

The Alexander Connection

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Centered Riding integrates many concepts and exercises from the Alexander Technique into its pedagogy and newcomers often wonder at the connections. Have you ever heard (or said) “this horse won’t bend left!” or “this horse won’t canter on the right lead!” (where another rider has no problem or the exact opposite dilemma)? These problems may stem from imbalances in the rider and where the Alexander Technique (AT) can help. AT takes us on a wonderful journey of self-discovery and awareness. Perhaps the most difficult part for most of us is the time it takes to be genuinely still and listen to what your body is truly saying – not our telling it what to do or interpreting things the way we perceive is “right.” Here are some thoughts on AT and CR. While the exercises below will help you to understand the technique, the best way to fully appreciate the Alexander Technique is to take some lessons from a qualified teacher or take an intensive workshop. The words of the teacher will speak to your mind while their hands will gently speak to your body. This will help you make a stronger mind-body connection.

The classic founding principle of the Alexander Technique is if the head and neck are in balance, the rest of the body will react by following a lengthening and widening of the back, bringing the whole body into balance as well. In Centered Riding, we approach this by the basic of centering. Instead of starting with the head and neck, we balance our centers, which in turn make way for the rest of the body to follow suit. It is just a different road to the same destination. Try this:

- Sit on a firm chair or bench where you can find your seat bones
- Find the place where your head balances on top of your neck. It is just between your ears, behind your nose. Envision the little “rockers” that balance your skull on top of your atlas (the uppermost vertebra in your spine)
- These rockers are mirrored in your seat bones, think of balancing both sets of rockers with a little feeling that they are like two magnets with the same polarity, they push away from each other ever so gently.
- Think “allow my neck to be free” – whatever that means to you. Key word – allow Do you notice a little lightness, freedom, ease come into your head-neck relationship? Can you feel that your back wants to lengthen and widen? If so, great. If not, don’t worry. An AT teacher can help you find this. Most people find similar results when they ground and center. The more paths you take to reach a destination, the more choices for movement you create, since riding is dynamic, you give your nervous system more education for coping with the multitude of situations this sport offers.

I think one of the most important things we can learn from the Alexander technique is to really know what we are doing and to what degree. How often are riders complaining that a horse is pulling or leaning on them when in reality it is the rider who has a death grip on the horse? Riding well requires that a rider be “invisible” to the horse when the horse is going well and the way the rider wants him to. The rub comes when we want to initiate a change and “do” more than is needed. This is a demonstration of an important principle of conscious control. This is to say, being in the moment and being aware of not only what you are doing but also how you are doing it. One of the best AT exercises for this is a classic Alexander lie-down or constructive rest, as it is also called. Here are the directions for a basic lie-down, remember, there is nothing to FIX, just NOTICE:

- Lie on the floor, with your knees up and balanced in a semi-supine position
- Place enough books under your head so your face is level, parallel to floor and your neck is free
- Keep your eyes open, if you can
- Lie still, find a place of comfort or ease, mentally go there
- Release into the floor, there is no danger of falling – you are down, let go
- Notice the back of your head, shoulders (whole shoulder blade), back of ribs, pelvis, feet on the floor
- Shoulders release away from one another
- Knees release up toward the ceiling, femurs fall back into pelvis

- Upper arms and forearms both release towards the elbow
- Notice your breathing

Remain lying down; mentally go through your body with attention to noticing what you notice. Go through your body, head to toe, up and down, left and right, comparing, noting. Leave out any judgment or desire to fix anything (that's a HARD one, up to the challenge?). See if you can do this for 15-20 minutes each day. In no time, you will have a better handle on when you are doing nothing and when you are doing something. Take this into your riding by playing with your awareness during your warm-up. Notice your body parts, particularly those you notice most while lying down, the back of your head, the back and bottom of your ribs, the back of your pelvis, and the soles of your feet.

Alexander Technique helps us with our awareness of just what we are doing and how we are doing it. I often hear exasperated new students fretting about how to keep in mind the five basics AND ride. "There's just too much to remember!" is the most frequent complaint. An exercise from an AT teacher is great for working towards understanding how hard it is to block awareness and easy it is to allow it. Start by walking around, it could be indoors or out. Just take time to notice yourself, how you feel on the ground or floor, how the ambient temperature feels on your skin, the light, any scents in the air, and anyone around you as well. Include yourself, your environment and other people or even animals in your immediate vicinity. Enjoy the sensations. Next, just notice yourself and anyone else in your space. Leave out the awareness of your environment. After walking in your space for a few minutes, allow your awareness of the environment return. Next, leave out the other people or animals from your awareness. Walk in your space with just thoughts of yourself and the environment. After walking like this for a while, allow the other people or animals into your awareness again. The last part of the exercise asks you to leave yourself out of the experience, keeping awareness of your environment and other beings in your consciousness. After a few minutes, again allow awareness of all three aspects into your thoughts – yourself, your environment and those around you. Throughout this little game, note how you react, physically and mentally to the challenges of leaving something out of your awareness. Some people have greater ease in eliminating one element or another, but still find leaving out anything was more tiring or difficult than allowing awareness of all three elements. Interesting exercise, it is best done after an Alexander Lie-Down.

I hope this gives you some idea of how the Alexander Technique fits in with Centered Riding. If you want more information, Google "Alexander Technique". There are many good, qualified teachers out there and many articles that you may find help you in your study of both CR and AT. I encourage you to look a little deeper into this modality and discover its application to your riding, teaching and every day activities.