

The Alexander Technique 'directions' and their relevance to breath and voice

by Antonella Cavallone



One of the newest features for AOTOS. Pamela Hay talks about why she started this feature in our newsletters in 2021 of all years.

I had the good fortune to begin what was one of the most difficult years with a spring in my step, being newly co-opted to the Editor role for AOTOS. I had been having a bad pandemic, particularly with my lungs, and it was my work with my pupils that was keeping my spirits up. I wanted to bring some of that positive, restorative energy to the membership, in case our singing teachers were feeling the way I had been.

I noticed that my pupils and I turned to more stretching than usual, no doubt thanks to being locked in our homes again and needing some movement in our lives. At the same time, my own sessions with an Alexander Technique teacher had to be put on hold due to lockdown number 2. I knew I craved the physicality of those sessions, as well as a session with an osteopath or two. And voilà, "The Agony Osteopath" was born.

So far we haven't had many in our newsletters, but I hope that we can cast the net out to feature the many osteopaths and physical therapist who help us with our use of ourselves.

If you have a teacher of a physical therapy (Feldenkrais, Alexander etc) or a vocal osteopath that you love working with, please do get in touch with me, editor@aotos.org.uk. We're here to help you!

Our head and trunk have the most important role in the coordination of the neuromuscular-skeletal system. The Alexander Technique “directions” is a type of kinaesthetic thinking that allows the head and trunk to fulfil their role of leading our coordination to optimise the way we function.

Let the neck be free, to

Let the head release forward and up, to

Let the torso lengthen and the back widen.

When performing an action our neuromuscular-skeletal system functions as a unified system. This means that mind and body work as one, we think and do the action as one function.

As singers you know that your whole body is your instrument, not just your vocal mechanism, you cannot separate your voice from the rest of you. Of importance at play are also other elements such as how you respond to the environment, and the intention of the moment. So again, it is all about how you use the whole system.

Knowing how you use it is worthwhile because that is the foundation upon which voice production and breathing rest. Any method or technique that doesn't address the whole neuromuscular-skeletal system, has limited applications to developing one's full potential.

The first thing you learn with the Alexander Technique is to let the neck be free to let the head release forward and up.

If the head is pulled down onto the spine (as when we slump, or we force ourselves straight), the neck and throat muscles will be tense, the spine compressed and the torso will become rigid. The poise of the head on the spine directly affects the quality of sound as the larynx hangs from the hyoid bone which is slung from the mastoid processes on the skull. Excess tension in the neck and torso regions will produce a strained sound.

Learning to release the neck so the head can orient itself forward and up, away from the shoulders, allows the torso to decompress, the head to be buoyant and the throat to be free.

The second thing you learn with the Alexander Technique is to let your torso and back lengthen and widen

When our habit is to either slump or to force ourselves straight, the torso becomes either flaccid or tense, in both situations the ribs get narrowed. The thoracic spine provides support for the ribs as they move during breathing. The ribs facilitate the expansion and contraction of the ribcage as the lungs fill and empty.

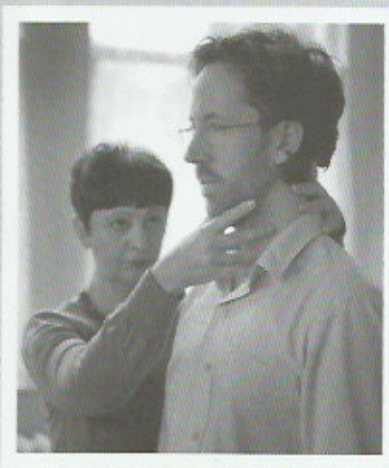
So spine and ribs work together in the gentle lengthening and widening of torso and back facilitating and supporting breathing. In other words, a good postural balance of head and torso facilitates natural breathing.



You don't learn breathing with the Alexander Technique

Breathing is a reflexive function that regulates itself. It is greatly facilitated when the torso lengthens and widens.

This lengthening and widening happens when we learn to free the neck to let the head go forward and up. We do not have to do the lengthening as in making ourselves straight. This happens when we stop slumping and shortening the body.



When the body lengthens and the back widens, the diaphragm works freely. The diaphragm has no proprioceptive nerve endings. It is impossible to control directly the diaphragm, it just works through the natural function of reflexive breathing. This means that when we deliberately try to take a big breath we interfere with this natural function and create tension.

However during singing or speaking the breath must not escape too quickly. The best way to manage the out breath is through controlled exhalation. This is done in the Alexander Technique by learning to practice the “Whispered Ah”. This procedure of controlled outbreath applied together with the lengthening and widening of the torso provides the synergy needed to stabilise the breath, prevent the diaphragm from rising too rapidly, while also ensuring that the diaphragm is not interfered in its action.

Self-observation for positive change

The Alexander Technique helps you become aware of the unity of the neuromuscular-skeletal system and teaches you how to use it according to its natural design and function. Applying the Technique can lead to dramatic improvement in performance.

Begin positive change with some gentle self-observations. Here are some tips to get you started.

- Talk, or recite a poem. Observe what happens as you begin the action of talking. Expand your observation to the whole body, what can you feel happening? Using a full-length mirror is very useful.
- When you open your mouth do you throw your head back? Put a soft hand on the nape of your neck, what can you feel with your hand? When you stand do you lock your knees back?
- Do you interfere with your breathing pattern, are you sometimes holding the breath while you think, or while waiting to speak to someone?
- Try to catch yourself during conversations. When you are talking and you want to breathe, do you gasp?
- Do you habitually keep your jaw and teeth clenched or your tongue pushing up against the roof of the mouth?
- When you speak, if you put a fingertip to the underside of the jaw in the V under your chin, do you feel a lot of pressure there against your finger?

Antonella Cavallone is a teacher of the Alexander Technique, which has a long history as a tool to enhance mind-body coordination, improve breathing and voice leading to enhanced confidence for performers.

To learn more, visit her website: <https://www.improveposture.co.uk/>