

Performing With Ease, part 3:

A Look at Resistance

By Rob Falvo

The Alexander Technique can be a catalyst for understanding who we are. By observing body tension, we can discover how our minds behave and begin to discover our fears, belief systems, and unconscious agendas. As long as there is an agenda, there is resistance and interference to the flow of life. When we notice these conditions, there is a possibility that tension will drop away and life will become easier, and silence or stillness can be observed at that moment.

Alexander Technique is practical play; excess tension can be seen directly, no imagination needed, no logical mind necessary (these qualities can actually get in the way), just openness and interest to see what is going on in your body and mind. When this happens, creativity is in full bloom without trying to be creative. Unlike philosophical discourses, which can be interesting and fun, this understanding comes out of direct experience without being argued or debated. It is either seen or not—that's it.

Kristnamurti, the world teacher, wrote: "Understanding is not an intellectual process. Acquiring knowledge about yourself and learning about yourself are two different things, for the knowledge you accumulate about yourself is always of the past, and a mind that is burdened with the past is a sorrowful mind. Learning about yourself is not like learning a language or a technology or a science—then you obviously have to accumulate and remember; it would be absurd to begin all over again—but in the psychological field, learning about yourself is always in the present and knowledge is always in the past, and as most of us live in the past and are satisfied with the past, knowledge becomes extraordinarily important to us. That is why we worship the erudite, the clever, the cunning. But if you are learning all the time, learning every minute, learning by watching and listening, learning by seeing and doing, then you will find that learning is a constant movement without the past."¹¹

What does this have to do with playing percussion? When tension is seen directly and is let go, movement on any instrument becomes easy and fluid, and performing becomes virtuosic. Whenever tension is not seen, resistance occurs and the body contracts. We

are no longer free, and it is like we are driving with our brakes on.

Questions might come up in our minds: Can I just get through this piece without stopping? Can I just make it to the end without any pain? Can I just make it to the end without needing to slow down? Any or all of these judgments might surface as we are performing, and at that moment the body begins pulling in and shortening. The shoulders come forward and move closer to the ears. The neck shortens into the torso and the chin rises up as the back neck muscles contract. The back shortens by compressing the vertebrae in any number of ways. The hips push forward while the knees and ankles lock.

Here are some practical movement questions to ask yourself while performing on percussion instruments.

Keyboard percussion: When moving up or down the instrument, are your hips and knees locked as you take several steps, or are you easy in your hips and knees while you take a step or glide, allowing free motion to the end of the passage? While you are reading music and performing on the instrument, are you staring and tensing your neck to see the music or are you letting the music come to you, letting your eyes be easy and your neck free?

Timpani: When sitting on the stool, are you sitting on your sit bones, or sitting on your tailbone or thighbone? When you are sitting and moving from one drum to the next, are you moving from your hips or from your chest (thus tightening your hips and tensing your body)? When pedaling, are you moving your legs from your hip joints (moving easily), or are you pushing the pedals from your ankles, straining your legs to get to the next pitch?

Drumset: Are your arms moving from the area where your collarbone connects with your sternum (sternoclavicular joint)? When this happens your whole body is free and easy to move, and your arms will be supported. Are you moving forward from your hip joints when you need to reach for a cymbal or tom-tom so that your arms are free and flexible (like octopus arms) rather than collapsing in your chest—forcing your breath to be shallow and confined?

Snare drum: Is your neck easy when you look down at the drum or music? When moving your head, are you moving from

the top joint found in back of the nose and between your ears? Are your shoulders light, elbows flexible, and wrists easy? Are you aware of your fingers and how you move them? When standing, are your hips, knees, and ankles easy?

Crash cymbals: Are you holding your breath while you crash the cymbals? Are your shoulders raised up (tension), or are you using only what is necessary to play? Are your knees and ankles locked, thinking that you need to lock them in order to crash the cymbals?

Tambourine: To play shake rolls takes a lot of muscle tone in the arms and wrists. Are you locked in your shoulder area, thus creating more stress on your fingers and wrists, or is the movement supported throughout your whole body in order to not misuse the small muscles of your fingers and wrists?

Triangle: While you are holding the triangle up in performance, is the shoulder that is holding the triangle raised up closer to your ear or is it easy, lengthened out from your body and resting on your rib cage? How about your other shoulder—is it tense while you strike the triangle, or are you supporting the movement of your fingers and wrists with your whole body as you strike it?

Bass drum: When you strike the bass drum, are you holding your breath, or are you breathing naturally without restriction in the body so that the breath is easily flowing? Are you playing just with your wrists, or using your whole arm to play, allowing the wrists to move more easily?

Multiple setup: While moving from one instrument to another are you aware of how you are moving from your neck to your toes, or are you more concentrated on getting all the notes and stick changes, thus tensing your body to do so?

What gets in the way of moving with ease? *Trying* to get it right gets in the way. This might seem off base or paradoxical, but it is true. Have you ever *tried* to be easy? Or, better yet, *tried* to lose your car keys? Or *tried not* to think of pink elephants? Whenever you are determined to get it right, there will be excess tension in the body. Do not take my word for it; see for yourself.

In one sense, this work is actually much easier than any intellectual understanding that deals directly with learning information. Your

mind, which is conditioned, will always think about things through a colored lens and not see things as they are. “Miracles” happen when observation occurs without interference from the mind. Change occurs without wanting it to occur.

Confused? Well, it is only confusing because we have been conditioned to think differently. Once the conditioning is noticed and dropped, movement is seen clearly and life becomes easier.

Most of us, however, do not want to face the fact that we are performing with excess tension. Fear comes into play here and we do not want to discuss it. Who plays with excess tension? Those people who deny their fear or resistance will try to keep their fears to themselves in hopes that nobody finds out. Those who will benefit from this work are those who are open, interested, sincere, and willing to look at themselves completely.

Those who can take notice of their habitual patterns of movement (excess tension) have a chance to perform with ease (least amount of tension necessary to perform whatever they are performing). Some performers know—really know without any doubt—how easy it can be. And the big secret is that it is there for everyone.

This doesn't necessarily mean that you will be the fastest player in the West. We all have limits based on physical abilities and programming, but the “kicker” is that nobody (including you) knows what those limits really are—so why bother asking the question. Better to ask: What habits and conditions do I bring to each playing situation? What do I notice about myself while I am playing?

When we are willing to be truthful with ourselves and take a good look, there is freedom. We have been taught that in order to “make it” we need to try hard. The question that comes up for me is: “Make what?” We are just adding on all the things we heard and believed to be true and now find ourselves moving with tension.

You can begin to take a look at what is really happening as you are practicing and performing, and you might be surprised at what you see. Remember that this work is about understanding the inner self (mind) by noticing the outer self (body). Students typically say that they can notice the excess tension in their bodies but cannot let it go. This happens when students are more interested in getting to the end of the piece than really paying attention to the process. This is what F.M. Alexander called “end gaining,” and it is what we all learned how to do really well.

Knowledge can be used just to show off one's intelligence rather than to enlighten an experience. As I mentioned before, knowledge (information) can actually get in the way. It distracts from really seeing what is happening because information can add to your mind and

veil observation. We try to figure it out, get it right, and sometimes show off to other people. We are always end gaining when we are using our minds in this fashion.

Understanding or being aware is different. It is clear seeing, which excludes *trying* to get it, or trying to fix the “problem.” Situations can be seen clearly, and instead of adding information to “correct,” there is a letting go of preconceived notions and judgments of good/bad, better/worse, and right/wrong. There is a dropping away of beliefs.

Resistance or tension actually is not a “bad” thing. It is what allows life to have direction, growth, and movement. The heart pumps using tension and release to allow blood to move throughout the body; muscles also work using tension and release to get you from one place to another. There is also nothing wrong with having excess tension. It is part of the human condition, but our tendency is to think there is something wrong and that there is something to get rid of and therefore resist. Trying to get rid of tension becomes distracting.

Distraction is when we identify with a thought that takes us away from an activity like reading music. When thoughts occur (as they typically do) and are identified with (meaning that there is interest in the thought), the thought pulls us in another direction, and the focus on the music and performance is not there.

Without distraction, there is a connection to the music in such a way that communication to the audience is free and easy; the audience will respond with the same openness and connection to the performance. The musician becomes a catalyst for the audience to sense life-affirming energy. It is this connection that everyone craves and enjoys as an audience member or artist.

In conclusion, the Alexander Technique is not really a technique at all. A technique is a system or method to acquire some kind of skill. Thinking of it as a technique fosters the thought that there is something to get right—something to master. When observed, tension is added on to what is natural and easy body movement, so how can you master something that you have already? The balanced movement came before the layering of interference or body tension.

This does not mean that seeing a teacher of the Alexander Technique is not recommended or necessary. We are all the same primarily and cannot objectively see all that teachers might be able to see. A teacher of the Alexander Technique can be a mirror for you to get to know your habits so that you can begin to see for yourself the quality of your movement.

ENDNOTE

1. Kristnamurti, J. *Freedom From the Known*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1969. pp. 22–23.

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