

Use: Simplicity and Complexity

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by Shula Sendowski

This article looks at the simple yet complex meaning of the term *use* in F.M. Alexander's books and explores the way he and teachers he trained have defined or explained it. Alexander's term *use* signifies something different from the word's usual meanings, such as "employment" or "putting into service" or "utilizing."

In his biography of F.M. Alexander, Michael Bloch wrote that Alexander "found inspiration for both the word and the idea in Shakespeare: 'Speak the speech... trippingly on the tongue.... Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus; but use all gently...' (*Hamlet* Act III, scene ii)."¹ Alexander purposefully chose this simple, non-scientific word to explain the Technique. As he writes in *The Universal Constant in Living*:

I refrain as far as is possible from using such terms as "posture," "mental state," "psycho-logical complexes," "body mechanics," "sub-conscious," or any of the thousand and one labeled concepts, which have, like barnacles, become attached to the complicated idea we have of ourselves owing to the kind of education to which we have been subjected. Instead I prefer to call the psycho-physical organism simply "the self," and to write of it as something "in use" which "functions" and which "reacts." My conception of the human organism or of the self is thus very simple, but can be made difficult by

needless complication resulting from the preconceived ideas which readers bring to it."²

In *The Use of the Self*, written earlier, *use* is dynamic—not mechanical—as well as requiring knowledge. After all, when we use a tool, we have to know what we want to do with it and how to do it. Thus it makes sense that when we use *ourselves*, we have a purpose in mind and know how to go about it. Alexander's *The Use of the Self* introduces the phrases: manner of use, old use, new use, conditions of use, directing the use, employing the use, maintaining use, inhibiting the use, and more.³

Alexander gradually prepares us for the concept of *use* by starting with something even simpler: *doing*. In the beginning of *The Use of the Self*, he describes watching himself to see "what I was doing with myself"⁴ or looking in the mirror to observe his "manner of doing,"⁵ which later on in the book appears as "manner of use." For example, FM teaches his students "to improve and control the Manner of their Use of themselves,"⁶ or he explains how the golfer, with time, will improve the Manner of his Use.⁷

In both *The Use of the Self* and *The Universal Constant in Living*, FM sometimes chooses the word *working*. Examples from the latter include:



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*The evidence should be put to a practical test by observing the nature of the working of the mechanisms of the psycho-physical organism during the consistent application of the procedures of my practice, and if this working leads to the raising of the standard of the general functioning....*⁸

or: “integrated working of the organism” and on the same page: “the integrated working of the psycho-physical mechanism.”⁹ Examples from *The Use of the Self* include “Direction of the working of the mechanism”¹⁰ or “Change in the working.”¹¹

In his introduction to *The Universal Constant In Living*, G.E. Coghill equates *working* with *use* as: “...the manner of working (use) of the mechanism of correct posture,”¹² so we might wonder if FM intended *use* in the simple sense of *working* as well.

But *use* in Alexander’s sense is more complex.

The common understanding of doing something with your arm might be that you are performing a specific task with the arm, and that once the task is over, the *use* is over. This way of looking at movement does not consider that the arm is moving in relationship with the rest of the body, especially with the head, neck, and back. There is no concept that the arm or any other body part—or, indeed, the whole body—is involved at all times, no matter what the activity may be. So, although Alexander chose a simple word to avoid complicated, pre-conceived ideas, his unique meaning of the word still requires explanation:

*I wish to make it clear that when I employ the word “use,” it is not in that limited sense of the use of any specific part, as, for instance, when we speak of the use of an arm or the use of a leg, but in a much wider and more comprehensive sense applying to the working of the organism in general. ...the use of any specific part...involves of necessity bringing into action the different psycho-physical mechanisms of the organism, the concerted activity bringing about the use of the specific part.*¹³

FM asks the reader to look at the whole picture, rather than at the small details. Even though the word *use* is a simple one, the concept is not; in Alexander’s work, the word requires a sophisticated way of looking at movement, whether large muscular action or subtle, quiet coordination that seems to lack overt movement.

This “whole picture” perspective encourages a general application of the word *use*. Alexander clarifies that *use*—or as he sometimes calls it “general use”—in a comprehensive sense—is a concerted activity and that it applies to the working of the organism in general. The reader will find expressions such as “general wrong use,” or “improved use of himself generally,” or “satisfactory standard of general use.”¹⁴

Alexander repeatedly explains the difference between the use of specific part or parts versus the use of the unified whole. For example:

“Even though the word *use* is a simple one, the concept is not; in Alexander’s work the word requires a sophisticated way of looking at movement....”

*It is important to remember that there is a working balance in the use of all the parts of the organism, and that for this reason the use of the specific part (or parts) in any activity can influence the use of the other parts and vice versa.*¹⁵

Or:

*Where the direction is satisfactory, satisfactory use of the mechanism of the organism as a working unity will be ensured involving a satisfactory use of the different parts such as the arms, wrists, hands, legs, feet, and eyes.*¹⁶

In these passages, he tries to clarify and simplify something that might be clear for those who practice the Alexander Technique but obscure for those who have never had this experience. Part of the difficulty is that in many places he repeatedly relies on the word *use* itself to carry his meaning.

Here, though, FM explains that both mental and physical aspects participate in the activity of lifting an arm—without relying on the word *use*:

*If we consider what happens between the receipt of a stimulus to lift the arm and the performance of the act, we shall see that a concerted activity takes place which brings into play not only the processes which most people...regard as “physical” but also the processes which they regard as “mental.” The result of the receipt of a stimulus to lift the arm is...a “mental” conception of the act of lifting the arm, this conception being followed by another so-called “mental” process, that of giving or withholding consent to react to the stimulus to lift the arm. If this consent is withheld, the reaction which would result in lifting the arm is inhibited, and the arm is not lifted. If consent is given, the direction of the mechanisms required for the act of lifting the arm becomes operative, and messages are sent out which bring about the contraction of certain groups of muscles and the relaxation of others, and the arm is lifted.*¹⁷

This is a clear and detailed description of taking an action from the very beginning of receiving the stimulus through inhibition and direction, all the way to the final act of lifting (or not lifting) the arm. Is this a description of *use*—even though that word does not appear anywhere in it? If we consider *use* as the whole process of receiving a stimulus, deciding to act/not act on it, inhibiting, directing, and taking action, then the description above is indeed one of *use*.

But Alexander also writes that *use* needs to be directed: “In most people their direction of the use of themselves is habitual and instinctive.”¹⁸ In describing his own process of discovery, Alexander acknowledges, “I had to admit that I had never thought out how I directed the use of myself, but that I used

myself habitually in the way that *felt natural* to me.”¹⁹ *Use*, in this case, does not reflect a whole process of action, but appears more as a part of an action—one ingredient in the action—that is shaped by direction, as well as by inhibition.²⁰

Alexander sometimes distinguishes between *use* and *energy*.

*When I employ the words... “I directed the use”...I wish to indicate the process involved in projecting messages from the brain to the mechanisms and in conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms.*²¹

However, in two other remarks *use* and *energy* appear to mean the same thing. In the story of the golfer, he says, “It is not the degree of ‘willing’ or ‘trying,’ but the way in which the energy is directed, that is going to make the ‘willing’ or ‘trying’ effective.”²² In the story of the stutterer, we are reminded of the need for

“It is not the degree of ‘willing’ or ‘trying’, but the way in which the energy is directed, that is going to make the ‘willing’ or ‘trying’ effective.”

1. *the inhibition of the instinctive direction of energy associated with familiar sensory experiences of wrong habitual use, and*
2. *the building up in its place of a conscious direction of energy through the repetition of unfamiliar sensory experiences associated with new and satisfactory use.*

In the next paragraph, he continues: “This process of directing energy out of familiar into new and unfamiliar paths as a means of changing the manner of reacting to stimuli...”²³

In these passages, we see that energy must be consciously directed in new pathways for *use* to change. But at the same time we also see that *use* appears to function as energy. Directing energy is what makes our “willing” or “trying” effective. Directing energy is what affects our reactions. It is interesting to note that Walter Carrington, who was FM’s teaching assistant for many years, confirms a connection between energy and use:

*The process of conducting the energy, that is what use is all about. It is a process that neither theoretically nor practically do we understand extremely well, but it is such an essential process, that we really do need to study it and understand it better.*²⁴

If we look at books by teachers trained by Alexander as well as more contemporary teachers, we see other ways of introducing and clarifying *use*. Here are a few examples:

Frank Pierce Jones, who was trained by A.R. Alexander, describes *use* as the total pattern of response to stimuli²⁵ in his 1979 book *Body Awareness in Action*. In the same book, Jones says, “Use describes the total pattern of behavior in the ongoing present. ...use of all parts of the organism acting in concert.”²⁶

The glossary of *Connected Perspectives*, a 2015 book of essays by contemporary Alexander Technique teachers, also associates “use of the self” with behavior: Use (of the self) is “The total pattern of behaviour.”²⁷ FM explains “human reaction” as “behaviour” in *The Universal Constant in Living*²⁸

and closely associates “reaction” with “use,” as in the case of the golfer who is unable to keep his eye on the ball due to his misdirected use.²⁹

Connected Perspectives includes “coordination” as well as “behavior” when explaining *use* in the glossary of the book: Use is “the way that we employ and coordinate ourselves (our awareness, intentions, and the body as a whole) in our everyday acts.”³⁰

In the glossary of his book *The Alexander Principle*, first-generation teacher Dr. Wilfred Barlow also alludes to coordination. He defines use as “the characteristic and habitual way of using and moving the body. The relation of one part of the body to another part in response to circumstances and the

environment.”³¹ He discusses “body-use” shaping the structure of our personality³² and employs the terms “muscular use,”³³ “muscular usage,” and “use-structure” in addition to

plain use. He talks about “the new desired use,”³⁴ “the new desired use-structure,” and “desired use-structure.”³⁵ His definition and explanations apparently limit *use* to its musculoskeletal and kinesthetic meaning.

Barlow avoids general expressions like inhibiting “habits of use” or “habitual use,” or “misdirected use” that are common in *The Use of the Self*.³⁶ Instead, he talks about “inhibiting habitual responses”³⁷ or “inhibiting the doing of the movement,”³⁸ “stopping immediate reaction and inhibiting the stimulus,”³⁹ not end-gaining,⁴⁰ “inhibiting immediate muscular response,”⁴¹ or saying “No” to an “action which one has decided in advance to carry out.”⁴²

In *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, first generation teacher Patrick Macdonald writes, “If a person whose body is badly oriented, what Alexander described as having a ‘bad use of the self’ performs the act of sitting....” Macdonald goes on to define “wrong use” very precisely: “pulling the head back and down, hollowing the back...excessive downward pressure...”⁴³ “Good use,” on the other hand, is described as “maintaining a solid back and a certain upflow of the body.”⁴⁴ The “manner of use” that we see in *The Use of the Self* becomes “manner of behaviour”⁴⁵ and “behaviour patterns”⁴⁶ in Macdonald’s book.

The Alexander Technique by Judith Leibowitz and Bill Connington has no explanation of what *use* means, and the word does not appear in the index at the end of the book. Leibowitz and Connington refer to habitual and immediate “responses,” “attitudes,” “patterns of behavior,” and the objective “to maintain the poise of the head on top of the lengthening spine in movement and at rest.” The authors explain inhibition, direction, and sensory awareness without mentioning the word *use*, but rather with other words.⁴⁷

Today’s teachers, faced with explaining the meaning of *use* to students coming from diverse backgrounds and professions, have many options to choose from. While many teachers are convinced that *use* cannot be replaced by any other word, looking back at the history, we can see that other terms have been employed to clarify its meaning. The question is whether we find it helpful to take advantage of terms that other teachers have employed to explain Alexander’s sophisticated ideas in simple language.

I think that this question is particularly relevant in today's complex world, for our ability to communicate the concept of *use* is key to addressing the problem of self-control. As John Dewey wrote,

*In the present state of the world, it is evident that the control we have gained of physical energies, heat, light, electricity, etc., without having first secured control of our use of ourselves is a perilous affair. Without control of our use of ourselves, our use of other things is blind; it may lead to anything.*⁴⁸

Endnotes

1. Michael Bloch, footnote in *F.M.: The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 28.
2. F.M. Alexander, in "Introductory Notes," *The Universal Constant in Living* (Downey, CA: Centerline Press, 1941), xxxvi.
3. F.M. Alexander, *The Use of the Self*, (Downey, California: Centerline Press, 1984) "new use": 28–31; 35; "directing the use": 20–23, 31–32; 40; "condition of use": 35, 40; "employing the use": 53; "maintaining use": 34–35; "inhibiting the use": 73; "habits of use": 64; "manner of use": 65.
4. Alexander, *Use*, 16.
5. Ibid., 9.
6. Ibid., 39.
7. Ibid., 65.
8. Alexander, *Universal Constant*, xxxii–xxxiii.
9. Ibid., xxxix.
10. Alexander, *Use*, 23.
11. Ibid., 45.
12. Alexander, *Universal Constant*, xxiii.
13. Alexander, footnote in *Use*, 4.
14. Alexander, *Use*, "general wrong use": 19; "the new and improved use of himself generally": 79; "Satisfactory control of the act of speaking demands a satisfactory standard of general use": 86.
15. Ibid., 78.
16. Ibid., 56.
17. Ibid., 43.
18. Ibid., 44.
19. Ibid., 20–21. See also "man's direction of his use": 22; "instinctive direction of use": 23; "reasoning direction of the new use": 31–32; "conscious direction leading to a new use": 40; "misdirection of use": 41; "he will react to the stimulus...by the same misdirected use of himself": 51.
20. Ibid., 73. FM gives the stutterer directions "for the inhibition of the wrong habitual use of his mechanisms." See also "inhibiting the unsatisfactory habits of use associated with habitual reaction": 64; and, the pupil, in early lessons "fails to inhibit the old instinctive direction of his use": 82.
21. Ibid., 20.
22. Ibid., 57. The remark is at the bottom of the page.
23. Ibid., 87.
24. Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud: Talks on Teaching the Alexander Technique*, ed. Jerry Sontag (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1994), 22.
25. Frank Pierce Jones, *Body Awareness in Action* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 46. "The term 'use' covers the total pattern that characterizes a person's responses to stimuli."
26. Ibid., 196.
27. Claire Rennie, Tanya Shoop, and Kamal Thapen, eds., *Connected Perspectives* (London: Hite, 2015), 336.
28. Alexander, in "Introductory," *Universal Constant*, xlii. "understanding towards the question of the control of human reaction (behaviour) so completely changed."
29. Alexander, *Use*, 51.
30. Rennie et al, *Connected Perspectives*, 336.
31. Wilfred Barlow, *The Alexander Principle*, (London: Arrow Books, 1987; London: Victor Gallancz, 1973), 209.
32. Ibid., 19.
33. Ibid., 162.
34. Ibid., 107.
35. Ibid., "the new desired use structure": 108; "use-structure": 162.
36. Alexander, *Use*, "stopping misdirected use": 57; "inhibiting wrong habitual use": 73; "giving up on habits of use": 64; "inhibiting old instinctive direction of use": 82.
37. Barlow, *Alexander Principle*, 178.
38. Ibid., 166.
39. Ibid., 174.
40. Ibid., 159. "First the subject must learn not to 'End-gain': and this will require what Alexander called 'Inhibiting.'" In *The Use of the Self*, Alexander writes about inhibiting our desire to gain the end, for example, in the case of the golfer's need to inhibit his desire to make a good stroke. See Alexander, *Use*, 61.
41. Ibid., 161.
42. Ibid., 208.
43. Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, (Brighton, UK: Rahula Books, 1989), 66.
44. Ibid., 69.
45. Ibid., 40.
46. Ibid., 53.
47. Judith Leibowitz and Bill Connington, *The Alexander Technique*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 44–55.
48. John Dewey, introduction to the first edition (1932), in F.M. Alexander, *Use*, xviii.

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