A New Framework for
Eternal Principles

The Alexander Technique’s underlying principles are timeless and unchanging. But its practical framework—the manner in which each teacher understands the principles and imparts them to her students—is personal and individual and varies greatly according to each teacher’s background, temperament, training, and so on. Some teachers have a psychological or therapeutic bent. Others are keen on anatomy and physiology. Others still see the Technique primarily as a study of movement. The diversity of approaches is both inevitable and desirable. The important thing is for the teacher to be efficient and for the student to find a teacher who suits his needs.

I teach the Technique in a variety of ways, one of which is akin to a martial art. In one of his aphorisms, F.M. Alexander captured the essence of a lesson. “You are not here to do exercises, or to learn to do something right, but to get able to meet a stimulus that always puts you wrong and to learn to deal with it.” As I see it, the teacher’s role consists of tempting a student to end-gain (by presenting him with a stimulus that “puts him wrong”) while at the same time showing him the means to “learn to deal with it.” Thus the Technique becomes a martial art: I “attack” my student by trying to put him wrong, and the student “defends” himself by inhibiting and directing.

In this essay I’ll show some parallels between the Technique and the Japanese martial art of Aikido, of which I have long been an ardent though undisciplined admirer. The founder of Aikido, Morihei Ueshiba (b. 1883, d. 1969), brought together elements from the millenary samurai tradition, swordsmanship, and other martial arts such as Daito-Ryu jujutsu, as well as metaphysical concepts from the Omoto religion. Unlike most martial arts, Aikido isn’t based on two adversaries trying to overwhelm each other until one of them is defeated. You only practice attack techniques so that your partner can “work on himself,” as it were, by practicing the appropriate defense techniques; victory and defeat don’t play a role in training. In Aikido you learn how to use controlled energy, rather than muscle power, in all situations. Needless to say, it’s not only possible but also quite easy to end-gain while learning Aikido, and plenty of Aikido practitioners are brutally inept. This doesn’t negate Aikido’s basic principles. Alexander teachers, too, have been known to end-gain on occasion, and we don’t think to blame the Technique itself for our imperfections.

Essay topics include the lunge; balance and its loss; provocation as a teaching principle; chair work as a martial-arts arena; direction as a Western form of the ki or chi principle; the connection between the back and the pelvis; the kiai, or use of the voice as a weapon; and the use of wrist locks and holds. I’ll describe a series of exercises and experiments for which you’ll need a partner, so I suggest you read this essay à deux.

The Lunge

The lunge is one of the best possible positions of mechanical advantage, in many ways superior to its cousin the monkey. At its simplest, the lunge just means standing with one foot ahead of the other. (Alexander recommended it as the “correct” standing position in Man’s Supreme Inheritance. Look at the photo insets between pages 90 and 91 of Mouritz’s edition.) It’s an endlessly changeable position; while standing in a lunge you can place your feet near or far from each other, turned in or out, in symmetrical or asymmetrical patterns; bend either or both knees; lean forward or backward; and turn your head independently of the rest of the body, thereby choosing a variety of bodily angles and sightlines.

You can shift from a left-foot lunge into a right-foot one in multiple ways: by stepping forward, stepping backward, pivoting, and so on. You can slide or hop forward in a lunge. You can walk into and out of a lunge, and you can sit from a lunge and stand into a lunge.

Exercise #1. Mobility is only half of the lunge’s merit; the other half is how stable and resistant it is. You and your partner stand facing each other, two or three feet apart. Announce to your partner that you’re about to fall forward. When the right moment comes your partner must lift his arms and stop you from falling too far by placing his hands on your shoulders or chest. Go ahead and fall forward. If your partner tries to catch you while keeping his feet parallel, he’ll strain to breaking point. But if he stands in a lunge, he’ll find it much easier to catch and hold you because his back and legs will do a better job of supporting the arms and shoulders and providing resistance to your falling weight.

Exercise #2. Ideally, mobility and resistance work together. Place yourself in a left-foot lunge, with your partner standing two or three feet directly behind you. Count to three out loud. On the count of three, your partner falls toward you. You’ll have to pivot at once—and very quickly—into a right-foot lunge, so as to face him, lift your arms, and catch him as he falls. Most likely you’ll find yourself destabilized by the pivot and hardly able to support your partner’s falling weight. This means your movement has cost you your resistance. But if you stay centered and connected as you pivot from left lunge to right lunge and vice-versa, you’ll retain your capacity for resistance even as you move. In resistance, keep latent mobility; in mobility, keep latent resistance.
In Aikido, the lunge is called *hanmi*. The entire repertory of Aikido techniques (numbering in the hundreds) is built on *hanmi*, and Aikidoka spend much of their practice working on it as a stance in itself and as a springboard for action. Incidentally, French teachers of the Alexander Technique refer to the lunge as "la position de l’escrime"—the fencing position. Aikido techniques are practiced both with bare hands and with weapons (sticks, swords, and knives). It’s logical and natural for weapon techniques to depend on *hanmi*, much as fencing does. In the photo on page 20, we see the late Morihiro Saito, for many years one of Aikido’s leading teachers, demonstrating his *hanmi* while holding a wooden sword (called a *bokken* in Aikido).

Good lunges demand such a heightened awareness of your coordination that to learn them to the fullest is to become quite centered and balanced. Thanks to its combination of resistance and mobility, the lunge is useful in many everyday situations: moving a piece of furniture, opening a heavy door, playing musical instruments, waiting in line, playing sports, and so on. Needless to say, the lunge is ideal for hands-on work, as illustrated by the photo on page 22 of F.M. Alexander teaching—one leg bent, the other straightened, feet slightly asymmetrical.

**Loss of Balance**

Suppose you trip while walking and start falling. You can panic, tense up, and hurt yourself; or you can inhibit and direct, keep your cool, and fall with such lightness that you might even enjoy the fall.

Learning how to fall is an essential part of Aikido. The process is fraught with difficulties. Until you get good at it, every fall may be painful and even lethal. (I once read that, in Japan, on average two people a year die of broken necks while practicing Aikido.) But being thrown about by a partner, flying in the air, falling in a highly organized and natural manner, and bouncing right back up are all life-affirming experiences, despite the risk of death or perhaps thanks to it.

This is the principle: “You can choose to lose your balance and keep your cool.” In my Alexander lessons I stick to the principle but not the demanding procedures of Aikido. Instead, I use a series of easy steps in which the risk of injury exists almost exclusively in the student’s imagination.

**Exercise #3.** I stand in a lunge in front of a student, who stands a couple of feet away from me. I place my hands on his shoulders and say, “Imagine your body is like a board on a hinge, and your ankle joints are the hinge; keep your heels down and let the whole body lean forward from the ankle joints once my hands invite you to do so.” Oftentimes the student already starts leaning forward on his own initiative, without knowing he’s doing it. He’s rushing into action and end-gaining—ever so gently, perhaps, but end-gaining nevertheless. Or the student, not trusting the exercise, stiffens his whole body and makes himself immobile, demonstrating he’d rather lose his cool than lose his balance.

Suppose the student does agree to lose his balance. A beginner often over-relaxes his body, letting his head and neck flop down and his pelvis slide forward. Relaxation is a form of passivity, a refusal to assume responsibility for a situation and its unpredictable outcome. Unlike relaxation, inhibition and its inseparable companion, direction, together give you the possibility to *not act* if you so wish; or to *act quickly* and adapt to a changing situation if so needed. A martial artist-in-training becomes extremely alert. He never knows who’s going to attack him, when, or how; but he’s ready to face any and every challenge. In that state of readiness, he “does nothing.” He inhibits and directs, so to speak. But he’s by no means relaxed or passive.

If the student gets the hang of the exercise and stays well-directed after losing his balance, then I make the exercise more challenging. I keep him off balance in my hands. “I’m going to drop you,” I say. “But for only a few inches, and I’ll catch you again right away. Do you agree to try it?” The student stiffens his whole body. He might even upright himself and leave my hands, thereby escaping his impending doom. In his mind, he’s being asked to submit to a terrible experience. Even though I’ve clearly given him the right to say “no” to the exercise, he freaks out anyway. To paraphrase Alexander, “he’s lost touch with reason.” That’s end-gaining in a nutshell: a form of madness that can be light or deep, temporary or permanent.

After a while the student re-directs himself and gives me permission to drop and catch him. I do the deed quickly, and the student freaks out big time: his shoulders shoot up toward his ears, his heels come off the ground, he yelps. Again he has imagined dangers that don’t exist. I described the exercise, asked his permission to do it, performed it as promised, and showed myself to be a reliable partner, catching him without effort. There was no danger whatsoever of his falling down and hurting himself!

You can see why this work is fundamental and urgent.

Little by little the student develops ways of losing his balance and keeping his cool—in other words, keeping his directions—in facing this somewhat unpredictable situation. Then I make the game harder still. “I’m going to drop you,” I say. “And this time I’m not going to catch you at all.” The student immediately panics. This is how he’s thinking: “My teacher is going to drop me; I’m going to fall; I’m going to hurt myself.” But that’s only his fearful imagination speaking.

“You have at least five choices,” I explain. “You can tell me ‘no,’ in which case I won’t drop you. You can decide to fall safely, the way many children do in the playground. You can take a single step when I drop you, and put yourself in a lunge. You can regain your balance by walking, as you would if you slipped on some wet leaves outside. Or you can grab me and drag me down with you.”

He hadn’t realized he had so many choices; he was convinced he was going to fall and die. Once he understands his options, we perform the exercise. The student keeps his direction and takes a few light steps, regaining his balance with total ease—a reaction that was at his disposal from the outset.

"As I see it, Aikido is a form of the Alexander Technique, and the Technique is a form of Aikido: Their principles flow from the same original source."
I often teach the exercise to a total beginner in his first lesson. Most people are quick learners; Alexander teachers sometimes think their students aren’t “ready” for complex procedures, and in my opinion they’re letting their own fearful imaginations ruin the game and sabotage their students’ progress.

Here’s a testimonial from one of my students, a violinist:

Dear Pedro,

Today, as I was coming out of the Bibliothèque Nationale, I was putting something into my bag while walking down the corridor, not looking where I was going. (BIG mistake!) As you say, “There are risks and dangers in every situation without exception.” The dangerous risk in this situation instantly manifested itself, as I suddenly found myself on top of three stairs, one leg in the air, the mighty power of inertia pushing me unstoppably forward.

A week ago I would have probably panicked, and possibly stumbled or fallen down those stairs. Instead I panicked for the briefest of milliseconds, but managed to actually react by running down the three stairs, rather more swiftly than I would have liked to, but in one piece, and erect at the end! Many thanks for this outcome—it would have been a lot more difficult to get home today and go to Israel tomorrow with a sprained ankle, or broken leg/arm/head etc.

Kati

Provocation as a Teaching Principle

From the point of view of a fearful student, the games I play with him are “provocative.” They provoke reactions; they seem even to cause these reactions. But it’d be foolish to confuse the stimulus with the response. Contrast two attitudes:

“Pedro made me stiffen my neck.”

“I stiffened my neck just because Pedro asked me a question. It was so crazy I had to laugh.”

There are some people who are provoked by a simple “Good morning.” A student once stopped her lessons abruptly, after I introduced her to the Whispered “Ah”—she just couldn’t cope with it. An Alexander teacher in one of my seminars, in which we played with party balloons, confessed that she was absolutely incapable of filling a rubber balloon with her breath and quite hated being confronted with it.

Every stimulation, however gentle and well-meant, has the potential to provoke someone into end-gaining and misuse. It’s best to accept and embrace this reality and work through the discomfort of end-gaining rather than trying to avoid triggering it. Purposefully taking your students off balance triggers a wealth of end-gaining behaviors, leading to a wealth of opportunities to inhibit and direct.

Verbal provocations work just as well. A student of mine once remarked, “There are no insults, only the insulted.” You can say the same thing with the same tone of voice to three different people. One will be terribly insulted, the second indifferent, the third amused. Is the thing you said an insult? Not by itself. I’m not proposing that you insult your students on purpose, but that you bring in a little verbal playfulness to the lessons, a little teasing, the odd commentary that catches a student unawares. Even the plain truth, directly stated, might serve as a trigger for end-gaining and direction.

The student is making the following unspoken statement: “My directions are conditional. I can only direct if I know exactly where I’m going, what I’m doing, what is at stake. To direct well I need to feel I’m controlling the situation.” But few situations are truly controllable; only our reactions are, and to an incomplete degree. We have to come to terms with the unpredictable in life, in others, and in ourselves. And the best way to do this is through inhibition and direction.

Sometimes, as a student starts to sit down, I tilt the chair forward, so that his back meets the seat at a surprising angle. Sometimes I actually remove the chair from behind a student before he sits. “The chair is not there,” I say. “Do a squat.” But the student freaks out anyway.
A woman took a lesson with me a few years ago. She and I had talked on the phone several times beforehand, trying to make an appointment and always misunderstanding each other a little. To me, she came across as someone easily angered, defensive, looking for fights. At the lesson my suspicions were confirmed. Initially she kept giving me reasons why she didn’t want to do various exercises, justifying herself nervously, skirting around the issues brought up in the lesson. But she was willing enough, and we did a whole hour’s chair work. At the very end, she was sitting in the chair. I asked her, “Are you ready for anything and everything? Are you well-directed, like a cat doing nothing and yet ready to spring into action at a microsecond’s notice?”

By then she had learned a lot about inhibition and direction, and we were getting along just fine. “Yes,” she said with a smile. “I’m ready for anything.” I removed the chair from under her at great speed—it’s easily done—and she fell down on her backside. She went through several strong emotions in quick succession: surprise, confusion, hurt, and anger, all in about one second. Then she started laughing hysterically, and she and I both knew she was a transformed woman. In her subsequent lessons she was enthusiastic, alert, and playful.

I once got into hot water over a workshop I gave for Alexander teachers in London. Some participants felt that my provocations were much too strong, and that the startle pattern of “normal” people would inevitably cause them to misuse themselves. The day after the workshop, I gave a lesson to a 73-year-old woman who had never studied the Technique before. With her I used the same provocations I had used with my unhappy colleagues. At some point in mid-lesson I wanted to explain my teaching philosophy, and I said something about my provocations and the choices she had in her reactions. “Yes,” she said, “but your provocations are so mild.”

Ki and Direction

Everything important and dear to us is difficult to put into words. Have a go at defining “love,” “art,” “freedom,” “justice,” or “pleasure,” and you’ll agree with me. Direction, a fundamental concept of our work, is one of those truths we grasp more easily than we verbalize. In The Use of the Self, Alexander attempted to define it:

When I employ the words ‘direction’ and ‘directed with ‘use’ in such phrases as ‘direction of my use’ and ‘I directed the use, etc. I wish to indicate the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms."

His definition is somewhat abstract. It’s hard to understand it precisely, to visualize it, to sense it, to live it. In the context of this essay I propose the following simplification:

1. Directions are messages from the brain to the mechanisms.
2. Direction is the energy you need to use the mechanisms.

Some Alexander teachers concentrate on the messages, and in particular the verbal aspect of the directions, as exemplified by “Let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, to let the back lengthen and widen.” But when we meet someone who strikes us as being “well-directed,” we react to the person’s energy, not to the way he or she silently verbalizes messages from the brain to the mechanisms.

When you shake someone’s hand you receive so much data you even make a partial assessment of the person’s character based on his handshake alone. The handshake contains multiple types of information, such as temperature, force, the shape of the grip, and so on. The handshake may be agreeable or displeasing, firm or floppy, hard and pointy, or supple and warm. These kinesthetic qualities are present throughout the body—the arms and shoulders, the neck, the whole back, the legs, and so on—in ever-changing combinations of contraction and expansion unique to each individual.

From that simple handshake we intuitively understand what “direction” means, and we intuitively equate it with “energy.” As I see it, to direct is to sense energy, to gather it within, to dispense it outwardly, to project it, to use it, to save it, to receive it, to share it.

The energy aspect of direction seems to me either synonymous or very similar to the concept of ki (in Japanese) or ch’i (in Chinese). The literal meaning of the words T’ai Chi Ch’uan is “great ultimate boxing.” In Chinese philosophy, the words also mean “the ultimate source and limit of reality, from which spring yin and yang and all of creation.” By itself, “ch’i” literally means “air, breath.” And “Aikido” translates as “the way to harmony with the universal energy.”

Aikido contains numerous techniques for creating and projecting energies-directions. Two simple examples will have to suffice here.

Exercise #5. Stand; put one arm out in front of you, as if hailing a taxi cab; have your partner take hold of your arm and bend it at the elbow, while you resist his efforts as hard as you can. Now stand again; put the arm out as before; imagine that your arm is a hose spraying water into the far distance; and have your partner bend your arm at the elbow. Most likely he’ll find it much, much harder to bend your arm when you imagine it’s a powerful hose. Your imagination has “energized” your arm and made it stronger, without your giving a single thought to the arm muscles.

Now stand straight and relaxed. Ask your partner to take hold of you around the waist and lift you off the ground for a moment and put you back down. Now imagine that you’re extremely heavy and rooted to the ground. Ask you partner to lift you again. Most likely he’ll find it much, much harder to lift you now. Your imagination has “energized” your body and made it heavier.

Aikido practitioners would say these exercises are about “projecting ki.” Alexander practitioners might say they are about “giving oneself directions.”

You can enhance your energies/directions through imagination alone (“messages from the brain to the mechanisms”), or through exercises, locomotion, dance, speech, and anything else that you do.
The Connection Between the Back and the Pelvis

Alexander teachers tend to believe that the motor of coordination is the relationship between the head, the neck, and the back. (I say “tend to believe” because there are teachers today who dispute the importance or the true meaning of the primary control.) Martial artists tend to believe that the motor of coordination is the central point of the body, lying an inch or so below the navel and called the hāra in some traditions. Each emphasis has risks and dangers. Some Alexander teachers are so head-oriented that they lose track of their legs and feet and the contact with the earth below. Some martial artists are inattentive to how they direct their heads and necks, and their misuse is one of the reasons they suffer from backache and other ills. But the well-coordinated person is connected from top to bottom, from earth to heaven.

I remain convinced that the primary control does coordinate the entire body—provided there’s a proper opposition between the head and the back, in which “the head goes forward and up, the back goes back and up.” The phenomenon is difficult to describe and even more difficult to execute. But when the neck “locks into place” and truly becomes part of the spine, and when the head and the back are magnetized in such a way that one tends away from the other permanently, then the entire body becomes connected, regardless of what position it takes in space or how it moves from position to position.

And I remain convinced that the connection between the back and the pelvis, which happens right where a martial artist might place or sense the center of his body, is fundamental for good coordination and good health. You can access that connection indirectly through the primary control alone, or directly if you don’t neglect the role of the head, neck, and back.

Exercise #6. While standing, put one hand on your stomach, palm facing in, wrist bent, fingers pointing down, with the fingertips one or two inches away from your genitals; and the other hand on your lower back, palm facing out, wrist bent, fingers pointing down, with the tip of the index finger more or less aligned with the top of the crack between your buttocks. It doesn’t matter whether you put your left hand on the stomach and the right one on the back, or vice-versa, although most likely you’ll have a clear preference for one of the two possible arrangements. While studying the exercise, alternate between the two possibilities.

In this position, your hands monitor the body and at the same time they encourage certain events within the body. They give you a feeling for your lower back and stomach, your breath, and above all the connection between your pelvis and your back. If you imagine the two hands are gently trying to meet each other in the center of your body, you create the feeling that hands, arms, and shoulders are a long infinite circuit, your energies flowing up and down the arms and through the body’s central point or hāra.

Many martial artists wear belts with their uniforms. An obvious use for the belt is to keep track of rank, as with the colored belts of judo and karate. This, however, is a modern custom of little importance. A better reason is that the pressure of the belt around the waist and hips provides a multitude of sensations.

When you wear a belt correctly placed

“There are risks and dangers in every situation without exception.”

and tightened, it provides pressure all around the waist and hips, inviting you to project your breath toward the center of your body. Your breath quite welcomes the pressure of the belt, and naturally pushes against the pressure.

Okay, then. You stand with your hands strategically placed, giving you a feeling for your breath and the connection between your back and your pelvis. Now take a few steps, forward, backward, sideways; stop for a moment with one foot slightly ahead of the other, and now bend and unbend your knees, each in turn, both together; take big steps, small ones, fast or slow; pivot on your feet, turning your whole body and changing the direction in which you are facing. It’s a delight to be able to bend the joints of the leg—hip joint, knee, and ankle—without losing the connection between the back and the pelvis.

Now stand still, with feet parallel or slightly asymmetrical. Sense your breath under your hands; sense how each inhalation seems to cause your stomach and lower body to expand and meet the gentle yet firm pressure of your hands. Breath is movement of lungs, of diaphragm, of ribs, of viscera, of air itself—all natural and necessary movements. But the movement of the breath doesn’t need to entail any movement of the skeleton, apart from the ribcage; the legs need not move, the arms need not move, the head and neck need not move...and the pelvis need not move. Your hands can feel the movement of breath and the stillness of the pelvis. Indeed, not only can they feel it, they can encourage it, like the martial artist’s belt.

You can work on the stillness of the pelvis through the primary control alone. Monkeys, lunges, table work, and chair work all address the stillness of the pelvis—depending on how you perform them. Ditto for the Whispered “Ah.” Ultimately, what matters is not so much how you obtain that stillness, but whether you obtain it or not. As I see it, it’s not possible to be well-coordinated if the connection between the back and the pelvis isn’t in place. And, as I see it, once you find that connection, you’re in great shape to do anything else you want to: run marathons, sing, play the cello, work at a corporate office, teach the Technique, and so on. Look again at the photo of FM in a lunge. The connection between his back and pelvis is absolutely phenomenal. Thanks to that connection, the joints of the legs work with particular intelligence and freedom.

The Kiai

The Alexander Technique came into existence because of an actor’s vocal problems. Attempting to solve these problems, FM quickly came to realize that he didn’t exactly misuse his voice; rather, he misused his whole self while speaking. To work on your voice, then, is to work on yourself; and to free your voice is to free yourself.

In many martial arts, you learn to use your voice both as a means to collect your energies and as a weapon. A well-directed shout, or kiai, gathers your energies and projects them outward, startling and scaring your opponents. In cartoons and martial-arts comedies, everyone is forever shouting in a stereotypical manner. Think “Miss Piggy.” But the true kiai is so powerful that serious martial artists may even
refrain from using it, to protect the well-being of their opponents.

I use an exercise that I learned from my first voice teacher, the late Roy Hickman, which in my view combines the martial-art concept of the kiai with the Alexandrian concept of the voice as a portal to the whole self. For this exercise you might want to be in a soundproof practice room in a music school. If such an arrangement is impossible, accept that your neighbors might be disturbed. Do it with a partner—it’s a hundred times more fun.

**Exercise #7.** Shout short commands as loud as you can. Choose from the list below; try different words; repeat a word several times; give yourself frequent breaks.

“GO!”
“NO!”
“COME!”
“NOW!”
“STOP!”

These short words carry enormous power. A mother sees her child running down the block toward a busy intersection. Without calculation, without the interference of intellect or the fear of ridicule, she shouts “STOP!” The child responds to the message at once and stops running before reaching the intersection.

In learning the exercise, you might go through three phases. In the first one, you try too hard, scrunch your neck, and produce a strangled cry that the child will not hear and will not react to. In the second one, you achieve some measure of freedom, producing a relatively healthy sound though careful calculation. In the third one, you tap into your instinctive side, in collaboration with thinking and directing, and you shout to the fullest of your considerable capabilities. Bruce Lee encapsulated the process elegantly: “Before I studied the art [of Jeet Kune Do], a punch to me was just a punch, a kick was just a kick. After I’d studied the art, a punch was no longer a punch, a kick no longer a kick. Now that I understand the art, a punch is just a punch, a kick is just a kick.” But what a punch, what a kick!

So, you and your partner take turns shouting and observing. And you notice any number of things. The head jerks forward, dragging the neck with it. The space between the bottom of the skull and the top of the neck shortens, as if the head is suddenly too heavy for the neck.

The shoulders tense up. The pelvis jerks forward, the heels come off the floor, the body sways.

And the shout sounds rather puny.

Take some time before shouting. Center yourself, lengthen and widen your back. Open your mouth gently, then close it. Place your hand against the back of your neck, open your mouth again, and monitor the effects of opening your mouth on the coordination of the rest of your body. With your mouth nicely open, let air out of your lungs, but without misusing your skeleton: head and neck directed, back stable, pelvis firmly connected to the back, knees slightly bent, feet planted on the floor. Keeping the whole body in this loose and firm state, inhale through your nose and shout again. In a sense, you are now spreading your attention, encompassing your whole body as much as the shout itself. It makes a difference; the shout becomes louder, vibrates more fully.

Now keep your directions, loosen the reins, and shout without forethought: “GO!”

Once you discover how to shout at your freest, you may choose never to shout again if you so wish. The important thing isn’t to shout, but to become able to do it. The ability gives you an inner power that informs everything you say. And if—God forbid—one day you’re accosted by a mugger in a dark alley, you might just be able to shout him into submission.

**Wrist Locks and Holds**

There are two types of defense techniques in Aikido: projections and immobilizations (or throws and locks). Suppose your opponent comes at you and tries to strike your forehead with a karate-like chop. You can use footwork to evade the blow and use your opponent’s momentum to send him sprawling across the dojo; or you can take hold of his hand and wrist and twist them in such a way that the opponent will drop to his knees in pain.

**Exercise #8.** There are several basic wrist holds in Aikido. Here’s one, called kote-geashi, used both as a solo warm-up exercise and as part of a throw. Put your left hand up, as if you were playing an imaginary violin, the elbow bent, the forearm turned so that your pinky is the finger closest to your face. Now place your right palm on the back of the left hand, with the right thumb on the space between the knuckles of the pinky and the ring finger, and the other fingers of the right hand wrapped along the left thumb and the left wrist. (See photo above.) Squeeze the left hand with the right one, then twist it so that the left pinky goes ever more leftward, while at the same time lowering your hands toward the center of your body.

Apply these forces gently, and resist just as gently. Once the forces are in place and you resist all of them at the same time, the oppositions within the arm and hand will start spreading toward the rest of the body, and you will re-direct your head, neck, back, shoulders, and legs almost automatically.
Now ask your partner to hold that imaginary violin; wrap your hand around his in the manner described; and twist his arm a tiny little bit and ask him to resist you. You could potentially break your partner’s arm. Or you could potentially help him find a circuit of connections from the wrist to the arm, the arm to the back, and the back to the legs. The principle is called “many forces, all countered.” Misapplied or applied too strongly, these forces are harmful; well applied and correctly countered, these forces create connections that go well beyond the body part being acted upon. In actual Aikido practice you might run into cruel sadists who hurt you on purpose. But that doesn’t change the fact that you can, if you so choose, use wrist locks and holds in an entirely beneficial manner to help your partner re-direct and establish connections throughout his body.

You can apply the principle of “many forces, all countered” in dozens of different ways; all you need to do is to take hold of any body part and apply multiple forces to it. Here’s an example: Stand behind your partner (who can be sitting or standing) and wrap your hand on top of his shoulder. Apply downward pressure, then add forward pressure; squeeze the shoulder; and twist it a little, all the while asking your partner to gently resist every one of your gentle forces. You can do it in table work as well. Your partner lies on his back. Take hold of his foot and ankle, squeeze and twist them ever so gently, and ask him to meet these forces. He’ll establish connections from the foot to the leg, the leg to the pelvis, the pelvis to the back, and the back to the shoulders, head, and neck.

In Conclusion

I started out by pointing out that the principles of the Alexander Technique are timeless and unchanging, but its practical framework is personal and individual. The Technique’s essential principles are in fact so timeless that they existed even before F.M. Alexander set out to discover them. The Tao Te Ching (written most likely in the sixth century B.C. by Lao Tsu) already embodied the truths that we study today: “Less and less is done/Until non-action is achieved./When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.” Zen Buddhist texts oftentimes strike our eyes as rather “Alexandrian.” Bruce Lee states a teaching precept of his, and he sounds like FM himself. Singing teachers, basketball coaches, sculptors, and philosophers who have never taken an Alexander lesson can embody Alexandrian principles and speak with a vocabulary not wholly different from ours.

As I see it, Aikido is a form of the Alexander Technique, and the Technique is a form of Aikido: Their principles flow from the same original source. And to expand your framework and “spice it up” with a little Aikido may well be a way for you to deepen your understanding of the Technique’s underlying principles.

It’s possible to read my essay and deduce I’m inviting you to attack your students, provoke and insult them, and break their arms. That’d be regrettable. I’m only suggesting that you explore new ways of helping your students tap into their amazing inner resources, so that they can become better able to deal with any stimulus that “puts them wrong.”

Endnotes:
3. Bruce Lee, Tao of Jeet Kune Do (Burbank: Ohara, 1975), 70.


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Photograph of Saito by Jean Paoli.


Photograph of student demonstrating kote-gaeshi by Pedro de Alcantara.

Resources for Learning More About Aikido

If you’d like to know more about Aikido, visit www.YouTube.com and look for clips of Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of Aikido, and Seigo Yamaguchi, one of Ueshiba’s first-generation students. The website www.aikitube.com is a subset of YouTube, cataloguing a few dozen Aikido clips.

C. M. Shifflett wrote a book full of useful anecdotes and illustrations, as well as exercises you can apply to your Alexander teaching, even if you decide never to practice any actual Aikido: Aikido Exercises for Teaching and Training (Merrifield, Virginia: Round Earth Publishing, 2000). You can use Shifflett’s book as a basic bibliography as well, since it mentions many other works of interest.

Aikido is like all disciplines: there exist many styles, schools, personalities, ideologies, feuds, and so on. Finding a teacher is easy. Finding the teacher who’s right for you is a different matter; it may take you years of trials and tribulations.

—Pedro de Alcantara
To motivate teachers all ages. Good teachers are costly, but bad teachers cost more. ~Bob Talbert. I like a teacher who gives you something to take home to think about besides homework. ~Lily Tomlin as "Edith Ann". The dream begins with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you to the next plateau, sometimes poking you with a sharp stick called "truth." In teaching you cannot see the fruit of a day's work. It is invisible and remains so, maybe for twenty years. ~Jacques Barzun. A teacher who is attempting to teach without inspiring the pupil with a desire to learn is hammering on cold iron. ~Horace Mann. A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops. (This podcast is primarily for Alexander Technique teachers and students) Mark Josefsberg, an Alexander Technique teacher in New York City, talks with Robert Rickover about whether a teacher's hands are crucial for teaching the Alexander Technique. Mark's website: markjosefsberg.com Robert teaches in Lincoln, Nebraska and Toronto, Canada. Website: alexandertechniquenebraska.com List of Alexander Technique teachers who use Skype: alexandertechnique.com/teacher/distancelearning More information about the Alexander Technique: alexandertechnique.com