

# Inhibition

For some time, I've had my eye on a shirt in a shop window, without much thought of actually buying it. One day this indifference changes to a realisation that Yes! I have the money, I could do with a new one, I'll go and buy it today – only to find it sold out. The emotional change from indifference to eager anticipation to bitter disappointment is curious and irrational, but perhaps familiar to all of us.

Alexander devised the following experiment<sup>1</sup> in order to demonstrate to himself how certain aspects of his thinking process (his anticipation in particular) could trap him into habitual sequences of use and prevent him from making appropriate choices from moment to moment.

- Make the decision to do something, for example, recite a line from a play.
- Pause in order to give your primary directions.
- Maintaining your directions, go on to do one of three things:
  - i Renew the original decision and recite the line.
  - ii Do nothing.
  - iii Do something entirely different, for example, raise one arm.

On paper this may seem like a trivial mind game but, actually performed and taken seriously, it often leaves one with a nagging sense of loss if the pause to re-establish neutrality was in any way ineffective and the original decision was not fulfilled.

Alexander considered the ability to “let go” of a preconceived plan, or a habit of muscle tension, or a way of behaving, or a negative mood, to be the key skill required in order to improve one's use. We need to develop the ability to decide not to do something, not by “bottling it up”,

this only means that you decide to do it, and then use muscle tension to prevent yourself from doing it,<sup>2</sup>

but rather by detaching ourselves intellectually from our inclination to behave in a destructive way.

This is the skill of “stopping” expressed in the Alexander aphorism “stop doing the wrong thing and the right thing will do itself”.

Alexander called this skill of “stopping” *inhibition*. His choice of terminology is perhaps unfortunate considering the recent use of the word “inhibited” to mean “timid and repressed”. Alexandrian inhibition is in fact a great liberator; having paused to consider our options we are free to (re)act as we decide to be appropriate to the situation, not as our habits of tension, repression, laziness, meanness, tactlessness, bossiness, grumpiness, fearfulness, workaholism, or meekness might otherwise dictate.

Inhibition is a complex skill with many facets.

- *non-doing* is the simplest form of inhibition. It involves coming back to neutral, not allowing one anxious reaction to build on top of the last, not interfering with the natural balance of the body

and senses. It may be simple, but it's not easy.

- *stopping and saying “no!”* – “Jumping off the runaway habit”, making a pause in which to reach a decision, not rushing in. Stop and think: what are my options *right now*? Which is the *best* option (rather than the most attractive superficially)? This can be as simple as thinking, “Now I'm going to rise from the chair, but no, wait, don't rush, I'm going to make sure my directions are working first” or as difficult and ambivalent as reaching the decision to leave a lucrative but personally destructive job.

- *ongoing inhibition* – Inhibition you don't have to stop for. In sport or musical performance, for example, where timing is of the essence, rather than just being “swept along” or “seeing what happens”, every moment becomes the context for a decision.

**For every action you decide to take there will be many more which you decide *not* to take.**

This kind of inhibition is essential if you are going to have the ability to “keep your head” in a difficult situation. Ultimately this is the most refined kind of inhibition because it recognises the fact that whilst we are alive, we are never “stopped”, but always in movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Described in *The Use of the Self*, FM Alexander, 1932, Chapter 1 “Evolution of a Technique”.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander quoted in *The Alexander Technique, The Essential Writings of F Matthias Alexander*, Edward Maisel, 1969, Chapter 1 “Notes of Instruction”.