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ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE IN RELATION TO SATIPATTHANA VIPASSANA PRACTICE

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##### 1) An Orientation to the Sense Doors

Satipatthana Vipassana practice is a strategy of being fully aware of all your activities through a conscious orientation to the six sense doors - the five physical senses and the 'sixth sense' - the mind. (1)

There are the five physical senses that are traditionally described - as sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch.

To these the eminent anatomist of last century, Charles Bell, added a "Sixth (Physical) Sense"; that of the sense of limb and body position (proprioception) and movement (kinaesthesia) - referred to below as the "muscle sense".(2)

In addition to the traditional five physical sense doors plus the mind, Buddhist meditators can incorporate into their practice being consciously attentive at the "muscle sense" door. This means mindfulness on the postures of the body (referred to in the Satipatthana Sutta) and movement of the body in daily activities with attention to the use of the various muscle groups, with particular attention to the balance of the head, neck and trunk (known as the "primary control").

The Alexander Technique is the practice of cultivating a conscious orientation to this particular sense door in all daily activities (e.g. sitting, standing and walking). The Technique brings into consciousness appropriate and inappropriate (excess) muscle tension previously unnoticed due to habitual "use".

##### 2) The lost sixth sense - faulty sensory appreciation

There is evidence that this muscle sense has become "lost", or suppressed, in our modern civilisation. Our minds become occupied with so many inputs and outputs to do with the outside world that signals from the body are suppressed or "gated out" before reaching consciousness.(3) The body tends only to be noticed when pain or pleasure arise and the "ordinary" sensations associated with sitting, standing and walking tend to go unnoticed.

The problem of faulty sensory appreciation is essentially one of habitual self-reference - "I will stand up" or "I will speak" etc. Instead of mindfully attending to the "means-whereby" the processes of standing up or speaking can be performed (as if they were being done for the first time), the tendency is that of "end-gaining" by relying on subconscious mental programs developed in childhood which tend to become more and more inappropriate over time. The overwhelming impulse (reaction) is to do "what feels right" which is the habitual pattern of use. With trying to achieve a "good position" by shortcuts there will be inappropriate contractions of neck and trunk muscles and this results in stiffness.(4)

The only solution to the problem of faulty sensory appreciation is to cultivate conscious control of posture and movement. The essential first step involves consciously pausing or "inhibiting" before undertaking a movement (also mentioned in commentaries to the Satipatthana Sutta). While the subconscious habit of use is being consciously inhibited, the means-whereby the movement can be

performed with the optimum muscle use is consciously directed. Basically the optimum muscle use involves letting the neck be free, so that the head can go forward and up and the back can lengthen and widen. The preceding sentence must be understood not just intellectually but through direct (kinaesthetic) experience guided by a teacher, because of the problem of faulty sensory appreciation.

### 3) The Role of the Alexander Teacher

One of the unique features of lessons is that of the role of the teacher. Her/his hands are not only sensing the state of the muscles of the pupil but also the trained hands help the pupil become aware of the muscles as these are touched (the pupil is not required to disrobe). The teacher, with heightened awareness of her/his own muscles, helps the pupil become aware. The awakened muscle sense of the teacher helps (over time) to awaken the muscle sense in the pupil. (5)

In practice it is only through the practical experience of a lesson with a teacher's expert hands that a person is given the awareness of deficiencies in her/his sensory awareness. As the teacher's hand touches muscles of the trunk and of the neck, the teacher senses the muscle state (over- or under-contracted muscles causing the person to be pulled down due to increased flexor tone) and at the same time directs the pupil's attention to the state of his/her muscles. When the pupil is about to undertake a movement, the teacher's hand may be gently placed at the neck to assist the pupil's sense of the neck and body muscles. (6)

### 4) Benefits derived from practising the Alexander Technique

The benefits derived from practising the Technique are many and varied. The conscious orientation to the muscle sense door affects all aspects of psychophysical functioning. Alexander stressed that specific aspects of functioning cannot be addressed without improving the general standard of use of the psychophysical organism - he was one of the first teachers to insist on the interdependence of mind and body. Improving the general standard of use affects various aspects of functioning such as breathing (as more room is created in the thoracic cavity and the ribs are allowed to move freely), backpain, joint problems, stress, anxiety and depression (through the ability to inhibit the habitual fear reflexes (fight or flight)), stuttering (through the ability to inhibit the habit of using unnecessary muscle tension when attempting to speak). The effect on general mindfulness helps to inhibit conditioned psychological habits of reaction in addition to the habits of reaction normally associated with muscle use (such as the fight or flight response).

In a positive way, the Technique creates a sense of wellbeing derived from consciously performing the activities of the day in a skilful way. Living is no longer seen as mostly being a "chore" and the satisfaction derived from performing daily activities skilfully naturally replaces the misplaced search for happiness from specific sense pleasures.

In particular, the Satipatthana Vipassana practitioner can benefit from an improved conscious orientation to the body during meditation and daily activities and an ability to sit in a poised manner for long periods utilising the minimum of muscular effort

(which is conducive to a relaxed and alert mind).

Further information

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Garlick, David, "The Lost Sixth Sense: a medical scientist looks at the Alexander Technique", Laboratory for Musculoskeletal and Postural Research, School of Physiology and Pharmacology, The University of New South Wales 1990.

Ven Pannyavaro, "The Art of Attention", Buddha Dhamma Meditation Association, PO Box K1020 Haymarket NSW 2000 Australia.

Notes

- (1) From Ven Pannyavaro "The Art of Attention" p2
- (2) From David Garlick "The Lost Sixth Sense" p9
- (3) From David Garlick "The Lost Sixth Sense" p9
- (4) From David Garlick "The Lost Sixth Sense" p25
- (5) From David Garlick "The Lost Sixth Sense" p13
- (6) From David Garlick "The Lost Sixth Sense" p26

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The Alexander Technique, named after its creator Frederick Matthias Alexander, is an educational process that was created to retrain habitual patterns of movement and posture. Alexander believed that poor habits in posture and movement damaged spatial self-awareness as well as health,<sup>221</sup> and that movement efficiency could support overall physical well-being. He saw the technique as a mental training technique as well. Insight meditation is based on the word "Vipassana", which means "insight." It's meditation that requires strict body and mind focus and produces dramatic results. It's used to dissolve problems, clear... She provides therapy to people who struggle with addictions, mental health, and trauma in community health settings and private practice. She received her MS in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from Marquette University in 2011. There are 15 references cited in this article, which can be found at the bottom of the page. Vipassanā practice in the Theravada tradition ended in the 10th century, but was reintroduced in Toungoo and Konbaung Burma in the 18th century, based on contemporary readings of the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta, the Visuddhimagga, and other texts.<sup>[5]</sup> A new tradition developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, centering on bare insight in conjunction with samatha.<sup>[6]</sup> It became of. Vipassanā is a Pali word derived from the older prefix "vi-" meaning "special", and the verbal root "-passanā" meaning "seeing".<sup>[2]</sup> It is often translated as "insight" or "clear-seeing". The "vi" in vipassanā has many possible meanings, it could mean to '[see] into', '[see] through' or to '[see] in a special way.'<sup>[4]</sup>