

Hands-on work in the Alexander Technique

By Lawrence Smith

Different somatic methods have differing approaches. Many will work with clients lying down to work on building awareness when habits associated with balance and verticality are not in force. In the Alexander Technique, we work primarily with the client standing or sitting, when postural reflexes that are stimulated by gravity are at work. This can be challenging, because most of us will hold fast to the muscular actions we believe (unconsciously) are necessary to keep us from falling. This is one of the main reasons that we use our hands to guide the client, to give him training wheels – if you will, to help him to discover standing, sitting and walking without the sensations on which he is used to relying. At this point, it may be useful to list some of the reasons that I believe that hands-on work is essential in Alexander Technique lessons.

What can be accomplished through hands-on work that cannot be done with verbal instruction is:

1. *Direct sensing of the client, both in stillness and in movement.* Most of what we wish bring to the awareness of our clients can be felt when the client is immobile. Further, an experienced practitioner can feel the initiation of a postural set (unconscious preparation for movement) well before it manifests in movement. If, at this point, this is pointed out to the student, he will, hopefully, feel himself doing it, whereas, if one waits to point it out until it is visually manifest, it is too late for the student to feel the true initiation of the unwanted action.
2. *Communication of the state of the teacher to the student.* Ashley Montagu, the anthropologist, wrote, in his book “Touching” that studies demonstrate that some kind of learning takes place through touch between the mother and her child. Children who are not handled, but are not in any other way deprived, develop more slowly, even in things like digestion. Montagu posits that children learn how to use their systems through contact with another. Researchers at the University of Parma, led by neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti, have discovered that the human brain has multiple mirror neuron systems that specialize in carrying out and understanding not just the actions of others but their intentions, the social meaning of their behavior and their emotions. These mirror neurons fire when we view actions or the states of others. We literally imitate internally actions that we observe in order to help us understand the intent of these actions. Although research has thus far addressed mostly visual and auditory stimulation, it should come as no surprise that tactile sensing also stimulates the mirror neurons. Those of us who have gone through training to teach the Alexander Technique will all remember that moment when we realized that we can “feel” the whole body of someone putting hands on us, and, in fact, will remember that it takes some time before we can convince our muscles not to harden in response to the hardening in the body of someone putting hands on us. On the other hand, this goes some way to explaining the surprising effect of gentle touch from someone who has spent years working on improving their own use.

3. *Indication.* What Patrick MacDonald called “a doing” but at a level below sense perception. One can obviously give much more precise indications manually than one can verbally. “Allow the head to go forward and up” is incredibly imprecise and vague until clarified with a manual indication. Also, the hands can be used to stimulate stretch reflexes, such as is done with a hand on top of the head, precisely (and slightly) augmenting the downward force of the weight of the head in order to stimulate extensor reflexes.
4. *Guidance.* Initiating movement so that the student is relieved of making a decision to act, which increases the possibility that the movement may begin without a return to the habitual condition. The student is still doing the movement, so all of the neuro-muscular parts of the well-organized action are in place. We need to help the student to construct an, at first, fragile neuronal construct until this construct is sufficiently developed that he can use it unassisted (or even to use an old construct that goes against a more recent, but solidly established habit, for example, trying to walk normally again after months using crutches – the normal walking is not in this case a new action, but is one that is difficult to return to after habits associated with maladaptive patterns have been installed).

It must be made clear that, even though hands-on work is essential in the A.T., the role of the Alexander teacher is one of facilitator and not one of manipulator. Without diminishing the role of manipulative therapies in dealing with certain health problems, I think that it is unlikely that pure manipulation can make any lasting change in posture. In order to affect a change in posture, one must learn to alter his behaviour, as it is behaviour that is usually the source of postural degradation. The A.T. student learns to alter his behaviour, a process that may be facilitated by the actions of the A.T. teacher. We cannot reasonably expect students to instantly give up feelings of control they gain through long established habits that give them a sense (however faulty!) of how and where they are in space and time. Nor is it effective to pry them out of muscular patterns, as deep patterns initiated in the brain will simply reassert. What we seek is to assist and support them so that they feel secure enough to attempt to let go of habitual control of balance and posture. We guide them, provide them with a safety net, and give them feedback. For example, I once had a boxer come for lessons. He was well over six feet tall, and rather stooped. Surprisingly, I found it very easy to guide him out of his habitual state. When I had him standing in the center of my studio, nice and tall and much more open, I took my hands off and asked him if he noted the difference. He said yes, of course, “but I can’t stand like this!” I asked him why not, and he replied, “Because I will fall over!” It is very unlikely that this man would ever have gotten himself to this insecure posture without hands-on guidance. He *could* do this on his own, but *would* he? So we become like training wheels to allow guided experimentation. In actually initiating movement for a student, we take over aspects of their conscious behaviour, so that they will not be so distracted from continuing the task of self-direction that will get them into movement without recourse to habitual patterns of control.

I don't think that, in the Alexander Technique, we are trying to "give" clients an experience (as has been oft stated by practitioners), or take them somewhere new. We are simply helping them to bring to the level of awareness actions which they have added over the years, actions which have become a constant state, and assist them in letting go of them. When we put hands on, we are looking for fixity, hardening (whatever you wish to call it) and helping the student to let go of it. The state that they then find is not really something new, it is simply them functioning without maladaptive patterns, as they did, hopefully, when they were young children. This idea that we take them somewhere that they don't know how to get to themselves assumes that we are doing something to them, rather than, as Alexander did, helping them to *not* do something. "Sometimes, if you don't do the wrong thing, the right thing does itself", Alexander stated. If a student lets go of habitual postural habits in a lesson, he will of course initially return to them soon after the lesson. Eventually, when habits do re-manifest, the Alexander student will begin to have an increasingly clear experience of what they are doing when they harden, of what thinking stimulates this hardening response, and they will learn not to do it. The idea of sending a direction that replaces the unwanted action is always tricky (allow the head to go forwards and up as a direction that replaces the action of pulling back and down), but this is a matter of trial and error. The A.T. teacher is there to point out when the student is succeeding or failing.