

Yoga and the Alexander Technique

by **Clare Maxwell**

From the upcoming book
Alexander Technique and the Art of Working Out
by Malcolm Balk and Andrew Sheilds

I am a dancer and choreographer. I have been studying Alexander Technique for 16 years and teaching it for four at various studios throughout New York. I also practice yoga.

Perhaps yoga is so popular because, like me, people want to be engaged as a whole person when they are exercising. Yoga provides an alternative to exercising by rote, which doesn't require a person's presence. Yoga is equal parts mental and physical. It asks that you actually become conscious of what you are doing. Where else do you get such a chance? The Alexander Technique supports this approach because it is essentially a mind-body process that makes concentration an expansive experience instead of a narrowing one. The Alexander principles address the very real problem of how we do what we do; they assume that unity of the self is possible now, in this

moment, whether you have the posture right or not. They give you a way to develop the stamina to be present, the stamina to have fun.

Having fun is very practical for me. Each time I do an asana, it can be a new experience, when I use the central principles of the Alexander Technique: awareness, inhibition and direction. If I am willing to relinquish my

idea of what I should do and to imagine my movement happening in a new way, my practice becomes full of kinetic surprises. Sometimes I just have to laugh at how much easier a posture is than I thought it would be. Very specifically, if I don't grip my neck and freeze up at the joint between my spine and skull, everything begins to flow. I always give myself permission not to do a posture if I can't manage it without gripping my neck. This very simple awareness helps me to define the edge between challenge and injury. I have never hurt myself

in a yoga class since I began my Alexander training. I now know when to back off, and when to go for it.

Most people, me included, tend to forcefully compress their joints when they push, reach or make a shape. This is the cause of many injuries. If you can feel compression, then you can make a choice to un-compress before initiating a movement. This is very different than trying hard to do it right, which is how most people approach learning something new. Hence, the first thing that I help my students with is to be able to notice when they are compressing. That attention is a window of opportunity in which to choose another option: expansion. Instead of right and wrong, you can just do it differently.

Here is an example of what I mean. In the effort to achieve a shape, and especially when bearing weight on the arms, many people will tense or pull up their shoulders. The most common correction for that would be to pull the shoulders down, or pull the shoulders back towards each other and open your chest. However, that's just adding an extra problem onto the original problem: not only are you now holding your shoulders up, but you're also trying to pull down against the holding up.

Instead of fighting yourself this way, all you really have to do is give up the original holding. To non-do, you can direct your shoulders to expand away from each other. If you can notice compressive movement habits, they're less likely to come into play during movement challenges and you will avoid injuring yourself.

When you're not wasting energy fighting yourself, you can focus on the posture at hand and allow the energy to flow through you. Yoga practiced in this way can be wonderfully exhilarating.

