The Art of Alpine Skiing and the Alexander Technique

by Erik Bendix

I have been skiing for 44 years. When I started skiing as a boy, skiing scared me so much I hardly could budge when my skis were on. Now skiing nourishes me so deeply that no other activity can compare. In my many explorations in between, nothing has liberated my skiing quite so profoundly as the Alexander Technique. The great American educator John Dewey said that the Alexander Technique "bears the same relation to education that education bears to life." It is a means toward achieving ends beyond itself, a method of learning how to learn. Seeing how Alexander's method applies to the practical details of skiing is an excellent way to learn both more about his method and about skiing itself.

Alpine skiing is an art of staying balanced and mobile during sustained sliding fall down a snowy mountainside. It is a scary prospect for most people, because people have deep instinctive fears of falling. What usually makes up for such fears are poise and flexibility. But if we let the fears get the better of us, it is easy to stiffen up. Stiffening like this can start a cycle: it can make us even more prone to fall, which frightens us into stiffening further, making us even more prone to fall, etc…..a cycle that ultimately crumples us into a not very effective version of ourselves. For every fluid and elegant skier on the slopes, there are dozens struggling and battling themselves all the way down. It is all a matter of how one reacts to sustained fall.

The Alexander Technique effectively teaches how to keep startle reactions from becoming postural habits that impede coordination. This puts it in a unique position to help all skiers. It teaches us how to un-crumple ourselves, recover balance, and be available for new experience. It teaches this in the first place by teaching us how not to pull our heads back. Most skiers pull back on their heads constantly without realizing it, flinching back or bracing themselves against their direction of travel. Every time they do, their skis skid out from under them a little, they accelerate, they grip their feet to stop that, and they lose some control. How to prevent this from happening is the basic skiers' dilemma.

Experienced ski teachers can see easily enough when a student's weight has been thrown further back than their feet, but ski teachers generally don't see that this has anything to do with how a student's neck and head are used. Ski teachers are trained in how to use the legs; it is rare indeed to find one who understands how the use of the head, neck and back affects how freely the legs and feet can move. Without this understanding their job is a difficult one, trying to get their students' legs to be flexible while the students stiffen their legs unconsciously in self-protection. Some background in the Technique could help them with this. Indeed, it could help any skier, from the complete novice to the competing athlete. The principles remain the same, regardless of the level of skill.

It may come as a surprise to skiers that a technique originally worked out in the artistic realm of the theater to overcome stage fright and loss of voice should come to bear on a sport whose audience is often no more than snow covered pines and a crow or two. But just as an actor who desires communion with his audience must not be at odds with himself, so a skier who wants to be at one with the mountain cannot both be plummeting downhill and trying not to.

As an actor, Alexander found that when confronted with performing, his habits of reaction engaged so powerfully that no amount of talking himself out of it succeeded in releasing their grip. He could not simply will himself into new behavior. The only thing he could consciously control was whether or not to react at all. Only if he chose not to react could he free himself from the tyranny the situation had over him. This seemingly narrow window of choice, however, proved to be an opening into ever expanding freedom.

Applied to skiing, this first and most fundamental of Alexander's insights means that a skier caught in the grip of habit must first identify what he is reacting to and stop reacting to it

altogether. When I started skiing as a boy, the stimulus of sliding downhill was enough to stiffen me with fear and send me on a frantic search for ways to improve my situation. Both my stiffness and my frantic search were exactly what prevented any improvement. From the outset my efforts put me at odds with myself. I was both desperate to learn, and braced in resistance against any possibility of that happening. My first glimpse of anything outside this internal war came when I learned that bracing against a fall could lead to injury. I had seen some painful accidents and knew I didn't want one of my own. So I unstiffened a little, and to my surprise my skiing improved.

Alexander's next insight was that he needed to pay particular attention to not stiffening or gripping with his neck. Gripping the neck is the first step in a cascade of reactions to anything that frightens us. We are so often frightened that we generally don't even notice this. Most of us have pushed our panic button so many times it has gotten jammed in the "on" position and we have adapted to that state as if it were normal. Then we don't understand why we have such difficulty functioning. Skiers generally don't pay much attention to their necks. But ungripping the neck is a priority and a key to unlocking any other problem of coordination.

Alexander noticed that the act of flinching also involved jamming his head back down onto his neck. He couldn't successfully ungrip his neck without also letting go of his neck's grip on his head. It was as if the sensory organs in his head, his eyesight and hearing and smell, were all in retreat from what had overstimulated them, and the very act of flinching back away from stimulus was what gave the stimulus such power over how he reacted. In stopping his reaction cycle, his head could rebalance itself upright, and he could again face what was in front of him.

Our control centers of balance and coordination are located in our heads. If a person's head won't move independently of his neck, then any activity below the head will tend to throw and jostle the head around and will detract from the head's ability to keep him accurately informed of where he is, how fast he is moving, and what direction he is going. Those are all crucial things for a skier to know, especially at higher speeds or on rougher terrain. The best athletes in any sport leave their heads very calm, even in the midst of intense limb and torso activity. They are aware of their surroundings and have a flexible kind of inner quiet that is undisturbed by the chaos around them. That requires true independence between head and neck. Yet for some reason, athletic training has little language for the use of the head. Maybe that is because there isn't much muscle in the head that can be trained. The head works mainly by how its weight is balanced and by what its owner is thinking.

In the case of skiing, how the head is used affects everything. Flinching the head back away from the direction of fall, besides depriving the skier of his enjoyment of the scenery, is also at the root of almost every problem a skier can have: loss of control over speed or direction, inability to anticipate, knee strain, flailing, crossed or separated skis, and, as I said, loss of reverence for the scenery. It is the mechanism by which skiers make their own nightmares come true.

Alexander found that if he could allow his neck its freedom and let his head right itself, this made room for his entire back to expand upward toward his head and spread out to either side, unpinning his ribs so he could breathe more easily. Most of us experience this kind of thing as just a sigh of relief, a natural response of relief from anxiety. What Alexander noticed about it, though, was that in panic reactions, we literally shrink, while in recovery from them we re-expand. He may have noticed this because he observed himself from behind using mirrors, so he was able to track the behavior of his back.

Our backs are one of the least conscious parts of us. They are also our main source of support, both structurally through the vertebrae and surrounding ligaments, and muscularly through the back extensor muscles that keep us upright. Because we tend to be so oblivious to this system, we often think that what keeps us securely upright is our legs. The more we think that, the more we tend to stiffen our legs into structural pillars, and the less available they are to bend and fold. The result is stiffened knee, hip, and ankle joints, increased wear and tear and proneness to injury in these joints, a lowering of sensory feedback from the lower limbs, and feet that grip like claws. For the skier, these are all recipes for disaster as well as obstacles to learning anything

new. If your legs are hanging on for dear life, any instructions for how to let them move will fall on deaf ears. “Unlock my knees? Can’t you see that they are protecting me against certain death???” There is a reason why people caught in this kind of panic are thought of as spineless. They have lost contact with the security of their own backs. When they find it again, their legs will be liberated. Mine certainly were.

Every Alexander teacher is familiar with the simple act of folding and unfolding oneself to sit and stand, and how freedom in the neck affects how easily the legs bend. This knowledge is very much what is generally missing on the ski slope. What is needed to solve the skier’s dilemma is something very counterintuitive. Instead of shrinking away from the direction of fall, skiers need to let themselves fall toward the valley, and the most effective way to do this is to stop pulling the head back and let it lead the way. The result is quite unexpected. Instead of the disasters one might fear, one actually slows down and regains control. It is a perfect illustration of Alexander’s insights.

I have talked all this time about the neck, the head, the back, and not at all about how to execute particular turns or how to teach them. I did that on purpose, to draw attention away from where it is usually riveted, and to uncover some underlying principles of human structure and reaction that are useful in teaching any skiing skill. In my view, these should be the starting point and should remain the foundation of all more detailed instruction. How to leave your neck open, how not to flinch your head back, how to leave your back long and wide, and how to unlock your knees can all be learned as a student first learns how to put on their equipment, and they are still a deep study for the most advanced skier. Instead of rushing past the details of getting to the slopes, I like to walk my students through every step, teaching them principles that will come in handy later and letting them arrive at the slopes already centered. What they learn handling equipment and ski lifts will help them balance and move around on level surfaces, and that in turn will help them stay balanced and moveable as they transition to moving downhill. Each exploration should be worth taking time over for its own sake, and each should build on the last and be a foundation for the next.

To teach Alexander Technique to skiers, you have to be creative. You obviously can’t keep your hands on students while they are on their way down a slope, and even if you could the padding of their ski wear would prevent them from feeling your hands anyway. My basic solution to this problem is save the hand-on work for off the slopes, and while on the slopes to teach skills before they are needed. To give just one example, good parallel skiing requires smooth shifts of weight from side to side. People trying to learn this are usually too panicked to do anything smoothly or gradually, even though they are perfectly capable of smooth weight shifts when they walk. So I start by having them “walk” more and more gradually with their skis on while standing on flat ground and going nowhere. Students can be reminded to lead with their heads, just as you would when teaching them a lunge or a first step in walking. Pretty soon, they’ll be doing it more smoothly and feeling good about themselves. Then I tell them: “now try exactly the same thing as you move downhill.” What is wonderful about this is that the only stimulus that has changed is their downhill motion, and that is precisely what I want them to inhibit reacting to. I have had excellent results with this kind of teaching so far. In a workshop setting I would complement this approach with traditional chair and table work before and after our winter’s day on the slopes. That way, students can be inhibiting and going up before they ski, and can take time to sort themselves out after their ski day is over.

Many Alexander teachers I have spoken to have hesitated to try skiing for fear of injuring themselves, often because of past experience of having done just that. The choice of whether to engage or re-engage in such an activity should obviously not be ruled by fear, but by conscious consideration. Of course skiing poses risks, but so does riding a bicycle or stepping off a curb. Snow is generally softer to fall on than pavement, and much of the risk in either case depends on how the activity is done. If injury does occur, the Technique has unparalleled strength in speeding recovery and helping one learn from the experience, and if injury has occurred in the past, it is a trustworthy companion to trauma recovery. Currently the most common ski injury is sprain to the knee’s anterior cruciate ligament, which mainly happens while resisting falling backwards in the skier’s dilemma already described. Modern ski safety bindings have eliminated most of the catastrophic injuries that used to plague skiing, but this is one injury that

is really determined by a skier's use. An Alexander approach to skiing should go a long way toward lowering the risk of that.

I believe the world of skiing and the world of the Alexander Technique have much to gain from each other. Practitioners of the Alexander Technique can take joy in improving their own ability to ski, and will probably come away from the experience with a far more dynamic and mobile understanding of the Technique itself, especially since the controlled free fall of skiing lets them play with balance in ways that can't be done on dry ground.

My own learning of the Technique took time, and its effects on my skiing were not apparent at first. My early experiments in applying it brought some new freedom and playfulness to my skiing. Then I began to notice my knees seemed more flexible as I skied and I was less sore afterwards. Then I started inventing new moves, including something I called "skiing with my head," which involved generating whole turn arcs by slight shifts in how I inclined my head. It was really fun, and it solved a problem I had always had of how to ski in control through a high-walled chute. It felt like movement of a fish. Slowly, the struggle was ebbing out of how I skied, and I found myself left instead with more and more choices. Do I want to absorb these bumps or fly off the tops of them? Do I want to take this hill in a steady rhythm of turns or do I want my timing to respond to the changing shape of what I am skiing over? What is my whim right now, with this texture of snow and this wind and this sunlight? A palette of choices, like colors from which to create a painting. Subtly, without fully realizing what had happened, my skiing had begun to transform into art.

I call my ski teaching method The Art of Alpine Skiing as a gesture of profound respect for Steven Shaw's The Art of Swimming, which is revolutionizing my own approach to both swimming and how to apply and teach the Technique. I have developed The Art of Alpine Skiing with Steven's very generous encouragement. When the struggle of needless effort is pruned away from skiing, what is left is pure grace, a floating down over snow-covered slopes the way a leaf might fall through an open sky. Skiing can be an art as much as any other, and the Alexander Technique is a welcome companion to any art. Together they can give us an incomparable taste of freedom in action.

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Erik Bendix will lead an Art of Alpine Skiing seminar January 6-13, 2007 on the Hasliberg in Switzerland. Contact him at erikbendix@hotmail.com Erik trained as an Alexander Technique teacher with Frank Ottiwell and with Joan and Alex Murray. He helped organize the 2001 American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique (AmSAT) AGM in Cincinnati. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. This article was originally published in the Summer, 2006 AmSAT News. Website: http://www.movingmoment.com/ski/index.htm