

To make the most of your potential as a Tango dancer, you need to know how!

Translation by Graham Fox, Lyon

F.M. Alexander Technique and Tango Argentino

I want to dance with ease, dynamism, power and flow, with elegance and grace.

I want to communicate with my partner, to sense his presence and feel connected to him.

I want to be upright with ease, to move around my axis without strain.

I want to dance without pain.

The Alexander Technique can give you the means to make these wishes possible.

Being present by inhibiting our automatic reactions

Frederick Matthias Alexander realised that our habitual ways of acting and going directly for results (what Alexander called "end gaining") hinder us from making full use of our potential.

Instead of acting according to habitual and often unconscious patterns, we can make use of the moment between stimulus and reaction to hold back our automatic or unthinking reaction (Alexander called this decision not to react automatically "inhibition").

This moment of inhibition enables us to gain freedom to choose our response consciously. We are opening up a space which allows us to choose to react either in our habitual but now conscious way, or to act in a new and unfamiliar way (new for this particular situation and stimulus). This greatly expands the range of possible options and variations for our reactions.

It offers a way to understand the processes underlying our thinking and our movements. We will then be able to decide if and how we want to change these processes. A new world of possibilities starts to open up for us.

Tango is about two people walking – as the Argentines say, a heart with four legs.

When walking we put one step after the other. If, after every step, we allow ourselves to choose how we walk, where we walk, and if indeed if we want to walk, we open up a range of new options. We can break up those sequences we've danced so often and recreate them in a new and different way. Our potential for improvisation gets an enormous boost.

As a leader I'm able to make use of my repertoire with more variety and sensitivity; it will be more interesting and enjoyable for my partner.

As a follower I can open up a space where I allow myself to be curious after every step I take, to wait for the impulses and propositions of my partner and to discover new directions and new and more varied elements of movement.

We are enabling ourselves to dance calmly and to maintain an overview in every moment, so as to be aware of impulses coming from inside us or from outside, and to go with them and develop them if we wish.

And sometime we can have the experience that following and leading are one.

Elegant Dance and uprightness through conscious direction

Our conscious and upright coordination of head, neck and torso is closely linked with Alexander's principle of inhibition.

If the muscles of our neck are organised in a easy and released way, our head can move as though we were gently indicating "yes", a tiny nodding at our head-neck joint which allows our head to release forward and up in relation to our spine. The weight of our head is typically around 10% of our total weight, and its free balance on top of our spine allows the spine to be elastic, mobile and upright. As a result our whole torso – from our sitting bones to our shoulders – is able to extend in every direction in space: it can lengthen and widen.

The dynamic relationship between head, neck and the whole torso (but most specifically the back) is a primary mechanism for coordinated uprightness. F.M. Alexander named this relationship the "primary control" of the organism and of the whole self (considered as a psycho-physical unity).

In Tango Argentino we encounter this uprightness in our lessons practising walking. Being upright in a coordinated fashion, we can take our steps with grace and precision. After every step we come back to our axis and open up the possibility of walking in any direction.

An upright and appropriate posture also supports the *abrazo* with our partner. We are able to find our axis in the couple with ease. The uprightness allows us to give up our own and our common axis in dancing *colgadas*, and then to come back into that axis. Our back maintains its strength while dancing *volcadas*, and no pain or discomfort need arise. The elasticity and uprightness of our spine allows us to make full use of dissociation, which we need when dancing Tango Argentino. Being upright allows us to dissociate with much more ease.

We are upright and our orientation is going up, and at the same time we experience a firm connection with the floor. We are moving between up and down – connected to the ground and to space above, we can be flexible and stable at the same time. We are able to move fast and dynamically: *giros* can almost happen by themselves.

Couples who have integrated these principles are seen as being present in their dance and as dancing together harmoniously. They use their bodies well as they move, and give an impression of lightness, sometimes of being freed from gravity.

Since our proprioception (our inner sense and awareness of our movement and balance) does not always work reliably, we may not be aware of the relationship between our head and our spine. We don't know if our spine is upright or bent over. Our proprioception doesn't necessarily give us reliable information about our uprightness, our axis or our muscle tension.

We are able to influence our muscle tone through the way we project and process mental information. We can consciously get rid of superfluous muscle tension, and where there is too little muscle tension we can increase it. We are promoting coordinated muscle tone throughout our organism.

We can control our uprightness, determine our axis and be stable and flexible at the same time. When dancing, this enables us to decide at every moment in which direction we want to go, and to follow the proposals of our partner. The muscles we need for movement can free up so as to move our legs, arms and head in an undisturbed way.

The uprightness of our torso and spine gives us freedom in our joints. We take pressure off our joints and avoid misuse of our bodies, and pain. Dancing in high heels becomes easier.

When we stop interfering with our head-neck-back relationship, the deep postural muscles, which are responsible for our uprightness and our postural tone, can work in an effective and appropriate way. Not interfering means maintaining the elasticity and mobility of the spine, and allowing our head to balance with ease on top of our spine.

Here is a little procedure which allows us to experience this process of "going up": Your partner lays his hand lightly on top of your head. Be aware of the contact of your partner's hand and imagine that you would like to grow into it. At the same time, you are aware of the contact of your feet with the floor, and you allow yourself to grow up into your partner's hand and down into the floor at the same time. Your thinking will activate your uprighting mechanism and may give you a feeling of length and mobility. It will let both your inner space and the space outside you grow and expand.

Through this principle of "going up", we can relieve our spine of unnecessary pressure, strengthen our back muscles and avoid back and neck pain.

In dancing, we may choose not to have head contact with our partner, because this would disturb our uprightness and poise. Often the head contact causes a bending or disconnection of the spine in the region of the neck, which disturbs the natural relationship of head, neck and back.

Is it helpful to curve or bend your head, neck or shoulders to have head contact?
Can I also be fully present and in contact with my partner without touching his or her head?
Am I able to create the contact with my partner through my inner awareness and presence?
You can answer these questions by pausing to inhibit your habitual reactions, and taking your answers into conscious and directed action.

Learning to dance with ease

Inhibition and direction support our learning process.

Inhibition helps us to find out why some sequences are not easy to dance. We can become aware when we start to cheat, hoping that somehow things will work out without our really understanding what's happening, trusting that our partner will somehow do the right steps and stay with us. We don't know exactly what we're doing, so at crucial moments we just hope for the best. The problem here is that we are never able to dance the step consciously, so we are cheating ourselves.

What can we do in order to rely more fully on our own skill and ability?
We could find out at which precise moment of the sequence we lose our awareness of how to carry it out. If we inhibit our reaction at that moment, we can stop and ask which step comes next, or where we want to lead our partner. We give ourselves the means to make a change, and to dance in future with more real know-how rather than following our habitual way of rushing or muddling through a sequence that we're not sure of.

Feedback from our partner may be helpful to find out what is appropriate or not appropriate in our dancing, which things cause little disturbances of the partner's axis, or when we are putting too much pressure through our hand into our partner's arm. With this awareness, we can decide if we want to maintain the situation or if we want to change it, and to evaluate what we can change in order to bring about a new and conscious action.

If you lose your axis you can find out if this is being caused by you or by your partner. Constructive feedback enables us to work out how we can coordinate our own movements, and dancing together gets gradually easier.

We can be aware when pain starts arising. This may also be a signal which leads us back to the process of inhibition, and to becoming aware of the "how" of our movements.

Inhibition also helps us understand new sequences and elements in an easier way. Sometimes my thinking the sequence is too difficult, or that my body is unable to do the movement (backwards *sacadas*, for example), prevents me from understanding the movement itself and how to perform it. I think we have all had the experience that once a new move is understood, it turns out to be much easier than you thought in the beginning.

Inhibiting my urge to rush and to react unthinkingly may also allow me to decide *not* to learn a particular sequence, movement or whatever.

Using the calmness and strength which flows from this process of inhibition, and using my directed uprightness, I can be present in the moment, aware of myself and connected with my partner, the music and the other dancers in the space around me.

Frederick Matthias Alexander

F.M. Alexander (born 1869 in Tasmania, died 1955 in London) was an actor. His first love was reciting Shakespeare.

He often developed strained breathing and hoarseness, and this led him to develop his method.

He realised that he himself was causing his problems, through his uncoordinated use of himself and his automatic reactions.

He discovered that through a conscious change in the use of his whole self, he could resolve his breathing problems and get rid of his hoarseness, and influence and change the use of himself in all situations of his life for the better.

His work has been summed up as learning to "think in activity".

In 1904 he moved from Australia to England, and later also taught his method in the USA. In his book *The Use of the Self* he describes how he developed his method.

In 1932 he started to train teachers of his method in London.

Lessons in the F.M. Alexander Technique

F.M. Alexander taught exclusively in individual lessons. Today some teachers of the Alexander technique also offer group classes. Alexander teachers help their students recognise habitual patterns in movement, thought and behaviour, and how to use the processes of inhibition and direction to change their habits on a conscious level in all their daily tasks and activities.