

Practising Detachment:

A Short Introduction to the F.M. Alexander Technique for Buddhist Practitioners

"The fact to be faced is that the human self was robbed of much of its inheritance when the separation implied by the conception of the organism as 'spirit,' 'mind' and 'body' was accepted as a working principle, for it left unbridged the gap between the 'subconscious' and the conscious. I venture to assert that if the gap is to be bridged, it will be by means of a knowledge, gained through practical experience, which will enable us to inhibit our instinctive, 'subconscious' reaction to a given stimulus, and to hold it inhibited while initiating a conscious direction, guidance, and control of the use of the self that was previously unfamiliar."

"I suggest that only those who become capable of translating into practice what is involved in the procedure just described can justly claim to have experienced detachment in the basic sense."

— F. M. Alexander, *The Universal Constant in Living*, 1946

Practice of Detachment in Zazen

In Buddhist sitting-meditation, called zazen in Japanese, the given stimulus is the instruction to sit upright. The formal instructions for zazen laid down by the founder of Zen Buddhism in Japan, Zen Master Dogen (1200-1254), center upon the command "Just sit upright. Do not lean to the left, incline to the right, slump forward, or arch backward."

For most of us, the instinctive reaction to this stimulus is to stiffen up or to brace, fixing the joints and holding the breath in the process. The more clearly we see it, the more possible it may be to inhibit this reaction, along with the false attempts at self-organization which are its offshoots.

To initiate a conscious direction of the use of the self that was previously unfamiliar may involve the wish to sit upright without fixing, keeping all the joints as open and free as possible, beginning with the sub-occipital joint where the head sits on top of the spinal column.

This process requires trust, because it entails opening up to the unknown, abandoning the false security of holding and fixing. Again, it requires clarity, especially in regard to timorous responses to the stimulus "Just sit upright."

The Secret Is in the Preparation

An ideal way to develop this clarity and trust, and hence an ideal way to prepare for zazen, is to practice Alexander's procedure of inhibition and direction in sitting and standing, under the guidance of an AT teacher. Having experienced how conscious inhibition and direction make for a freer use of the self in rising from a chair, thereafter, to counter any tendency to stiffen in zazen, we can simply think of sitting 'as if to stand.'

The secret is not in the movement of standing but in the readiness to stand. "The readiness is all." Therefore, even with legs crossed in lotus, it may help to think of being able to pivot freely, 'all in one piece,' on the sitting bones so that the head being released forward and up, against the back lengthening and widening, could lead us up into standing.

Learning Clarity in the Moment

Alexander arrived at "the only place, and the only moment in time, where change could begin, or where he could have any control over the habitual patterns of misuse which were dominating every-thing he attempted to do. This place, or this moment in time, was the instant that a stimulus to activity reached his consciousness."

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