

# Moving from the Still Point of Support

## An Interpretation of the Alexander Technique

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*“At the still point of the turning world.*

*Neither flesh nor fleshless.*

*Neither from nor towards.*

*At the still point, there the dance is.*

*But neither arrest nor movement.*

*And do not call it fixity.*

*Where past and future are gathered.*

*Neither movement from nor towards.*

*Neither ascent nor decline.*

*Except for the point, the still point*

*There would be no dance,*

*and there is only the dance.”*

T.S. Eliot

Years ago, I worked with a little girl I will call Anna. She was nine years old. Her mother and father were on the verge of a divorce, and understandably, she was in conflict emotionally. Anna also had a mild scoliosis—a slight lateral curvature of the spine. Although the condition was not acute, she pulled over to one side. Tension from the family circumstances exaggerated this tendency, involving a strong downward pull of her shoulder, almost as if she were cradling herself. Her father brought Anna in for a lesson, and while we were working the exaggerated pull downward and inward of the shoulder most affected by her scoliosis began to dissipate to the point of letting go completely.

There was a sudden rush of blood and energy to the affected shoulder, and, based upon experience, I wondered whether Anna might not become faint. When I asked her how she was feeling she began to complain of lightheadedness. I picked her up and placed her on my teaching table. When she began to perk up a bit, I asked her what she had experienced shortly before feeling faint. ‘I felt like a tiger in a cage,’ she replied.

Emotion bound and repressed, to her as solid and as constrictive as a cage! A little

later, while continuing to work with her on the table, I asked, ‘What now, Anna? How do you feel now?’ ‘I feel like a clown in a circus,’ she replied. So, the energy was on the move. The tiger had changed into a clown, and the cage was transformed into a circus. A little later, while working, I asked, ‘What now, Anna?’ ‘I feel like a light bulb!,’ she replied.

Anna was radiating a ‘self’ unmoved by her parents’ struggles. Her little life was connected to something apart from those exterior forces that had affected her negatively. I watched her translate the lesson into her own smiling experience and asked again, ‘Anna, what are you experiencing now?’ ‘Well,’ she responded, ‘somebody just switched off the light, but the bulb is still there, burning softly inside.’ From the mouths of babes! Her father, who was observing the lesson, began to cry. His daughter was feeling comfortable and secure, not affected by the world and its fickle inconsistencies.

Certainly, there are circumstances and events beyond one’s control, but when through direct experience a person is made aware of his or her own inner being as having support from the deep interconnectedness between one’s self and all life, then no degree of ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ can quench their fire or put out their light—the glow, the hope, the feeling that beneath the habit of identity, one belongs to, and is part of, something greater.

How does Anna’s story relate to the Alexander Technique? Within our bodies, there are specific mechanisms of postural reflexes that reassert balance moment by moment. When not interfered with, they function well and provide us with ease, grace, and fluidity of movement and with a sense of purpose and well being as we go about our daily tasks and interactions with others. However, if we interfere with these mechanisms (i.e., our postural reflexes), we must compensate.

Herein lies the rub.

Feeling little kinship towards the body within which we give expression to our sense of ‘self,’ we create our own support and hold ourselves together by ‘doing’ something, by ‘holding on.’ In doing this, however, we cease to allow our natural design to fulfill its function. We operate under the delusion that without individual effort and determination, we will be cut off, set apart—at worst isolated, from those with whom we appear to exist in relationship.

Metaphorically, we are like the newborn, who when the umbilical cord is severed, might experience a moment where continued sustenance is uncertain. When a tender thread breaks which once provided connection to a source of nourishment, a space appears wherein a need must be fulfilled. And, from that time on, unless

immediate reassurance is provided (e.g., the newborn is picked up and held), the baby risks having to rely upon its tiny self (to the exclusion of interconnectedness), for support.

This, of course, is a false assumption. The fact of support does not disappear. Only our awareness of the connection does, and it works interactively. The baby reaches out, expressing specific reaching reflexes, and the adult responds, assuming the role of provider. If, however, the adult does not respond, the reaching is unfulfilled, and the child must wait until the next time. While waiting, the child begins to invent its own support.

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While simpler life forms appear to behave with a certain ecological awareness, we, in losing our connection, define ourselves apart from mutual existence, inventing support through movement associated with the ‘habit of identity.’<sup>note1</sup> We set ourselves farther and farther apart from ‘inter-being.’<sup>note2</sup> Consequently, we mimic other people, who have themselves lost their own awareness of, and subsequently their access to, support.

In practical terms, if we are to reclaim our experience of being supported, we must find out how and when we are interfering with interaction, cease to reinforce the inconsonant patterns, and return to an awareness of the whole. However, only when support is part of one’s awareness will this experience be available. Otherwise, voluntary muscular effort impedes postural reflex and muscular response, and we use ourselves in ways that we have not been designed to be used in our attempt to accomplish hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Then, living through a day is more effort than pleasure. Relationships remain strangely unfulfilled, more burdening than mutually sustaining. Movement, though purposeful, is strained. If all is effort, then where is the simple joy of being alive, of moving mutually in this perpetual dance of life.

F. Matthias Alexander maintained that to recapture the unified condition, we had only to ‘come to full stop, and return to conscious simple living, believing in the unity of all things’ (*Constructive Conscious Control of The Individual*). His ‘means’ of returning to this simple state of being requires a commitment to change moment by moment in the ongoing present. His teaching posits a highly disciplined personal observation of the way you use yourself while pursuing whatever purpose, goal, or ‘end’ you have in mind.

The phrase 'come to full stop' meant to Alexander the withholding of consent to any reaction discovered in the moment to be non-constructive and out of harmony with the whole, while simultaneously allowing awareness to expand within that moment to include the possibility of an altogether different response.

Accomplishing this involves using a specific 'means,' whereby the person directs attention towards enlivening the postural reflexes which, because of their interactive functional design, foster a unified field of awareness and perception.

Not unlike what he observed about himself during the evolution of his technique, Alexander found in teaching his method to others that the student's unreliable kinesthetic perception was a major stumbling block to learning. He became convinced that to 'feel right,' people always carried out their actions in a way that felt familiar to them. He solved this problem by developing a way of using his hands that was able to bring into the student's kinesthetic awareness both the habitual and non-habitual possibilities of response. This particular use of the teacher's hands provides kinesthetic information that is unavailable to the person who acts or moves by means of habitual reaction.

Letting go of old, but familiar ways may cause the student to feel uncertain.

However, because an Alexander teacher's hands empower the student as a whole and complete person, rather than as one who is partially aware and disconnected, the student feels secure in letting go of old, unreliable habits. The person can then move and interact with the environment according to the design of the human organism. The student can perceive, recognize, and feel his own internal support system. There is less of a need 'to do something' other than what is essential and appropriate.

The Alexander Technique teaches a person how to discriminate among the kinesthetic impressions that are most closely identified with habit and identity, and how to eliminate the elements of learned behavior that interfere with constructive and mutually rewarding response. The implication of using the teaching as a practical means of identifying unrecognized patterns of behavior and choosing not to continue to reinforce them expands the whole range of learning, interaction, and human potential. The Technique speaks to all persons who are interested in change and the freedom to make non-habitual choices, offering increased possibilities in daily interaction and in one's overall experience of life.

Experiencing joy in oneself as being a part of 'the unity of all things' requires participation: an active commitment to the present. Actions cannot simply be accepted at face value as being constructive, nor can perception regarding what is

appropriate, given the circumstances, necessarily be considered as accurate, so long as one is principally governed by achieving the ‘end’ result.

With no attention to the ‘means,’ whereby we accomplish what we set out to do, we miss the transitional moments of life—where all is potential, moving towards life, moving towards a cohesive whole that is completely interactive and interdependent. Beset by habitual responses and motivated by the feeling that we must be in charge, we perform apart from the interactive nature of our design, to the point where we too often miss the cue to participate.

The joy of support, then, lies waiting to be recognized, listened to, acknowledged. Its presentation is elusive, existing in the space between things known and not known: at the still point of being—being in relationship where all is potential, not yet defined—within moments like those just before sunrise and sunset, within the time between inhalation and exhalation. The joy lies potent in the space created by withholding the accustomed and habitual reaction to life: between the stimulus and the response.

So, Anna’s ‘light bulb’ does indeed exist, not merely in a child’s imagination, but reflected in the simple expression of relationship—in the inter relatedness of her life to all life. Her epiphany suggests that beneath our habit of identity, we belong to, we are supported by, and we are part of something greater.

Keeping the bulb burning brightly requires a willingness to participate moment by moment in the movement that is neither from nor towards the still point of support. And, above all, “do not call it fixity.”

## Endnotes

Note1

Ken Carey, *Starseed, The Third Millennium*, Harper, San Francisco, 1991

Note2

The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist derives this term ‘interbeing’ from a particular Buddhist Sutra that means *to continue in present time*. Thus: I am; therefore, you are. You are; therefore, I am. We ‘interare’.