

The Alexander Technique:  
Lecture Given to the Flute Performance Class at UMASS  
February 13, 2007 by Priscilla Hunt ©2007

Today more and more people are realizing that musicians are especially at risk for muscular-skeletal and other injuries related to repetitive stress and tension. The National Association of Schools of Music now mandates that music schools provide health information to students as a requirement for recertification. The forced retirement of the principle oboist of the Chicago symphony, Alex Klein for overuse syndrome and "focal dystonia" of his hand muscles was not an isolated incident. He was 48 years old and had won all the important woodwind competitions worldwide. Fortunately, he is still able to teach and conduct. <sup>i</sup>

Physical therapists note that the majority of musicians' injuries are due to repetitive stress: musicians perform highly skilled and coordinated repetitive motions at high speeds. There are other pressures that lead to muscular tension. Musicians tend to be perfectionists and make high demands on themselves; they must deal with performance anxiety and lots of competition. Moreover, many instruments are not ergonomically designed and

most muscle related injuries are associated with “abnormal postures, muscle imbalances and movement disorders.”<sup>ii</sup>

Physical therapists recognize that flutists are especially at risk as are viola and violinists who also play with the arms at shoulder level.<sup>iii</sup> After all, you are challenged to hold an instrument upright in virtually a horizontal position with your face turned to the left, potentially for long periods at a time, and all this without over-tightening the upper body, arms, shoulders, neck the face of the jaw, without tensing up the legs and feet, and without constricting the breathing mechanism—diaphragm and ribs. How many of you have experienced localized muscular fatigue, pain, “play through pain,” have pain after a certain length of practice, have pain that lasts beyond playing the instrument, feel that a normal workload is challenging? What do you do for fatigue or pain? Physical therapists admit that rest alone won't solve these problems, and that posture is key. Here is where the Technique comes in.

Let me tell you how I came to it. I myself had to give up a potential career as a flutist at the age of 18 after playing from the age of 10, because of severe pain in neck and arm. I never understood what I was doing to cause it and doctors never addressed the cause either. I just had to give up since rest didn't really help. Patterns that I had established destabilized my back

and I had bouts of back problems. In middle age, I took up the A.T. I went at the recommendation of my cranial-sacral therapist because I wanted to take more charge of my own health and healing instead of being dependent on him to feel better. Also I wanted to understand more why I kept getting into trouble. The triggers for my neck and back pain were a complete mystery and I didn't even associate them with the flute, or more precisely with my way of playing the flute.

I found that AT is an educational method for learning about how you use your body in ways that work against you, and for gaining the tools of awareness to stop doing the things that are setting you wrong. With the help of a teacher I experienced what I do to sit, stand, take weight, breathe or engage in a skilled activity like playing the flute or piano, I discovered habitual patterns of overuse that were causing existing problems and setting me up for future ones. I learned that my trying too hard was causing me to malcoordinate myself (I am a type A personality). I worked too hard in some muscles, for instance, in my neck, shoulders and arms and was therefore not allowing other muscles to work that were actually built to do the job my neck and shoulder and arms had taken over. No wonder I had severe neck and shoulder pain!

Moreover, as I learned that I did not have to try so hard, and succeeded in not overtensing I began to get more in more in touch with a strength, ease and vitality that comes naturally to humans and all animals without trying. This easefulness had been underneath all the tension and had been forgotten, since the tight, stressed self had unconsciously come to feel normal and right and necessary to the task.

As my lessons continued and deepened, my curiosity was awakened and my mind became engaged in a journey of discovery and self-healing. Once I was able to give up habits of tension that had come to my attention, I became aware of other habits hidden underneath relating to earlier experience. These layers of habit went all the way back to the extra tensions associated with practicing the flute hours a day for years and years from the age of ten. Now I see my habits as a flutist as a foundation for all the other habits of misuse that I acquired. The later layers were an attempt to somehow compensate for the extra tension in my upper body by adding more tension. Do two wrongs make a right? In the short term I got results through discipline and determination, but the long term led to a total shutdown and chronic pain.

I found the Alexander Technique in the nick of time. These insights about how I got myself in trouble could have been

devastating but actually, they brought relief. This knowledge has given me the opportunity to take change and help myself. Everyday I feel grateful that I am now well along in the journey of self-understanding and liberation and can share this valuable life resource with others.

We can all learn skills to be conscious of when we fall into old habits of tension that interfere with our natural ease, strength and coordination, and to leave our habits behind. When I heard about the Technique, I discovered that the Technique is not well known to the general public but is known worldwide by musicians and actors. Leading music schools in Britain and the states have A.T. teachers on their staffs because they have recognized that it should be an integral art of a musicians set of tools to keep them in shape for a long and productive career and help them realize their potential.

Moreover, many musicians are idealists completely immersed in their music or technicians honed in on their instruments. They are prone to forget that they are the source of their music, and that they are an instrument themselves. The instrument of the self needs to be working well in order for the other more obvious instrument, -in your case, the flute—to work well. The instrument you play is an extension of yourself, of your unity as a body and mind, so that in essence, your self comes

first. For many of us this is hard to accept. My improved relation to others and the world, increased enjoyment and capabilities after AT lessons taught me that care of the self needs to be a foundation for all other goals and activities.

Now that I have told you my story, let me move on briefly to F.M. Alexander's story because it is instructive for us all. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a young man of 19 engaged in a career in performance in Australia, F.M. Alexander hit an unexplained obstacle. He was an elocutionist, a type of an actor that recited literature and dramatic passages, and as such he was his own instrument. The instrument wasn't working. Whenever he would recite publically he would lose his voice. Doctors could find nothing wrong. Yet his voice was not working as it should. He was forced to fix it himself.

He began to observe himself, to take charge. He found to his surprise that speaking wasn't a simple activity for him, although it should be the most natural of all activities. When he spoke, he pulled his head back and down and that compressed his larynx. Whenever he did that, he also compressed his ribs, and tightened his legs and feet. He now understood that he had a "mental conception" about what it means to speak; on a subconscious level, he thought that he needed to tense his whole body to speak. He also observed that the compression of his head

and neck was associated with a total pattern of tension. He noticed that even the thought of speaking would get this pattern going. His body was getting ready to make all that effort even before he began to speak. It was gearing up before he was even aware of it.

He tried an experiment. Could he get himself to stop doing this getting ready consciously? No, he discovered, it was already engrained in his nervous system and in his brain. But this programmed activity was doing the opposite of what he desired; it was shutting himself down. He must have wondered: "If, somehow, I do manage to stop, what would be left?" Would he be able to speak at all? He no longer knew how to speak in public without his habit. Later, when he discovered that his brain and body did in fact know how to speak without his trying to do it, he said he had taken a journey from the "known to the unknown."

How did he make this discovery? He taught himself something called "inhibition." He trained himself not to react habitually and unconsciously to the idea of speaking publically; not to get ready to speak before he spoke and to trust that the speaking would do itself. He stopped and took some time before speaking. He quieted his mind and quit worrying and then somehow allowed the speaking to happen. And it did. He had

accomplished the journey from the known, his tense way of speaking, to the unknown, a way of speaking that he didn't have to try to do. He found lots of ways to practice this art of inhibiting -- not reacting to the stimulus that sets up habits of tension. For him the stimulus to malcoordination was speaking publically. For us, it may be playing the flute.

F.M. observed that even the way he got in and out of the chair involved those same habits of tension. This simple activity brought them out into the open. So he made this activity a test case. He practiced doing sitting and standing without getting ready, with inhibition.

He then added another skill he had discovered that assists the body in finding its natural state when tension has been released. This skill was the mental activity of directing, whereby we direct our body into spatial expansion to help along the natural process of our lengthening and widening and expanding that occurs when we stop adding extra tension to our activities.

Movement in and out of the chair with the teachers' touch and verbal guidance became the basis of an Alexander Technique lesson. It enabled the student to discover his unconscious habits and learn skills to undo them that could be applied to all activities. F.M. later found that it could be helpful to work first on a student in a lying down position where less

demands were placed on them. He could move their limbs gently and help to free tension by asking them not to help and not to react, thus teaching them skills of inhibition. He could also ask them to direct themselves into length and width while they are supported by the table. Table and chair work are the nuts and bolts of an Alexander lesson, although the teacher may engage the student in other exploratory activities or games.

Before I ask for volunteers to demonstrate how a lesson works, I want to briefly discuss what F.M. discovered about a properly coordinated person that would be valuable food for thought for flutists in particular.

Five key points for human beings in general and for flutists in particular:

- 1) The body is structured to both make use of gravity, which connects us to a support structure, the ground, a chair. We don't have to hold ourselves up or support ourselves with extra tension. Often, if we are worried and anxious, we try to pull ourselves up, and this can happen while playing the flute. Instead, if we can inhibit, and not react to our anxiety, or idea that we need to help, we can allow the weight to fall through weight bearing points. We can let go of a lot of excess tension

and allow ourselves to be supported. This is something you can observe when you are sitting or standing. Are you letting the weight fall through your feet or sit bones? Can you ask yourself not to help, not to sit in your ordinary way and see what happens.

2) If we are truly allowing the weight to fall through us, we are in for a surprise. We have within us a natural support mechanism that takes us up against gravity—in particular small muscles along the spine that we are not conscious of and that encourage our whole back to lengthen and widen and become a source of support for the arms. When this is happening we can be in a state of balance or poise, on our sit bones, or on two feet. We can be moved or move easily because we are not holding ourselves up but are simply going up. Therefore we acquire new strength from a lengthening and widening back.

Expansion upwards can be further activated by taking weight, even, possibly, a flute. African women carry weights on their heads that stimulate and strengthen their support mechanism so that they become taller and more upright. We, carrying a flute in front of us are faced with more of a challenge not to be dragged down. But if we are already going up against gravity, with a lengthening and widening back, and free extension in the arms, the flute will be carried up by this process,

and we will have a sense that we are not holding the flute—it is doing itself. This gives us the opportunity not to tense our shoulders, elbows and wrists.

Physical therapists have called A.T. one of several relaxation methods to help musicians, and this idea of letting weight fall and making use of gravity could be interpreted as ‘relaxation.’ But in fact it isn’t. It is the first stage in achieving a body tone and balance, muscular endurance and freedom of movement that musicians need to overcome the stresses they face.<sup>iv</sup>

Thus the first two points ideas are 1) letting the weight fall through you so that you are making use of gravity; 2) allowing the automatic support mechanism, and especially a lengthening and widening back, to take you up against gravity so that your arms and the flute are supported by your back. Here is the third point that is perhaps F. M. ’s most important discovery.

3) The process of going up against gravity is dependent on the proper relationship of the head to the neck and of the head and the neck to the torso, or back. He called this relationship the Primary Control, because it influenced the person’s total coordination. Flutists can easily interfere with this relationship because the very act of playing involves positioning your embouchure<sup>vii</sup>. The head can be pulled forward or back and the

neck tightened in various ways that put pressure on the back so it can't lengthen up and widen and offer support for the arms holding the flute. So, a flutist needs to keep his or her neck free, and as F.M. discovered the head should be allowed to free forward and up in relation to the neck.<sup>vii</sup>

4) The fourth point follows from the third-- the freeing of the head and neck and back is necessary for our breathing mechanism to work properly. A free neck and a properly working Primary Control is essential to the natural action of the ribs so they achieve their widest excursion and provide us with the necessary air to play. If the ribs are working naturally, we should never have to gulp air or sniff or use our neck and shoulder to breath. If we interfere with head, neck and back, this has a negative impact on our breathing. It impedes the natural movement of the ribs. Then we have to force our breathing with a lot of extra effort, which is inefficient and could be injurious in the long run.

5) The fifth point is that the poise we gain from acting on points 1-4 makes us available for movement when playing and this also reduces muscle fatigue and holding. If we let the weight fall through us, we are not locking the legs or knees or hips to play; if we allow ourselves to go up against gravity by not tightening our necks and expand and breathe freely we have also

unlocked the joints in our shoulders, elbows and wrists. We have avoided a static immobile and held posture that could eventually get us into trouble.<sup>viii</sup>

If a flutist comes to an AT lesson with a particular problem, it will be addressed in terms of the larger whole, that is, in terms of use of gravity, how the relationship of head, neck and back effects the automatic support mechanism that takes us up against gravity, puts us into expansion and effects breathing. By addressing the organization of the body as a whole in this way, problems in the parts such as shoulder or arm, will be resolved because the larger pattern causing these problems will be addressed.<sup>ix</sup>

Students ask: How long will it take to get the benefits of the Technique? When is this process over? We are dealing with habits that had built up over a lifetime so it is best to start early to address them. The Alexander Technique is not a quick fix. It is a method of exploration that can bring about deep and long lasting change, one little significant bit at a time. Even a small change in the amount of tension, say in your neck, can make a big difference. And this can occur in one lesson. One lesson can change a student's consciousness and thus her habits. And, because of this constant opening of the door to new insights and

greater understanding, the process itself can be deeply rewarding and give continuous benefits. However, Alexander himself said it took from 20-30 lessons for a person to really have the skills to take charge and make the Technique a resource for their whole life. Many people continue onward to greater and greater insight and change because the process itself is meaningful and continually influences their other activities for the better. That was certainly my case, and I went into the three-year intensive teacher training to explore it more deeply and to be able to help others.

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<sup>i</sup> See Wall Street Journal, January 31, p. D10.

<sup>ii</sup> J. Dommerholt, et alia, “Therapeutic Management of the Instrumental Musician,” Performing Arts Medicine, edition 2, 1998, 278, [hereafter TM] and Byl N.N. Arriaga R. “Treating the Injured Musician,” Physical Therapy, (1993) 1:62-68.

<sup>iii</sup> TM, 280 “the anterior and middle deltoid, the upper trapezius and the supraspinatus and infraspinatus muscles are more susceptible to muscle fatigue when the arm is held at or above shoulder level.”

<sup>iv</sup> TM, 278.

<sup>v</sup> See TM, 282, It is likely that abnormal posture, especially forward head posture, alters the embouchure of wind instrumentalists, the free way space and the airflow.

<sup>vi</sup> See T.M., 282.

<sup>vii</sup> See the image entitled “A poised head coordinates the whole” under “Musicians” on this website.

<sup>viii</sup> See T.M. 282. “Posture must be considered a dynamic process and is always related to movement.” See also McKinnis, D. L. “The posture-movement dynamic.” In:

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Richardson J.K., Iglarsh Z.A., ed. Clinical Orthopedic Physical Therapy. Philadelphia, PA: WB Saunders; 1994.

<sup>ix</sup> T.M 282. “To improve posture, the individual components must be integrated into total motor patterns.”