

Performing With Ease, Part 2

Relating the Alexander Technique to Activities of a Percussionist

By Rob Falvo

As percussionists, we typically perform on all our instruments with excess tension. We go through our life practicing and performing without any real change. Instead, we adopt methods of relaxation or stretching in hopes of keeping our career alive until we are ready to stop. We might justify our aches and pains by saying, “My shoulder hurts regularly because three years ago I dislocated it and...,” or “I practiced six hours today and my arms are aching. Well, no pain, no gain,” and then carry on, knowing in the back of our minds that we are not being truthful with ourselves. When we misuse our bodies, especially as we grow older, there is a tendency to feel pain or discomfort.

MISUSE AND OVERUSE

There is no such thing as overuse; it is all misuse. When we are not aware of how we are moving, we will practice our instruments in the same habitual, conditioned way. We practice for the end result without being aware of the process. This is what F.M. Alexander called “end-gaining.” We would not misuse our bodies if we weren’t end-gaining.

For most of us, moving percussion equipment is a big part of our job, and it is a good example of how we end-gain. We just want the equipment moved to where it needs to go without paying much attention to how we are moving it. Next time, instead of lifting instruments unconsciously, begin to notice how you are using your body. When you reach down to grab marimba bars, are your knees locked and hips fixed while you bend from your lower back, or are you flexing at the hips, knees, and ankles, allowing your hips to move back? When you are carrying tom-toms in your hands and against your chest, are you tightening your neck, lifting up, and pulling in your shoulders, or are you letting your arms release down and away from your torso, allowing the drums to be supported equally between your arms and body?

ACCENT THE PROCESS RATHER THAN THE END RESULT

We end-gain less when we pay more attention to the process and let the end result take care of itself. There are ways of practicing to become aware of what is happening in your body.

1. Become aware of your breath and the quality of your breathing. Is your breathing shallow, stuck, interrupted, or are you breathing fully, with ease, and with an easy flow? Whenever you become aware of your breath, thoughts are let go, your mind becomes clear, and end-gaining disappears. As a result, your neck becomes less tense, your shoulders drop down, and in general your body lets go of excess tension. The next time you practice music, be aware of your breath and notice changes in your body tension.

2. Become aware of how you are moving your ankles, knees, hips, and top joint of your spine. The top joint, called the A/O joint, is found between your ears and behind your nose. The hips are found lower on your body than where most people think, and understand that there is no major joint at your waist. (See my first article on Alexander Technique in the August 2008 *Percussive Notes* for in-depth discussion of the joints.)

3. Begin to notice how conditioned the mind is and understand that your conditioned thoughts always influence your movement. If your mind is agitated, you are going to move with excess tension, and that will affect everything you do.

Since we were old enough to falsely believe that we are separate from people and things around us and began to use words like “I, me, and mine,” our minds began to be conditioned by fear and we began to hold tension in our bodies. At this time, we began to imitate people and take on their habitual patterns of movement. This is why many family members walk, talk and, in general, move around in a similar fashion. It is very interesting to watch yourself and your own family members move, noticing similar habits of tension.

CHANGE YOUR DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

We are programmed through our musical training to go for the end product. We have learned this very well from almost everyone. As percussionists, we have learned that to be successful we need to achieve our highest technical ability. We practice to have the fastest hands. We play our routines on xylophone, snare drum, drumset, etc. to achieve this as best we can. Many times we aim to match the speed of our favorite recordings.

There is nothing wrong with practicing this way except that we are typically practicing for the end result rather than paying attention to the process. When I changed my mind about what success really means to me (performing effortlessly), I changed the way I approached practicing on all percussion instruments. This has improved my overall performance of any piece on any instrument. It is not about speed any more, it is about the process.

Paradoxically, speed can and has improved as a result. I understand that to shift your thinking to process rather than outcome can feel like you are taking a big chance. It is not something that was part of your musical training. Students wonder how they will get anything done if they are not aiming for the end. Well, when you are ready to take a chance and approach practicing in this way, you might find that the constant chatter in your head to get things right and get it now takes a backseat and you become less tense. As a result, there is clarity in what you are doing, there is easiness, lightness in your body, and there is direction in what needs to be done. You begin to understand that you do not need to force anything.

As an instructor, this might change how you teach because teaching now becomes process oriented. Of course, your students still need to put in hours of practicing, but the way they practice changes. By teaching in a process-oriented way, students are nurtured to notice their tendencies or habits, and practicing becomes a journey into self-awareness. This is not to say that there is no accountability for what happens in their juries or recitals. All that is there, with one major difference. There is no personal judgment of the student, no criticism, no blame—only observation and understanding. Nothing is personal, and everything that happens on stage matters. The teacher becomes a mirror for the student to reflect back to the student how he or she has performed with empathy, honesty, directness, and openness.

GIVING UP JUDGMENTS

When we stop judging ourselves (in other words, stop trying to be right), and instead notice what is actually happening in our body, excess tension drops away. It is only through observation and acceptance that we begin to

change. You do not need to do anything but become aware of when you are using excess tension for change to occur.

How do you do that? Be honest and notice that you would rather fix the situation than just observe it. When excess tension is seen in the body as interfering with your ease of motion, it will let go and you will be free of it.

Whenever there is a judgment of right or wrong, good or bad, etc., there is fear, and this translates physically as a contraction. Our tendency is to pull in and shorten the body. Notice what is happening in your body the next time you practice a piece of music. Is your neck pushed forward? Are your shoulders pulled into your body and raised up closer to your neck? Is your torso collapsed, shortening the distance from your shoulders to your hips? Typically, we carry ourselves the same way when we are performing on stage.

RELAXATION

When we relax we are actually making an effort, or *trying*, to be easy. Typically this means a collapse in the part of the body we are trying to relax. When this is done, either tension creeps in somewhere else in the body to compensate for the relaxation or we will not have enough muscle tone to play. Instead, we can *release excess tension*—allowing it to be felt throughout our whole body. This way, breathing is easier and our body is more flexible throughout.

Alexander Technique work is not about relaxing in isolation; it has direction and is about using the least amount of tension necessary to do whatever you are doing. This is done by observing how you are moving. Explore and see how much tension is actually necessary to perform any piece you are working on. This doesn't mean that *fff* passages are not *fff*; just notice how much energy it really takes to play one.

THE USE OF IMAGERY

Imagery can be used effectively in many situations, particularly visualization exercises to memorize music. However, in the Alexander Technique work, thinking of images to release muscle tension distracts students from being able to look directly at the quality of their movement. For example, an image to let go of body tension, such as “imagine yourself in your favorite vacation place,” is something that is thought of in the mind and is a distraction to true observation. When you identify with thought, it takes you away from the present moment. How can you observe if your mind is wandering? The observer is free from any thoughts and is witnessed from behind the mind. A direct approach is to get to know your habits by seeing them as they occur.

RESISTANCE

A key to moving with ease is in recognizing when you are resisting life. When there is resistance, there is a contraction in the body. When

we notice even the smallest amount of contraction when moving about in whatever is being done—talking, performing in recital, walking in crowded hallways, lecturing, etc.—the tension can be let go. We have learned that we must try to get rid of the tension by forcing it away, which only reinforces it.

STATIC ON THE RADIO

Most of us have minds that tend to chatter continuously, and when we perform on stage, the mind may chatter *ad infinitum*. When we try to stop it, it actually strengthens and interferes with our performance. I compare it to static on the radio: the more static, the more interference. When we begin to notice the chatter in ourselves without trying to push it away, we create some space between it and our activity. The more space there is around it, the less it tends to take us over or interfere with our performance. Consequently, the clearer our minds become, and the easier it is to perform.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can Alexander Technique fix the problem?

Whenever we want to fix anything we tend to concentrate, which is a form of end-gaining. We look for a solution that has no problem. It is not a problem to move with excess tension, it is just something that happens when you are not aware. There is no right or wrong here, only being aware or not being aware.

If we should not concentrate, then what do we do? We need to think about how we are moving and, at the same time, think about the notes.

When someone concentrates, it is narrowing in on something at the exclusion of everything else. Rather, we need to see the whole of what is happening, inside and outside the body. By observing, being a witness to what is happening without the mind commenting, there is no interference from thoughts. When you are observing, you can notice your habits and tensions clearly, and in that noticing, tension will drop away. Since you do not need to do anything about it, you are free to focus on the music. I have found that slow practice is best. Move as slowly as you need to in order to no-

tice your whole body and read the music at the same time. Sometimes I just take one measure, play the measure very slowly, rest for a measure observing my body (including my breath), and then repeat.

Can you do this without a teacher?

It is a good idea to take regular lessons from a teacher of the Alexander Technique. However, if that is not possible, you can understand a lot about yourself by being open and willing to explore. It seems overwhelming to do because we are so conditioned to think a certain way. It really is simple once you observe what is happening without placing all the judgments that usually come with it. Practicing in this new way develops a new habit—one of noticing the quality of your movement, and process becomes everything.

CONCLUSION

Can anybody really change? Can you make a change that happens where you seldom, if ever, go back? Some people do not believe this is possible, some do believe this possible, and some people *know* this is possible. The people who know this is possible, know it because it is first-hand information: they have changed, and although old habits might creep back in every once in a while, it doesn't last very long and it is not as dramatic as it was before. Life becomes easier.

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