

ExChange

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Utilizing Support



Compassionate Lessons

By Robert Lada

Some time ago, I found myself in my ophthalmologist's office with a problem with one of my retinas. Of course, being a very important doctor, he relied on an assistant to prep me before he, the bigwig, walked into the examining room. The assistant explained what was going to happen during the exam and what the side effects might be from the drops that would be put into my eyes. She answered my questions and made sure I was not only comfortable, but understood everything that was going to happen. Eventually the main man arrived. His exam was competent and quick, and he recommended a course of action, which proved to be effective.

Reflecting on this experience later, to my surprise I realized I preferred the assistant's approach, even though she was at the start of her career with much, much less experience than the doctor I had come to see. Wasn't it possible to be both proficient and caring? What kind of training would I offer my doctor to improve the care he was giving to his patients? What follow are the exercises I have found to address this gap between technical skill and care. I call them Compassion Exercises and use their principles when teaching lessons and classes. We bring our selves, our eyes, our heads, and our hearts to lessons. I want to share and explore some of the approaches I use to uncover a nurturing space for both teacher and student.

My feeling is that compassion is inherent in us all, potentially informing all of our thoughts and actions. It is certainly a subject others have written about and the consensus is that compassion can be the basis for richer interpersonal interactions. As human beings we can learn to experience ourselves compassionately, to see the whole beings we are when interference falls away without losing our identity. As Alexander Technique teachers, we can explore kinesthetically what it means to teach with compassion. We can touch our students compassionately, taking them in the direction they want to go, even if they don't realize it yet.

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Definitions

Compassion is an active choice to want, with others and for others, the alleviation of their suffering. It is a sustained intention to seek the good in others and is characterized by such things as empathy, sympathy, patience, tolerance and understanding. We can say that compassion is gentle concern, a good-hearted activity, a combination of empathy and understanding.

Empathy is seeing the world through the other person's eyes, with patience and sincerity. To have empathy, one feels another's pain. It is walking along beside her as she is and observing her without judgment. A person's capacity for empathy allows him to plan for the future and relate to his future self. Importantly, the ability to relate to another helps you relate to self.

With sympathy, one feels sorry for another's plight, yet remains relatively distant. In common usage, sympathy is usually making known one's understanding of another's unhappiness or suffering, especially when it is grief. One feels empathy when one has "been there" and sympathy when one hasn't.

Compassion Exercises

The following exercises are in no particular order. Each one is independent of the others and can be tried without reference to the rest. By that same token each person's experience with any one of them will be individual. So too are the possibilities. Each exercise will have a section in *italics*, which states the detailed steps in the exercise. The rest of the text will be supporting commentary.

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Exercise 1: Playing with Perception

This exercise is designed to acquaint you with how your awareness can change depending on context. It explores how a person perceives things, the sense of the surrounding space, as well as the limits and colors of awareness. This is most easily a group exercise, but individuals can try it if they are prepared to use their imagination!

Begin by walking around in the space where you all have gathered.

Walking about normally in the room, what is my baseline awareness?

What am I thinking, how am I feeling, what parts of the world and myself am I aware of? Etc.

When I begin to greet and acknowledge others, how does this baseline change?

When I think of myself as an Alexander teacher, how does this baseline change?

When meeting a student, what happens to my perception?

When thinking of compassion, what changes?

Exercise 2: I, too, am that

This is a deceptively simple exercise, but is quite demanding for both teacher and student.

Begin a lesson. Every time either the teacher or the student notices something about the other and remarks on it, also add the phrase "I, too, am that"

Along with honing listening and narrative skills, this exercise gives a teacher a chance to connect more profoundly and completely with the student while still retaining her own separate personality. In my experience, fuller contact with a student can result in a blurring of personal boundaries, which is unhealthy. This exercise can clarify these matters for you.

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Exercise 3: Higher Creative Self

This is an adaption of work Penny O'Connor does in London. It involves a role-playing exercise where you, the reader, act as a teacher.

Begin by teaching a part of a lesson, perhaps working with a chair, as you would normally do it. Then, with another particular AT teacher in mind, teach the same material as s/he would do it. Play with this for a while, switching between the two roles, and see if you can begin to get a feel for what's happening when you play the role of yourself.

Next, cease switching between the two roles and see what it's like to become yourself. Then, step bravely into the unknown and drop the role of yourself, and (with the assistance of another teacher if you're in a training situation), teach that same material. The person who shows up at that moment is, to my mind, the one who abides for you across all time, your higher creative self. See if you can switch between playing the role of yourself and letting your higher creative self emerge as you continue to teach.

This is quite a deep exercise. The closest description of this might be that it feels like the difference between your speaking voice (your normal role) and your singing voice (higher creative self).

Exercise 4: The Little Engine that Couldn't

All too often frustration can override compassion in group teaching situations and the frustration becomes detrimental to everyone involved, even if they didn't realize it at the time.

There are potentially three different roles in this exercise. You play the role of a student who earnestly is trying to learn something particular, but just can't seem to get it no matter what the teacher does. A second role is that of the teacher, trying to teach you the concept. If it's a group situation, the rest of the group would represent the third role that of offering advice to both the teacher and the student.

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Exercise 4: The Little Engine that Couldn't (continued)

The exercise is simple. The teacher will try to get a concept across to you the student, and despite your best efforts you still mess it up.

The group and the person in the teacher role can explore what it's like to be compassionate under difficult circumstances. Can the teacher meet the student where she is, but not join in her self-defeating habits?

A variation of this exercise is where you, the student, rather than trying hard and falling short, has strong ideas about the concept and doesn't want to hear anything the teacher is saying. Can the teacher find an empathetic response that will show you the way to turn "no" into "yes?" or will the teacher try to drive home an agenda?

Exercise 5: Shape Matching

In this exercise, you actually look for a problem that the student is having, but respond to it a little differently.

With your hands on your student, sense a place where she is having difficulties. Rather than fixing her problem, get a sense of the shape that she has assumed because of this problem. It's quite likely a static shape, but there could be movement in it. At any rate, first synchronize with the rhythm of her breathing. Once you've done that, assume the same shape, so that you're living her issue as well as you can. Then, apply your knowledge of the Alexander Technique in yourself and see what happens to that shape and subsequently how your student responds.

Often students are holding and stiff because they don't know what else to do. In this exercise, you use empathy to respect someone else's journey and for an interlude, accompany them on that journey. You may find that you're able to facilitate giving a voice to that part of the student that wants to communicate through this approach.

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Exercise 6: Heart Permeated Seeing

If you have a group, get a partner, as this is a two-person exercise.

For this one, be seated or standing, not too close to each other. We'll be going through a sequence of steps oriented about vision.

First, look at your partner, seeing what you see for a bit and then look away.

Next, look at your partner again, and recognize that you are looking through a palpable space, and then look away.

Next, look at your partner again through that space, and note more exactly where s/he is, perhaps in front of a grey wall, to the side of a decorated table, etc. etc., and then look away.

Next, repeat the same, and specifically realize that this is shared space and that you're both in the same space, and then look away.

Next, repeat, and do whatever works to have your heart influence what you see. It can be your heart supplying the blood that makes this vision possible, it may be the commonality between heart cells and brain cells, it may be your heart allowing your vision to nestle while it's being created, however this plays out for you.

Next, within all of this and as a part of it, bring the ease and movement of the relation between your head, spine, and torso to the forefront of your consciousness by whichever means that you use and see what happens.

Finally, begin to exchange work with your partner and explore.

In my experience, when the freeing response is explicitly invoked, something quite striking happens, but I don't really have any language for it. I find that my thoughts and words become richer and feel that I do a much better job of communicating verbally with my student.

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Exercise 7: Head, Heart, and Gut

My own feeling is that we can do better when all parts of the nervous system are involved in our lessons. The gut has a significant component (enteric nervous system) that is part of the autonomic nervous system, but is separate from parts that affect the heart (sympathetic and parasympathetic).

Working with both yourself and your student, sense the interaction between head, heart, and gut and try to have them line up with each other so that this communication is the richest. It might be easier to sense the head and heart first, and then bring in the gut. You may begin to feel three separate channels that are dancing with each other.

Bringing the gut into this exercise, explicitly gives access to more primitive emotions in my experience. My friends that work with chakras recommend going from the bottom to the top and vice-versa, but I've never had any luck tapping into that.

Exercise 8: Compliments

Set up in pairs. The teacher, after working with the student for a bit, gives the student a compliment verbally about what s/he did. The student's job is to receive the compliment, notice where it registers kinesthetically, and whether it moves once having landed. The student then gives the teacher a compliment and the teacher follows the same process. Keep repeating until both teacher and student are comfortable with the movement of the compliment in the student. Hopefully, the same thing will happen with the teacher as s/he gives the compliment.

Then, do a longer lesson with the teacher's central purpose being to compliment the student when observing anything. The compliments can be silent.

This is another exercise where there is a good deal more than meets the eye. The more I emphasize this approach, the better results I get.

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Exercise 9: Interruptions

When I speak, I get interrupted quite often. I used to get quite annoyed when it happened, and then got annoyed at myself for being annoyed. Having been interrupted, I found myself commenting on the interruption rather than saying what I had to say. By doing this, I undercut my message when I was finally able to speak. I started observing more closely and I noticed the same phenomenon when others were interrupted as well. After a few months, I was able to articulate my goal in this endeavor:

I wanted to be able to be just as committed to completing my thought as not when speaking, which to me meant trying to be in monkey with my speech.

Nice goal, no luck. I tried using traditional AT methods to cope with this, but nothing really worked out. I kept at it however, and when I got nowhere with the effort, I eventually gave up fully and completely. At that moment, an image of the moon shining on a lake came to me and this exercise was born.

When you speak, or take any other action, let your heart illuminate all your movements so that the depth and richness of your action is visible to you.

This attitude, though it's stated quite simply, has deeply changed the way I regard inhibition. It peeled back a layer of end-gaining, especially around speaking, and I have found, subsequently, that when I do say something, my speech more completely expresses the feelings and thoughts I am trying to communicate. It has been my path to an ongoing, moment-to-moment life of inhibition.

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Exercise 10: Creative Role Playing

Here are just some ideas for situations that would evoke compassion that I'm mulling that might turn into exercises, which you can add to your list.

- *Work with someone whose eyes are closed so that they're quite dependent on you.*
- *Work with someone as though it's the very last time that you'll be with them*
- *Work with someone who is the tip of the iceberg. You're familiar with what you're usually aware of, but try to tease out things from other worldviews built from values, beliefs, race, ethnicity, religion, culture, socioeconomic class, age, gender, genetic factors, verbal and nonverbal communication cues*
- *Weave the phrases "thank you" and "I'm sorry" into your lessons. If you get the chance, look up the text of the Australian government's apology to its aboriginal population and see how it influences you.*

Conclusion

Are we born compassionate? I believe so, even though this may become muted as we become adults. I hope these exercises will light the way for you to make compassionate behavior more and more part of your daily life.

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In closing, I would like to leave you with a poem from the American Southwest.

*Take care when you speak in judgment.
Words are powerful weapons that can cause many tragedies.
Never make a person look a fool with your tongue.
Never make a person look small with your big mouth.
A hard word, a sharp word can burn a long time,
Deep in the heart, leaving a scar.
Accept that others think differently,
Feel differently, speak differently.
Be mild and healing with your words.
Words should be lights.
Words should be calm, bring people together, bring peace.
When words are weapons
People face each other like enemies.
Life is too short and the world is too tiny to turn it into a battlefield.*

~ Traditional Hopi Saying

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Bob Lada is a professor at Berklee School of Music in Boston and teaches at the Alexander Technique Center of Cambridge, Chesapeake Bay Alexander Studies, American Repertory Theater, and Harvard Extension School. He also maintains a private practice in Cambridge, MA. Bob has taught workshops throughout the USA and Europe and is a charter member of Alexander Technique International. Bob's background is in athletics and analytics, and he looks at the Technique as a tremendous aid in getting out of one's way in performance situations so that creativity and skill can come through. His perspective on AT is to take all the energy that you use to keep yourself upright and transform it into something that's available for your creativity. He is currently working on videos about the Technique which will be posted on his website: <http://www.rllalex.com/> Email: rllalex@comcast.net

