from teaching from a positive voice, and how I’ve come to teach this way.

When I teach, or live for that matter, I keep asking “what can I say yes to?” and look for both internal and external resources for support. I try to teach with a generous spirit and choreograph lessons which have a series of small successes for the student. I ask students seek to enlist these successes as collaborators in exploring the mysteries of themselves and the world. Students come to me for one thing, usually pain-related, but stay for another. I think that lessons evoke something which has always been theirs and my focus is to awaken or induce the pleasure that they can get from discovering themselves.

This can be scary. A positive aspect of holding on is that students know where they are because of the sensations of tension from excess muscular effort. They can become disoriented when those kinesthetic landmarks are no longer there. I’ve found that a compassionate attitude and emphasis on the positive can successfully help students to navigate this evolution of themselves.

There has been research on the positive effects of saying “yes”. “Bad“ tends to be stronger than “good”, but this effect can be mitigated. Productive teams or flourishing couples and groups will have “positivity” ratios between 3:1 and 5:1 in their interactions and comments (Fredrickson,2009 ; Fredrickson & Losada,2005; Losada,1999 ). People are less likely to perceive a negative comment as a threat if primed with a positive comment beforehand (Lyubomirsky, 2010). We’re also less likely to try to make sense of a positive comment, which keeps it fresh and novel for us and prolongs its effect (Lyubomirsky, 2010). It’s far more effective when critiquing someone in a lesson to start with what you like and then build a “needs improvement” list, than to begin with their shortfalls.

**Alexander’s Discoveries**

I appreciate and admire Alexander’s discoveries, but I’ve never been completely comfortable with his goals or methods.

For me, his discoveries were twofold:

1. That an open and dynamic relationship between the head and the spine is the basis of an increased quality of functioning. Alexander called this relationship “primary control”, though I prefer the term “primary movement” or “primary coordination.”
2. That insights about this relationship could be communicated through personal contact

So, how do we approach these discoveries? Is there a way we can teach them from “yes”?

We’re all familiar with Alexander’s story and his observations about how compromising that relationship between head and spine results in a “pulling back of the head”. He developed a very comprehensive method for improving this relationship based on prevention and saying “no” to unwanted responses, replacing them with others that had been reasoned out beforehand.

I quite strongly prefer the word “yes” to the word “no”. I’ve found that there is a lot you can say “yes” to when students pull back their heads. Our nervous systems are tremendously sophisticated, geared for survival, and able to organize around a conscious intention. If our intention is to take advantage of all the energy made available when we pull back our head and reroute that energy onto a more efficacious path, we can change a perceived roadblock or unwanted response into a resource available right then and there. So, we can (1) say “yes” to the surge of energy necessary for creating a “holding”, (2) roll with it or ride on it, and (3) let it complete its work coupled with an intention of flowing and moving up rather than stopping it. This, to me, is the way of not-doing that Lao-Tzu spoke of at the beginning of this paper.

I feel we can go one step further. We can take the perspective that a way for being in the world is resting as much as possible while being active. We have a rich vocabulary for the feelings, sensations, and implications of action, but less so when we speak of rest. For me, rest is effortless attention in which we are primed for movement but not yet committed to anything specific, leaving us able to respond to a change in circumstance. Action, as it’s usually considered, all too readily overly excites the nervous system. We rarely make an “active” effort to move towards a quiet state. Quite often, we speak of action as a step away from our resting state rather than a complement to it. Or, said another way, “doing” opposes “being” rather than flowing from it and returning to it.

**Initial questions for investigation**

Here’s my short description of AT: “How you do what you do and who you are when you do it”. For me, the “how” is teaching from a positive voice, but what’s the “what”? If someone asks me “What distinguishes AT from other modalities like physical therapy, yoga, and Feldenkrais?” I talk about these three features:

* “Use” of the self as a conceptual framework.
* Moving up.
* The requirement for us as AT teachers to live the work, not just speak it.

My primary goal as a teacher or student is to be an active, compassionate participant in the emerging present.

I want to be as responsive as I can to a world that changes moment by moment. On a practical level, this means I want to process more sensation without being overwhelmed. This desire has led me to work much more with the wisdom of the heart rather than reasoning, and I’ve become more comfortable with the clarity that comes from embracing uncertainty. I urge you to articulate your own goals and definitions about AT.

**From Postural Sets to Postural Waves, or Creative Laziness**

My first premise is that when you trace things back, all holdings arise from fear and/or the illusion of aloneness existing separately from the greater world. The genesis can be, but is not limited to, our fear of (1) falling; (2) pain; (3) a perceived threat; or (4) failure or being deficient. All of these will result in some degree of disengagement and disconnectedness; we may feel less supported. To affect these holdings most profoundly, we can use strategies that increase connections and our awareness of support.

Holding or “pulling down” is most often generated from a positive motivation. The key question for me is why this shortening of stature happens. My current feeling is that we pull our head back and down when we no longer sense our support and connection to the greater world. The non-conscious[[1]](#footnote-1) part of ourselves is summoning up extra amounts of internal energy to ensure that we stay upright or safe. If we can gain some insight here, we can possibly modify our prevailing conditions and let our sophisticated nervous systems do the rest.

The first thing I do when noticing something like this in myself is to say “thank you” to my non-conscious and try to explicitly engage with it. I try to remember that all habits originally were adaptive, solving a problem for our organism and helping it to survive, even though they might be maladaptive now. By adopting this point of view, we can take advantage of these waves of energy and turn a roadblock into a resource. This is a matter of awareness, and it can happen with no time delay or withdrawal from an activity.

Frank Pierce Jones called these waves of internal energy “postural sets” which precede and accompany any voluntary movement (Jones, p.150). My method of addressing them is to have you to first acknowledge them, accept and make friends with them, and then transform them to your advantage. More specifically, I introduce this for a student using the gross and neutral movement of sit-to-stand.

(1) I ask the student to sense either what they do *in order* to stand up or what they do *first*. Then, to make matters even more evident, I tell them to start to stand, but not actually complete the movement and demonstrate this. This usually results in the student noticing some sort of surge of activity and tightening and, quite often, they will say something like “I don’t want to do that”. We then discuss how this set is a potential resource sent from their non-conscious, I’ll propose that we take advantage of it through the lens of collaboration.

(2) I then ask the student to sense this postural set, accept it, and, if possible, notice how the set influences the movement. This explicit step of accepting the set as if it were a companion will invariably result in a more flowing and easy experience for them. We are working with changing the pattern of movement through increased internal engagement that leads to a greater sense of support.

(3) Next, I lead them to understand that the intensity of the set is like a wave that whose feeling changes from imperceptible to noticeable and then fades into the background. I then propose an experiment. I ask them to sense the set coming into being and ask them not to move or stand until the intensity starts to fade. Again, they will have a more flowing and easy experience.

(4) Finally, to give the student agency over the entire process, I ask them to stand when they feel that the postural wave will be the most helpful to them, like surfing on the wave to standing. This focus on riding the wave and resting will almost always result in a lengthening of their stature to a more appropriate shape which will result in easier movement.

The collaboration between conscious and non-conscious unlocks the inherent movement in a postural set and turns it into a wave, positively affecting the use of the entire self, not just the physical self. The student will almost always smile, talk about feeling better, and look more comfortable in their own skin and in the room. This is an example what I what I call creative laziness: replacing muscular effort with awareness and it facilitates the emotional change from fear to excitement.

**Moving in the direction of flow (inhibition)**

Inhibition is an important term in the Alexander Technique and is based on a simplified stimulus-response model which suggests that we can modify our behavior as we become conscious of it. In my experience, we can do even better. We can say “yes” by inhibiting all the time and letting stimuli come and go, separating inhibition from a specific stimulus. This is a richer model than the one Alexander used. Simply stated, inhibition is a process of consciously affecting use and we need not be aware of what we’re affecting.

For me, inhibition is any conscious action that heads us towards flow, support, and orientation. Among other things, this action can be to rest, to wait, or to listen to our ongoing waves which we described earlier and cooperate with them. It is important that the action be conscious. You really can’t get an AT lesson from a three-year-old even though their use is excellent because their connection to “use” is still in the realm of the non-conscious.

Here’s an interesting point: activities are already in motion when we become conscious of them. It would be impossible for us to survive if this were not so. Have you ever noticed your heart beating faster, but you don’t know why? Or, being so scared of something that you find yourself across the room before you realize what’s happening? Much of our brain activity is constructing alternative scenarios of the near future and choosing the apparently most effective, discarding most of them. You could say that our lives are akin to our conscious and non-conscious collaborating in steering a ship that’s in motion. From athletics, I know that it’s far easier to move from being in motion than move from being stopped. So, we work with conscious awareness and modifying an activity, but not stopping it because you can’t really stop.

There is a role for cognition or thinking in all of this. I subscribe to the thinking behind embodied cognition. In brief, embodied cognition “claims that the brain, while important, is not the only resource we have available to us to generate behaviour. Instead, the form of our behaviour emerges from the real-time interaction between a nervous system in a body with particular capabilities and an [environment](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environment) that offers opportunities for behaviour and information about those opportunities. The reason this is quite a radical claim is that it changes the job description for the brain; instead of having to represent knowledge about the world and using that knowledge to simply output commands, the brain is now a part of a broader system that critically involves perception and action as well. The actual solution an organism comes up with for a given task includes all these elements” (Thompson, Jeff)

This leads me to work with conscious intervention rather than conscious control. There’s an ongoing management aspect to the word “control” that just isn’t workable or palatable. “Paralysis by Analysis” can occur when you attend too much to activities that are normally outside conscious awareness. One interesting thing about the universal constant (that use affects function) is that function is largely non-conscious and not amenable to direct intervention. Hence, the indirect approach of AT. When it comes to function, conscious control is maladaptive.

**Movement and orientation facilitates the “up”**

Organizing around and saying “yes” to “moving up” is one of the positive influences we can have on students. During a lesson, we have share an environment with them, and they can learn by deeply contrasting how we respond moment-by-moment with how they respond.

We are creatures that depend on mind and movement as our primary defenses. Movement must be inherently pleasurable, or we never would have survived and evolved. Sometimes it hurts to move, but we experience terror if we feel we can’t move. We need access to mobilization on a visceral level.

It’s much easier to move from movement than to start from what appears to be a dead stop. So, we do try to find movement within stillness for our students. We have two built-in sources for this. One is the active movement of the ribs and diaphragm that facilitate breathing. The second is the inherent instability of the head because its center of gravity is forward and above the pivot point at the atlanto-occipital joint on the top of the moving spine. We are asked to constantly rebalance because of these two activities which are both life-sustaining and helpful for effective movement.

Now, orientation definitely matters as well, and our focus on orientation in AT is fundamental. We move up into the world above and down towards our support in the world below. This is much more comprehensive than a movement of the head relative to the upper spine and shoulders. Your head and the 33 vertebrae in your spine are nearly always rebalancing with each other and act like a 34-part, loosely coupled whole. Moving up through the crown of your head brings you into a more complete world and offsets an experience dominated by vision which is mostly horizontal.

We say “yes” by knowing that it is sufficient to open to a 360-degree world, by embracing all directions, particularly the world above, and by aspiring to move without interference. We already know how to move up beautifully because we did this when we were three years old. These patterns of movement are still available to us and part of our work as AT teachers is to remove interferences viscerally through transformation by conscious intervention so that this coordination can re-emerge.

This can be a teaching challenge because of proclivities in the brain associated with survival. It’s better for us to detect danger when there is none than to miss danger when it’s there. Our brains do a wonderful job of detecting (and sometimes making up) patterns and breaks in patterns. The headwind/tailwind problem is a wonderful example of this. When you’re bicycle riding, for instance, it’s much easier to detect details about a wind in your face than a wind at your back.

So, we are neurologically biased towards finding problems and distortions. We are more apt to notice and dwell on the interferences rather than movement potential. Fortunately, we can train ourselves to see potential and flow in these distortions. We can begin to see “holdings” as multiple “flows” that momentarily negate each other, much like standing waves and, by intervening consciously, untangle and differentiate them for the student.

**Thought and Action-provoking phrases**

I believe that we do better by influencing rather than by directing. I try to use language as a device to lead students into the not yet known rather than a definition of what should happen. My words are meant to be provocative (in a good sense), not limiting. Here are some phrases that I’ve used from time to time with commentary on how they affect my teaching.

* **What can I say “yes” to?**

Gratitude is extremely powerful. When I find a holding or something that I don’t quite like in myself, I thank my non-conscious for bringing it up and ask what I can say “yes” to. I move up as best as I can, and hope to be surprised by what happens. This is far more effective for me than trying to predetermine the outcome.

* **Words are springboards or offerings, not definitions**

With students who are comfortable using directions, I ask them what they mean by “neck” or “back” and what they’re trying to accomplish with their directions. I have them monitor their sensations while doing so. I encourage exploration, not fulfilling commands or wishes, but acknowledge that they are great starting points. I’ve had a number of students who’ve been exposed to the directions who come to me believing that they have been taught mantras and I worry about this.

* **Process more sensation without being overwhelmed**

I believe this lets us live in the world more safely. When we feel safer, we can interact with the greater world more completely. I like that it provides a positive reason (that we hold on in order to feel safe) for a reluctance to fully let go. If you get the chance, study the techniques that Betsy Polatin writes about in “The Actor’s Secret” for methods of relieving these pressures.

* **We live in a world of ebb and flow, one of pulsation**

We are never still; we’re a moving web.  For example, our hearts beat, we breathe in and out, our brains pump cerebrospinal fluid, our awareness and consciousness change shape. While on earth, we constantly bounce off the planet and come back because of gravity.  Our cells pulse as they do their work.  This is reality and we can say “yes” by embracing it. As an experiment, emphasize for your student that they are solid, a moving web, predominantly liquid with waves, or composed mainly of space.  These are all true in their own way. It is helpful to experiment with each point of view.

* **Neither help nor hinder**

I’ve used this for so long that I don’t know if this phrase came from me or I heard it from somebody else first and commandeered it. It really illuminates the point that we move by using pulses and waves. I most often use this phrase for describing, to a beginning student, what’s happening during table work. I ask them to neither help nor hinder any movements that we make voluntarily or waves that pulse through them as things gets unbound. I illustrate this by moving their arm as a demonstration. I ask them first to help me do that and sense what’s happening. I then ask them to hinder or resist and make it more difficult. They’ll usually be quite successful at this. Finally, I ask them to do something that is neither of the two. This is often quite challenging. I also ask them to check their breathing while this is going on because it’s quite likely that they’re holding their breath. It becomes a game for them.

I don’t use words like release, relax, or let go. I leave holdings in place, and try to neither help nor hinder when I sense them. Rather, I listen for how the primary movement permeates them. I move up myself and see what happens. This gets me past the issues with students who want to “change without changing”.

* **Going with flow for resolution**

The non-conscious is wise.  I was doing a lesson with a student who had been told to put his shoulders back because they were hunched forward.  When I asked him to start the movement that he used to "fix" this position, I felt a strong impulse for him to move even more forward which he had been overriding.  I had him go quite slowly and ride this impulse, all the time keeping my mind on the verticality and integrity of his primary movement.  I felt this impulse crest, and then reverse direction. The impulse ended up leading his shoulders back to where he wanted them to go.  He reported that he felt a pop in the upper portion of his neck at the same time that I felt the impulse crest and all was well after that.

* **Spitting the watermelon seed**

This is an exercise for sensing the shape of your awareness. I illustrate it by tossing a ball to the student.  Before tossing, I ask them to get a sense of the shape of their awareness, how much of the world they sense above, below, to the side, in front, in back.  I ask them to track any changes in this shape when I toss them the ball.  So long as my toss is a little bit tough, they'll report some kind of shrinkage or narrowing of this shape.  I'll then ask them to compare three strategies to play with this shrinkage: (1) Push out against it so that it won't happen; (2) accept that it will happen and bring their awareness in from as far away as possible; and (3) follow through on the aforementioned shrinkage like spitting a watermelon seed (with sound effects) so that the follow through takes them strongly down into the support of the earth and up into the world.  They'll usually experience different effects with each strategy and then can use whichever they choose as they go about their lives. Their palette of potential responses has increased.

* **The “no” in inhibition is “know”**

To me, saying "no" to what you notice and don't want is energy wasted on the past, especially since you don't know what you're doing at any time in any real depth.  Discerning what's happening in the near past is quite useful and can set you up quite wonderfully for the future.  This discernment starts to really sharpen once you give up your attachment to defining what's happening and let knowledge start to creep in.

* **Directions can be questions**

On the rare occasions that I use directions, I don't treat them as orders (to use Alexander's original term) or wishes since these are both based on the consciously reasoning out beforehand what is appropriate.  I ask, "To what degree am I moving up right now and what does that mean anyway?"  Using more traditional language, I can ask "How free is my neck and what are its qualities?" I leave it to the non-conscious to process this and report back.  I then get a conversation about the emerging present with myself which is quite powerful. The conscious guides and facilitates, the non-conscious survives, the organism thrives.

* **We’re on a spectrum between holding and balancing**

In introductory workshops, I pass around an 8-pound medicine ball and ask attendees to contrast their inner experience when holding the ball up and letting it balance in their hand.  They'll pretty much all say that balancing is less work.  We eventually talk about heads and spines and how the same contrasts apply. We discuss how we continuously make choices about whether to hold or balance our heads on our spines as we change our relationship to gravity when making any voluntary movement.  We also play a game called "good posture, bad posture" in which I ask them to show me what they think is bad posture.  I then ask them to head just a little bit towards balance while in bad posture and to notice whether they are more comfortable.  We then do the opposite.  I ask them to show good posture. Quite often it involves a lot of holding and we work with that, particularly emphasizing movement up through the crown of the head.

* **Head is poised on top of spine, spine is poised underneath the head**

I’ve had good luck with this one with students who tend to have rigid spines and conceive of them as if they were fence posts. As the head moves, the spine also moves, and vice-versa. This is another way of describing how our bones float in a web of connective tissue because we are tensegrity structures.

* **Bringing “yes” to Faulty Sensory Awareness**

In beginning classes, I ask students to show me where their heads and spines meet. They usually point to the back of their head or neck. I tell them that if this were true, their heads would fall off and that they would unconsciously take steps to make sure that this doesn’t happen. They will usually hold onto their head with their trapezius and related muscles. I then show them images of their spine coming up between their ears and have them nod their heads pivoting from that location with their nose going down when the back of their head goes up and vice-versa. I point out that something is always going up. We then talk about how there are plenty of receptors in the sub-occipital region and none to speak of in between the ears. I point out that it’s quite reasonable to come to believe that our architecture matches what we feel, even though that’s inaccurate in this case. This is a different internal experience from the one they experience from what Alexander called “faulty sensory appreciation”. Accepting the reason for this misinterpretation has worked well for me and it leads into body mapping and total coordination quite easily.

**Psycho-physical unity includes body/mind/energy/spirit and probably more**

We work with use of the self, more than use of the body, and the non-conscious aspect of you is a tremendous resource if you can tap into it. My method is to somehow modify my prevailing conditions, turn matters over to the non-conscious, and see what happens. Here’s how psycho-physical unity plays out for me:

* **Our lives are much more poetic than prosaic**

Our two-way collaboration with the non-conscious comes through dreams, images, words, feelings, and sensations, among others. We lead an incomplete life should we ignore them.

* **I am more than the evident physical self**

I believe that consciousness goes beyond the physical, and that you can affect physical expression by working with awareness. We aren’t consciously aware of much, and the rest becomes available through intuition and the assistance of the greater world. Our work is much richer if we don’t limit ourselves f to what we get through our senses.

* **Compassion is limitless, reason is limited**

I have a rigorous academic background and a healthy skepticism of the reach of reason.

* **Tensegrity**

TENSion + intEGRITY, a word that describes the web in which we live. Continuous tensions (the muscles and connective tissue) with discontinuous compression (the bones that float in the web).

* **Multi-sensory**

The way I like to build lessons. Multi-sensory for sight, sound, and movement (at least) coming together.

* **“Now” is created. The present is always emerging and reality is shimmering**

We are remarkable creatures. We can only sense where we were, not where we are, and still must project into the future. We’re able to put all our different streams of experience, with different timelines, into something seamless. Ask yourself “how wide is my now?” In lessons, I act like a midwife, helping the student emerge.

* **Information is created rather than transmitted**

We have sensations that we interpret through perception which yield information. This is a creative act as is our action when we then use that information.

* **When in doubt, you can always listen**

There’s never any rush and developing a friendship with listening can make this clear. Be quick, but don’t hurry.

* **If you name it, you reinforce it**

This reality is why I feel there’s a big risk with approaches that ask you to identify in detail behaviors that you don’t want and take up arms against them. I have an analytical and athletic background. In both modes, you’re expected to find “minimum” solutions to problems, looking to be as economical as possible and the act of naming is an extra step. Additionally, I play athletics at a reasonably high level, in games that are fast enough so that thinking can cripple performance. You are better off saying “yes” by naming what you want, even if you don’t know it completely.

**Conclusion**

“I imagine that yes is the only living thing” (e. e. cummings)

The use of the self is a wonderful lens for exploration of our life.

It’s a fulfilling practice to always be learning what you want to do and be focused on the emerging present and future. We can and should be informed by the past but need not dwell on it. Teaching and learning from “yes” aids in stepping into the unknown more assuredly and confidently.

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1. A note about language. I’m going to use the term “non-conscious” to include unconscious, subconscious, and anything else below the threshold of awareness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)