

# Philosophy

The idea that holistic psychophysical education may be a force for good is not a recent one; Plato wrote:

Anyone who can produce the perfect blend of the physical and intellectual sides of education, and apply them to the training of character, is producing music and harmony of far more importance than any mere musician tuning strings.<sup>1</sup>

Just as the Alexander Technique is not a therapy, yet can illuminate our approach to therapy – even to the extent of rejecting certain “therapeutic” practices (for example, deep breathing exercises) as harmful, so, the Technique, though not a philosophy itself, has a juxtaposition to certain aspects of philosophy which cannot be ignored.

There are, I think, three interconnected themes of the Alexander Technique which have particular philosophical significance. I shall call these

- **one-ness**
- **choice of behaviour**
- **being in the moment.**

## One-ness

Alexander challenges us to furnish any proof that the process involved in any activity is either purely “mental” or purely “physical”.<sup>2</sup> When Alexander teachers are working, what they have their hands on is not a “body”, but something more: it is the Gestalt of every aspect – physical, intellectual, emotional, sensual, spiritual – of the individual concerned.

This is important in practical terms because the Alexander Technique asks us to approach what might seem to be a “structural” problem by learning to *think* differently, or an “emotional” problem by allowing the gentle, methodical

hands-on work to give us *physically* a new experience of ourselves. Moreover, we may find our beliefs challenged by our experience, at some stage of learning the Alexander Technique, if we subscribe to views which involve, for example,

- the Subconscious Self as a force beyond our control,
- the body as a mere “vehicle”, the “driver” of which is our “true self”,
- the idea of a “natural body” which approaches everything through “feeling” and rejects “cerebral” reasoning.

## Choice of Behaviour

If we accept this idea of one-ness, we must also accept responsibility for our actions – we cannot blame our Subconscious for irrational emotional outbursts, or our shoulders for stiffening themselves. If these things happen it is because we *do* them, and if we do them, then they are our responsibility; we can do such things *and* we are free to decide *not* to do them. Equally, I cannot blame fate, human nature or any other perceived external influence for what *I* do, or do not do. As Cassius said:

Men at some time are masters of their fates:

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
but in ourselves ...<sup>3</sup>

Alexander celebrated our decision-making capacity in such matters by referring to it as *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*,<sup>4</sup> whilst the existentialist writer Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) described the daunting nature of the implied responsibility by observing that we are “condemned to be free”.<sup>5</sup> I would argue that without wholehearted acceptance of this “condemnation”, the benefits we can gain from the Alexander Technique will be severely limited.

## Being in the Moment

The responsibility outlined above is necessarily a continuous one. From moment to moment we make the countless decisions by which we direct and define ourselves. This is true whether I *notice* the decision-making process or not, and happens regardless of any self delusion or “excuse” I may have concerning my freedom of choice. The ability to evolve away from the past without worrying about the future is one of emerging benefits of Alexandrian emphasis on “process” rather than “result”.



The idea of being in the moment is expressed in the Zen concept

*Tada ima*  
*Only Now is Real*

“Yesterday is a memory,  
tomorrow a hope,  
but now is reality.”<sup>6</sup>

1 *The Republic*, Plato (c428-c347 BC), Book III.

2 *The Use of the Self*, FM Alexander, 1932, Chapter 1 “Evolution of a Technique”.

3 *Julius Caesar*, I.ii.137.

4 The title of Alexander’s first book, 1910.

5 *Existentialism and Humanism*, JP Sartre, 1948.

6 Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, quoted in *Aikido and the Harmony of Nature*, Mitsugi Saotome, 1993.