

## Alexander Technique Skills

**Awareness:** Noticing and describing my habitual movement patterns and the new experiences I have in my lessons and in between lessons. For example, is my neck tightening when I get up from my chair, when I work at my computer, when I exercise?

**Inhibition:** Pausing before reacting to a stimulus, whether it comes from outside myself or within me. For example, when my cell phone rings, I can pause for a moment before I pick it up to answer. In this pause, I may become aware of what my muscles “want” to do to answer the phone in my habitual way. It also gives me time to give myself a little direction (see below).

**Direction:** Thinking to myself:

I allow my neck to be free;

So that my head can release forward and up (away from the top of my spine);

So that my torso can lengthen and widen;

So that my knees can release forward and away from my torso;

So that my heels can release back and down;

So that my neck can be free.... etc.

Direction is not checking to see if these things are happening, or moving body parts to “make” them change. It’s just a light, wishful thought that I renew frequently.

**Non-doing:** Inhibition is literally “non-doing” - pausing before responding to a stimulus, long enough to consider whether and how to react. Directing is also not doing something, at least not in the way most of us experience “doing.” No deliberate muscle action is involved. I may notice my muscles responding to my thoughts, but my primary attention is given to sending the thought, not to trying to do or feel something.

**Thinking in Activity:** John Dewey used this phrase to describe a skill he learned through Alexander Technique lessons. To me, it means:

- Being aware how I react - in mind and body - when something stimulates me to do something;
- Giving myself a moment before acting on that stimulus, so I can make a choice about whether and how how to respond; and
- Lightly thinking my directions as a friendly reminder to myself that I don’t need to contract and compress myself in order to act.

## Alexander Technique Basic Concepts

**Mind-Body Unity:** The mind, brain and body are not separate. Through the nervous system, which links the brain to the rest of the body, they influence one another constantly. Our thoughts and emotions profoundly affect our bodies, and vice versa.

**Good Use of the Self:** This is F.M. Alexander's term for what we are working towards: fluid, efficient, and alert functioning of body and mind. We talk about the "self" because we are concerned with the whole person, recognizing that body and mind are not separate. We talk about how we "use" ourselves to indicate that we can make conscious choices about how to do our daily activities, so that the cumulative effects of unconscious habits don't cause us pain and disfunction.

**Primary Control:** If the head, neck and back are contracted together, movement is restricted; if the neck is free and the head poised easily, movement becomes more fluid and requires less effort. Thus, the relationship among the head, neck and back is the key to good coordination and efficient functioning.

**Habit and Debauched Kinaesthesia:** The force of habit is extremely strong, and cannot necessarily be overcome by sheer willpower. When we are used to moving, sitting and standing in a particular habitual way, it feels wrong to move, sit and stand differently. The feeling sense may not provide us accurate information about what we are doing. F.M. Alexander called this phenomenon "debauched kinaesthesia," or "unreliable sensory appreciation."

**Means-Whereby vs. End-Gaining:** If we keep concentrating on a goal, we may fail to give attention to how we can best attain the goal. Alexander called excessive focus on the goal as "end-gaining." Students of the Alexander Technique practice letting go of this attitude and replacing it with an attention to the means they use to attain their goal - the "means-whereby" in Alexander's terminology. We practice this using very simple goals: for example, getting in and out of a chair while giving attention to not tightening the neck.

**Postural Reflexes - the True "Core" Muscles:** The body has a natural support mechanism that keeps us upright: muscles that wind around and support the spine. If we stop doing things that interfere with these muscles, they will maintain us in an easy upright position, without a lot of work in the superficial muscles of the abdomen, back, shoulders and legs. The more we allow these true core muscles to support us in everyday activity, the stronger they become.

**Don't Take a Deep Breath!** Efficient, easy breathing begins with breathing out. An in-breath will follow automatically - there no need to "take a breath."