Some time ago, a young legal recruiter came to me for her first experience of the Alexander Technique. She was a former dancer, with the posture to show for it: she had the classic ballet dancer’s stance, with sternum raised, shoulders held back, and head held high. She was first astonished, and then delighted, when I helped her find an easier way to stand upright. It was clearly a great relief to her to discover that good posture could feel so good. Toward the end of the lesson, she turned to me and exclaimed, “You debunk everything!”

Learning the Alexander Technique does require considering the possibility that many common beliefs may not be correct. Here are a number of examples that we will explore:

- Your belief about what your body is doing and where it is in space may not be accurate.
- What you think is “good posture” can be as bad for you as “bad posture.”
- “Keeping your eyes on the prize” can be counterproductive; focusing too hard on your goal may actually interfere with attaining it.
- The Cartesian view that mind and body are separate is incorrect: thoughts exist in the body and thinking can change your physical state.
- Reacting quickly to all demands for action (including demands you make on yourself) can be harmful.
- You can’t “project” your voice.
- You shouldn’t “take a deep breath.”
- Doing nothing is not a waste of time.
In my teaching practice, I get to know my students in a very specific but profound way. They generally come seeking a means to feel better and healthier or to change a habit that they don’t like. In the process of seeking change, we discover their fundamental beliefs about how the body and mind work, what improved functioning actually entails, and how to achieve it. Often, we discover that my point of view about these questions differs from theirs.

Some of these differences are simply a matter of information. Most people don’t know much about anatomy, either in general or in relation to their own bodies, and much of what they think they know is wrong. I teach them where to find the top of their spines, their hip joints, their wrists and ankles, and so forth, not just in a picture or model skeleton, but in themselves. I teach them about the movements of bone, muscle, and other tissues throughout the torso that occur with each breath. I show them how simple actions, such as rising from a chair, can be done more easily and efficiently with some simple changes in mechanics.

Information alone, however, does not necessarily result in change. I once helped to introduce a large group of advanced physical therapy students to the Alexander Technique. They all knew much more about anatomy than I do. Unlike most people, they were already quite familiar with the location of the atlanto-occipital (AO) joint. (You can see a diagram showing the AO joint on page 47.) In fact, they had been taught to teach patients to do what they called the “AO nod,” that is, the subtle movement of the head on the AO joint that is like nodding “yes.” (Alexander Technique teachers also work on this movement with their students.) However, when I went around the room putting my hands on the heads of these highly trained students and worked with them on nodding in this way, not one of them was actually able to move the head freely on the AO joint; their necks were all far too tense to allow for the freedom Alexander Technique teachers seek to elicit.

It is important for most people to understand some basic facts about their anatomy, such as where the major joints are, in order to make more efficient use of themselves. But my students and I also discover and examine their beliefs about other physical “facts” about posture, movement, breathing, and voice—which are often of dubious accuracy and utility.

I often find myself needing to clarify for my students what we are aiming for, exactly, in our lessons. This goes beyond posture and mechanics. Many people, especially many successful lawyers and other professionals, live in a state of almost constant muscle tension. Learning to move out of this state in Alexander Technique lessons is a huge relief. At any given time, I seem to have at least a few students whose main reason for taking time and spending money to have lessons with me is the “table work” that we do, during which the student lies on my
table: it seems to be the only regular opportunity some people give themselves to relax and let go of having to be busy all the time.

This can give rise to the idea that the Alexander Technique is about relaxation, which is only partly right. Muscles that are overworking do need to do less. However, usually when some part of the body is overworking, another part is underworking. Thus, the rebalancing that happens in Alexander Technique lessons may involve inducing some muscles to have increased tone while others have decreased tone.

Many people say they feel more relaxed than usual during and after their Alexander Technique lessons. When I ask them what specific feelings they are noticing, they may report feeling lighter, more energetic, or less tense. They associate this pleasant experience with situations that are relaxing—with a good long vacation, for example. Thus, they interpret the sensations they are feeling in their bodies as indicating that they are relaxed. There's nothing wrong with this label, unless it brings other mental baggage with it. If you think that the Alexander Technique requires that you relax, and you also think that you can't be relaxed and work hard at the same time, or that you can only relax when you lie down and close your eyes, you will have trouble using Alexander Technique skills at the office. So I tend not to speak about relaxation to my students, but rather about releasing unnecessary tension and muscle work. Telling someone to relax is generally counterproductive anyway. Or, as I often tell my students, “trying to relax” is an oxymoron. You can't relax by trying hard.

You also can't recreate a feeling by “memorizing” it or trying to feel your way back to it. Once I tried to explain this to a friend, and she came up with this analogy: if you are feeling sad or stressed, and think back to being really happy when you were on vacation, the memory might make you might feel briefly better, but if you want to really re-experience that feeling, you must re-create the conditions that gave rise to it. When I help a student to use the Alexander Technique skills that we are practicing together to create a feeling of ease in movement with less neck tension, that feeling is usually clear and memorable, and my student will recognize it next time it arises. When the student closes her eyes and says “I want to try to remember how this feels and hold onto it,” she is not really at risk of forgetting what it feels like. Rather, she means something like “I want to hold this position and remember it so I can get this great feeling back on my own.” But the position didn't create the feeling, and “holding onto” a position or a feeling results in stiffening and tension. You'll never feel exactly the same thing twice. If you want to keep revisiting that place of ease and enjoyment in movement, you can—by going through the process again.
This emphasis on process is at the heart of the matter. When we speak of “learning” in this context, we are talking about learning a skill, not learning information. When I first took Alexander lessons, I noticed that my teacher repeated the same information, the same phrases, over and over. I wondered if she thought I was stupid. I didn't have to be told twice to think of allowing my neck to be free or to bend my hips, knees, and ankles to sit down.

Later, I discovered that I did have to be told twice—or rather, hundreds of times. The words she was using were not merely concepts and information for me to learn intellectually. Rather, they were thoughts to live by, to live with in my body. Every once in a while, the embodied experience I had under her hands matched with the words in a new way, and suddenly I had a whole new understanding of something I had heard many times before.

Learning the Alexander Technique is the opposite of an all-or-nothing proposition. You will not always do everything “right” from an Alexander Technique perspective—nor is it necessary. You don't have to quit your “bad” postural habits cold turkey. In fact, the whole “right–wrong” paradigm is useless in this endeavor. I'm more interested in helping my students discover how they do things and try out new ways to see if they prefer them. It's more productive than looking for mistakes, and it's more enjoyable.

It can take a while before I can persuade a new student to take this attitude of discovery and nonjudgment. After all, they usually come to me to solve a problem, and they want to be told what to do and when they go wrong. They are mostly people who have been extremely successful at school and careers, and they want to do well at this, too. It's part of who they are.

I'm not saying that my students shouldn't have goals, or that they shouldn't seek my guidance in how to attain them. But the vocabulary of “right–wrong,” “good–bad,” and “should–shouldn't” that frames so much of our lives has a strong tendency to evoke the very reactions that we are seeking to interrupt and change. Many of us experience being scolded, yelled at, and told what to do by authority figures from a young age. Those of us who were good students and well-behaved children (and I am one of them) learned how to avoid these experiences and gain praise and rewards by being extremely responsive, always ready and eager to please. Those behaviors and attitudes continue to serve us in adulthood, especially in highly demanding careers such as practicing law. And those behaviors and attitudes often come with a built-in, automatic muscle set: tense neck and shoulders, tight back muscles, and all the other attributes of the startle pattern that we will examine in the next chapter.
Envision a school-aged child being reprimanded by a teacher for not completing his homework: if the child cares at all about doing well at school, or about having the teacher’s approval, he will freeze, tense up, and cringe. As adults, we freeze, tense up, and cringe in response to the admonitions in our own heads: “I should finish writing this brief before I leave the office.” “Work through your fatigue, because this has to get done before morning.” “I promised this to the client by the end of the week, and I can’t fail to deliver.” “My feelings of worry and anxiety demonstrate that I am being appropriately thorough in my research.” “If I don’t look intense enough, my colleagues will think I am not taking this project seriously.” “I can’t afford to make a single mistake.”

These attitudes represent the drive and perfectionism that motivate many lawyers. However, the Alexander Technique does not require perfection. Indeed it requires a willingness to make mistakes, to be uncertain, and to be experimental, as part of the process of learning. Anyone who has learned to play a sport or a musical instrument knows that repetitive practice is necessary to gain skill and mastery, and practice entails making mistakes as well as getting it right. Learning the Alexander Technique is like that.

Another comparable experience is learning a foreign language. There is grammar to assimilate and vocabulary to learn. But to actually speak, read, and comprehend the language, you have to practice. At first, you practice simple, repetitive exercises that seem stilted, as your mind, ear, and tongue become accustomed to the new sounds and meanings. This phase is like going to Alexander Technique lessons and sitting down and standing up again, over and over. Later, you are able to improvise in your new language: you begin to understand actual people saying spontaneous things, and you can express your own thoughts in the moment. As an Alexander student, you begin to be able to apply the skills you are learning to real-life situations as they arise. Finally, if you persist, you become comfortable functioning in your new language, and may even think and dream in it occasionally. As an Alexander student, you eventually find that your new way of being has become habitual, displacing the old, damaging habits that you wished to discard. What previously you could do only with full attention, when there were no outside pressures, has now become a part of you.