

Learning to See the Ball using the Alexander Technique

By Gaynelle Gosselin

This article begins with a personal anecdote from the author, for whom childhood P.E. classes were exercises in frustration and humiliation largely because she could not master the coordination needed to catch, throw, or hit a ball. She could not keep her eye on the ball despite well-meaning instruction from coaches, friends, and family members. It was only in her 30s, while training to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique that she learned to catch a ball. She did this through a process known as **constructive conscious control**. It is a process that begins with drawing awareness to habits of thought and movement that accompany a stimulus (in this case the sight of a ball or other projectile coming near one's kinesphere), and then evaluating the habits for their usefulness. Through the joint processes of inhibition and direction one learns how to stop unproductive habits and to move with better coordination. Used together, **inhibition** and **direction** offer a means for functioning at a higher level within any given activity. When teaching children, this process has the potential to prevent malcoordination from ever taking hold.

Alexander Technique instructors use a combination of verbal instruction and highly skilled manual guidance to re-educate students so that their movement patterns are more dynamic and efficient. Lessons are typically given on a one-to-one basis, but many instructors also offer group lessons and workshops. The basic principles may be applied to any activity. Before attempting to integrate these principles in an educational setting, it is rec-

ommended that the teacher seek lessons with a qualified Alexander Technique instructor.

A Brief History of the Alexander Technique

About 100 years ago, Frederick Matthias Alexander developed a system of movement education to address his own coordination problems. He was an actor who developed persistent vocal problems because he was habitually misusing his body. Before he could coordinate himself better, he had to learn to stop what he had previously done and redirect his efforts (Alexander, 1932). The implications of Alexander's discoveries extend far beyond acting and vocal performance. Virtually any human activity, including ball sports, can benefit from the application of his technique. In fact, Alexander devoted an entire chapter of his book, *The Use of the Self* to the problems faced by a golfer who could not keep his eye on the ball despite both the instruction and the willingness to do so (pp. 56-69). He suggested that the solution to the golfer's problem lay with addressing the following questions:

Why does the golfer take his eyes off the ball in the first place...?;

Why does he *continue* to take his eyes off the ball after he has decided to keep them on the ball? Why does his "will to do" fail?; and

What is the stimulus that constitutes an apparently irresistible urge to take his eyes off the ball, in spite of his desire to follow his teacher's instructions and in spite of his "will to do?" (p. 56)

To answer these questions one must examine the nature of habit and its influence on sensory appreciation. Habit is necessary for the development of any skill. A complex activity such as hitting a ball could not be performed if one had to think about each step involved. The potential for trouble arises because habit forms the basis for sensory appreciation. As any movement is repeated over time it becomes habituated (Hanna, 1998). The sense of that movement becomes what feels normal. If the movement habit is well-coordinated, then there is no problem. However, if the habit interferes with coordination, sensory perception becomes unreliable and a hard-to-break cycle emerges. Poor movement habits beget faulty sensory appreciation, which in turn reinforces poor movement habits. From time to time, even professional athletes experience faulty sensory perception. Alexander Technique instructor Roy Palmer cites a case of sensory perception gone awry with a quote from Tim Henman after his defeat at the Hamburg Masters in 2001: "I couldn't have felt better coming into this match and I couldn't have played much worse," (Palmer, 2011). Understanding the relationship between sensory perception and habit can go a long way toward helping students develop good coordination.

The Force of Habit and the Endgaining Trap

Unfortunately, the role of habit is something that is not very well understood by many instructors. Well meaning attempts to break its force are too often misdirect-

ed. A teacher can tell a pupil who is having trouble learning to catch or hit a ball to keep their eye on the ball, but this is insufficient to stop the habit of not watching the ball. Worse, it is likely to elicit an **endgaining** response. In Alexander Technique terms, this means that the pupil will focus so much on the desired outcome, that they fail to pay attention to the process involved in reaching their goal. In their wish to succeed, they will engage the very habits that interfere with success *because they feel right*. A common response is to put more physical effort into the action in the belief that the effort will somehow help (Palmer, 2011). This translates into excess tension or stiffness that increases as the student tries harder and harder, but to no avail. This same student may be told to relax because they are trying too hard or thinking too much, but again, this will not help. To change the outcome, the pupil must learn to stop doing whatever it is that is causing them to take their eyes off the ball in the first place.

This is what Alexander teachers mean by inhibition. It is an act of withholding consent to a habitual reaction. In the midst of any activity, one may pause and make a choice to refrain from engaging in the habit. In this sense, inhibition is a way to “just say ‘No’” to anything that interferes with performance. Students are trained to please, so learning to say “No” is both empowering and pleasantly subversive. When a student succeeds at not reacting in their habitual manner, then they may continue the activity or perhaps choose to do something entirely different and new.

Learning to inhibit habitual responses opens a pathway for restoring accurate sensory perception. However, to succeed, one must be open to unfamiliar experiences. Endgaining is pervasive in our culture, and it is accompanied by a false sense of what is necessary for success. In the case of the previously mentioned golfer, the habits he formed from the desire to make a good stroke made it impossible to keep his eye on the ball. These habits were tied to a faulty sensory perception of what a good stroke should feel like. To keep his eye on the ball, the golfer would need to try something that would, initially, feel wrong to him (Alexander, 1932). When encountering this problem in our own stu-

Glossary
<p>Constructive Conscious Control - a process for evaluating, organizing, and choosing responses within any situation or activity</p>
<p>Direction - a thought process used to organize the movement of various parts of the body in relation to the whole self and the surrounding space. Direction is both sequential and ongoing. For example, a typical Alexander Technique direction is: 1) Allow the neck to be free, so that; 2) The head goes forward and up, so that; 3) the whole back lengthens and widens.</p>
<p>Endgaining - a tendency to over-focus on a desired outcome at the expense of the process needed to reach that outcome</p>
<p>Faulty Sensory Appreciation - proprioceptive and/or kinesthetic sense that has become inaccurate as the result of habituated movement patterns and postural sets</p>
<p>Inhibition - a thought process used to pause and consciously withhold consent to a habitual response</p>
<p>Primary Control - the dynamic relationship between the head, neck, and torso that acts as a constant determining the quality of coordination and functioning of the whole self. When the relationship is free of either collapse or excessive tension, coordination and general functioning are enhanced.</p>

dents, we must recognize that their desire to be right (or their fear of being wrong) tends to reinforce habits of misdirected effort. Students need encouragement to move beyond familiar habits. Instructors must create an environment where it is safe for students to feel wrong. Students need to trust that it is perfectly acceptable for them to not know what they are doing at first. In Alexander’s words to one of his own pupils: “You can’t do something you don’t know, if you keep on doing what you do know,” (Maisel, 1995).

Direction, Primary Control, and Coordinated Effort

In his early work, Alexander discovered that there are physical conditions which aid coordination and these conditions may be consciously directed. What he called **primary control** (a.k.a., primary coordination) describes a dynamically balanced relationship between the head, neck, and torso (Alexander, 1932). Functioning and coordination of the whole self for good or ill is determined by the quality of this relationship (Alexander, 1941). If the head/neck/torso relationship is stiff and tense, coordination is impaired. If the relationship is free, coordination is enhanced. Ideally the neck and torso must be free in

such a way that the head moves “forward and up,” and the back “lengthens and widens” (Alexander, 1932). These directions are not to be employed as postural commands; they are thoughts that set up conditions of fluidity and ease of movement. By following the directions and allowing the body to respond, but not using muscular effort to force the response, the primary coordination is enlivened.

Unfortunately, many activities are taught in ways that interfere with this fluid coordination. Alexander Technique instructor Joe Boland notes that when teaching a complex sport such as tennis, instructors often break movement down into component parts and assume that with enough repetition the student will assemble the material correctly:

“The problem is further exacerbated in that not only do we describe tennis movement in terms of component elements, but we describe the anatomy in like terms as well (head, shoulders, hip). The net effect is that we create a conflict between image and reality. The reality we want is integrated movement...but the language we use in order to stimulate this reality creates an image and consequent reality of disintegration.” (Boland, 2011).

He goes on to say that typical instruc-

tions (i.e., watch the ball, turn, take your racquet back) lead the average student to direct attention to the anatomical parts associated with each instruction. This causes fragmented effort because the brain responds to each command as a separate act not as part of a whole movement. Boland suggests giving instructions that integrate the activity such as, “See the ball to turn the body, etc.” (Boland, 2011). This type of instruction is more harmonious with the students’ primary coordination and is likely to yield better results.

Taking the Force out of Habit

Virtually every teacher knows that practice makes habit. Repetition of malcoordinated movement only reinforces it. Students would do well to heed the following advice: “If at first you don’t succeed, never try again, at least, not in the same way. [It] almost always involves extra and excessive tension,” (McDonald, 1989). The role of sensory appreciation cannot be overstated. If the sensation of effort is what feels right, the underlying tension habits are likely to persist even though they are unproductive (Alexander, 1941).

Knowing this is the case how is one to escape the snare of bad habits? The first step toward change is awareness, but helping a student to accurately perceive what he is doing may require some detective work. If a student cannot keep his eye on the ball, watch to see how and where they look. Then ask why. In ball sports, endgaining tends to take attention away from the ball itself. For the person returning a serve or hitting a baseball, eyes may drift to where they want to hit the ball before the ball has even left the hands of the server or the pitcher. In some cases, “excess tension habits formed out of a desire to hit the ball hard will cause a person to be unable to move the head quickly enough to see the ball once it has left the hands of the server or the thrower, leaving one focused on the opponent rather than on the moving ball,” (Vineyard, 2007). Whatever the habit is, the student must be given space to perceive the habit and stop it before continuing the activity. This is how one learns to identify with coordination rath-

er than the feeling of effort. One must give up familiar ways of doing and learn what is unfamiliar. This is tricky territory for students and teachers alike because it often calls for discarding cherished ideas and beliefs in order to gain access to a new way of moving and being (Alexander, 1941).

Fear is another likely culprit causing misdirected effort. “Unduly excited fear responses,” as Alexander termed them, include fixed expressions, breath holding, poor posture, jerky movements, and strain (Alexander, 1946). These habits all too often accompany and impede the learning process. Fear responses may also include unnecessary startling. Many people flinch when the ball comes near and cannot help taking their eyes away from it. The neck will shorten, pulling the head down and back on the spine. In some people, the startle reflex causes a sudden extension of the upper torso that extends outward to the hands (Jones, 1976). Fear responses, including the startle reflex, tend to interfere with the primary coordination unless they are redirected. If one’s head is pulled down in response to a ball coming near, the gaze automatically moves away from the ball. If one arches the back suddenly, the shoulders pinch together, and hands are suddenly thrust outward making it impossible to grasp the ball. A person who startles in the face of a ball flying at them may be told to not be afraid of the ball, but this admonition is no more helpful than endlessly ordering them to keep their eye on the ball. If they could help it, they would not be doing it. What will help is using inhibition and direction so they can see the ball coming without reacting to it in their usual way.

Anyone who has ever tried to break a bad habit knows how daunting the process can be. However, the principles of Alexander Technique offer a reliable means for teaching people how to stop unproductive habits. Again, one must be willing to be process-oriented, and one must create an environment where it is safe for the acts of throwing, catching, and hitting to feel different, even wrong. Following are strategies for using ball toss explorations to teach inhibition and direction and vice versa.

Strategies for Using the Technique in Activity

In the author’s work with performing artists, students have fun with ball toss activities. It is worth noting that many of the students have had difficulty with sports as children, and their maladaptive habits surface quickly. During the process of tossing and catching, students learn to inhibit fear responses and develop habits. They also develop better spatial awareness and coordination. The games begin with brightly colored “koosh” balls because they are fun and non-threatening, and they have a texture that lends itself to waking up the tactile sense. Bean bags and “Beanie Babies” are also used. They add an element of fun and humor, and they are disarming because they don’t have the same association in students’ minds that balls do. Later tennis balls and racquet balls are added. Before beginning, it is of the utmost importance that students understand it is perfectly fine if they do not catch the ball. It is just a ball. The fate of the world does not depend on whether or not the ball is caught. When students feel safe, they are more willing to explore the process.

In the first exploration, students are instructed to make eye contact with the person to whom they are throwing. The thrower then says their own name as they offer the ball to the catcher. Throwing is done underhanded at first. Students may move on to stronger and faster throws as they become more proficient and comfortable. The person catching the ball makes eye contact with someone else and then offers his name. Having the students use their own names is helpful in new groups because it helps everyone learn each other’s names. However, there are several other key reasons for it, including: 1) students must employ inhibition because saying their own name goes against the expected order; 2) it helps break up habitual patterns associated with throwing; 3) it forces the thrower to wait until the catcher actually sees him (another act of inhibition); and 4) saying one’s own name is affirming and helps build confidence.

As the ball is being tossed, it is important to keep it moving as quickly as the

students are able to follow. After a few rounds, ask students to begin noticing what they do with themselves. Notice if they are tightening their necks or tensing their shoulders. Notice if they are avoiding looking at each other by looking at the ground or elsewhere. Notice if they have been holding their breath. Notice if they do these things more in the act of catching. Notice if they do them more when throwing. Then pause.

It is very likely that all of these things are happening. Before students can progress they must learn to stop these types of reactions to the stimuli of catching and throwing. This is where the principles of inhibition and direction must be employed. Some prompting is necessary. Begin by suggesting that students allow some freedom in their heads and necks so that their heads could easily move to follow the ball if they wanted. The first response will likely be some interesting movements of heads and shoulders as students try to make their necks looser. This is not the point. The point is to be in a state where the head is free to move, and is ready to move, but does not have to move. The muscles of the neck, head, and shoulders must release their grip. Releasing the neck tension allows the head to move up, which, in turn, allows a beneficial lengthening through the whole torso, thus activating the primary coordination.

From here, direct students to release the tension in their shoulders in a way that lets the shoulder blades and the chest area spread outward. It is crucial to think outward, not down and back with the shoulders. Shoulders that appear to be hunched forward are being pulled that way by tension in the chest. Forcing shoulders down and back creates a second layer of tension and interferes with efficient working of the arms. Thinking of width across both the shoulder blades and the collar bones helps to bring the whole arm structure into a springy balance. Some students may respond to this prompt by actively pushing their arm structure out. If this happens, remind them not to actively “do” the direction but to “think and allow” the direction.

Ask students to notice their breathing. Instruct them not to do anything to change

how they are breathing. They should simply become aware of their movement as breaths come in and out. If students tend to squeeze their hips, knees, ankles or feet, suggest they release that tension, too. Again, it is critical that students understand these directions are just thoughts. They are not to force themselves into any particular posture. The purpose is to notice tension habits and release them, not to add more effort.

Students are usually good at identifying their habits. Once they have done so, it is important that they understand that the ball is not more important than they are. There is no need to squeeze or tighten or hold their breath in response to the ball coming or going. The next step toward inhibiting these types of responses is to notice the moment when they occur. At this point, the ball toss resumes. Prompt the students to become aware of the critical moment when the habit starts. Often the habit will disappear because they are now giving full attention to the process of throwing or catching. If not, then by noticing the moment the habit kicks in, the students can begin to make the choice to do what they always do (i.e., tense up) or to do something different (i.e., stop tensing and actually see the ball). Students learn quickly that the less they interfere with their own coordination by tensing up, the easier it is to see the ball, and the more success they have with catching and throwing.

Conclusion

The irony is that catching the ball is irrelevant at this point. What is most important is that students stop the habits that get in their way. For students with a particularly strong anxiety about catching, it can be helpful to choose not to catch the ball, but to simply see the ball and follow it as it leaves the hands of the thrower and moves through the air. Likewise, it can be useful to give throwers permission to deliberately drop the ball if the act of throwing is a stimulus for excess tension. As students learn to be able to see the ball in motion while simultaneously inhibiting tension, not only do they become more successful when they do choose to catch and throw the ball, they often begin to use their

non-dominant hands in the process.

As students progress, other variations on this exploration can be used. They can begin to walk around the space while they toss the ball. The number of balls can increase, so that several objects are in the air at once. Finally, students can begin to call out each other’s names as they throw the ball. With each variation, it is essential to notice the tension habits that creep in and to take sufficient time to inhibit and redirect them. Students who learn this will go a long way toward reducing performance anxiety, not only as it relates to ball sports, but as they go about their daily lives.

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