

Alexander's Discoveries about Movement of the Self (Zones -1 through -X) and the Twelve Principles of Permaculture Compared

I want to say that exercise—weightlifting, running, and so on—are like conventional agriculture. We see that plants need NPK, we synthesize those and dump them on and presto! The plants grow bigger. We see they are eaten by pests or smothered by weeds—we make poisons.

Then there is organic—let's not make war and not make artificial props. We'll do the elaborate rituals of movement that mimic nature—using poop from animals to fertilize, using brute force and labor to get the weeds out, using nature's poisons instead of those of our own genius. I want to say this is yoga (“yoga”—as it is practiced and taught in the West—poses, etc.), and physical therapy.

Next we have permaculture—and at its best, this is about observation and doing nothing that would *seem* like a good idea but is really less intelligent than what nature was already doing anyway. This is the most like Alexander's discoveries about the self.

How do we apply the principles of non-doing, non-interference, observation, to the self, to zones “negative one”(-1), “negative two”, “negative three”? We will need a mirror.

Alexander was an actor who lost his voice. Doctors' advice failed him, and resting did not work, so he said he would figure it out for himself. He observed his speaking in mirrors and found that he had a habit of moving whenever he was about to speak that could clearly, directly be seen to be squashing his voice box, leading to the pain.

He then had the more complex task of finding a way of changing habits. Because just knowing he was doing this didn't make it possible for him to stop doing it. In fact, what he saw in the mirrors differed from what he thought he felt he was doing.

But he did find he could change his habits by broadening his perspective, by changing his general way of coordinating himself rather than trying to change only the specific way he did the one activity of speaking.

In all of this, many of the principles of what we call permaculture are evident.

In this article I'm going to go through one of the standard articulations of the principles of permaculture, David Holmgren's, and talk about how this principle is similar to Alexander's

discoveries.

1. *Observe and Interact* — “*Beauty is in the mind of the beholder*”

By taking the time to engage with nature we can design solutions that suit our particular situation.

How do I move? I can base this on habit or on deliberate choice. Let me observe how I am moving before trying to jump to a conclusion about how to fix it: oh, am I gripping the toothbrush with more force than is needed? Am I tensing up my legs while typing, without really having a clear sense of why I'm doing that? What do I observe about my whole self, not just the part that seems immediately related to the activity (the point of contact between my toothbrush and my teeth)? Am I holding tension in my shoulder I don't need? My legs? My toes? Again, Before doing something about it, let me see if my observation, by way of a mirror or a video of myself, actually matches what I think I am feeling. Alexander observed himself for years in a mirror in order to discover the subtle patterns of movement involved in all of the larger more obvious movements. He discovered what ways of moving were more in accord with nature's design—less pressure on the larynx, more direct relevance to his goal of speaking.

2. *Catch and Store Energy* — “*Make hay while the sun shines*”

By developing systems that collect resources when they are abundant, we can use them in times of need.

We have “energy” supporting us constantly, and we tend to waste much of it by doing more than we need to. The reflex support—that buoyancy that moves children and herons and even plants up in gravity—does its job far more easily than voluntary muscle. Moving with timing is much easier and more efficient than moving against our timing. It may be easier to understand this as a gestalt, a sense of the “presence” or “quality” of movement of a dog or cat, the sense that they are present in this moment and not wasting energy by worrying about something conjectured in the future. In movement, the idea of “storing” energy is not quite accurate, because if we “do” something to hold onto it we actually interfere with it more. But the idea of coordinating with the timing of availability of energy is apt.

3. *Obtain a yield* — “*You can't work on an empty stomach*”

Ensure that you are getting truly useful rewards as part of the working you are doing.

We can get pleasure from movement itself. A happy journey to a happy destination. The feelings of “irritation and pressure” most people experience most of the day, Alexander said, are optional rather than inevitable. And at the same time we get our goals done. We don't always have to sacrifice our goals (stopping work, taking a break, retreating from life) in order to have more of a yield in movement. We can have this yield within the movements and activities and goal pursuits we're engaged in already. I can do the dishes in a more coordinated way; I can type these words in a more coordinated way.

4. *Apply Self-Regulation and Accept Feedback* — “*The sins of the fathers are visited on the children of the seventh generation*”

We need to discourage inappropriate activity to ensure that systems can continue to function well. Negative feedback is often slow to emerge.

Pain is information. It is—very frequently—telling us that we're using ourselves in ways not in accord with our design. Our thinking and our movement (these are inseparable) are not in alignment with our actual needs. Instead of pushing through, we need to observe, and have a more open mind about what the feedback is telling us. If we learn a “fix” to how to move and the pain continues, or a new pain arises, that's feedback!

5. *Use and Value Renewable Resources and Services* — “*Let nature take its course*”

Make the best use of nature's abundance to reduce our consumptive behavior and dependence on non-renewable resources.

Renewable—the slow-twitch fiber that supports us in gravity is more like a renewable resource than the fast-twitch, voluntary movement fiber. It is non-fatiguing.

6. *Produce No Waste* — “*Waste not, want not*” or “*A stitch in time saves nine*”

By valuing and making use of all the resources that are available to us, nothing goes to waste.

Along with #3—we can't capture energy beyond what the body-mind naturally has and makes available. And we don't need to. But we can stop throwing it away. This gets to the heart of the Technique—it is a non-doing, it is turning the dial closer to doing less. The less voluntary movement interferes with nature's design the more the energy is made available for doing.

More than focusing on not producing wasted movement (which entails the problem of not thinking of a pink elephant), getting free of the assumption that you need to use so much effort to accomplish things, having a more open mind on this point, is of benefit.

7. *Design From Patterns to Details* — “*Can't see the forest for the trees*”

By stepping back, we can observe patterns in nature and society. These can form the backbone of our designs, with the details filled in as we go.

The whole self is involved in any particular movement. We aren't just moving an arm to the keyboard to type, we're also rebalancing ourselves to keep from falling over while doing so: moving our legs, moving our spines, moving deep muscle as well as superficial. The involuntary muscle is a part of the self as much as the voluntary. The “involuntary self”—the reflex—is a part of the whole self. Understanding the self as a unity of body and mind, of involuntary and voluntary, gives us an accurate picture of the pattern from which we can sense what's appropriate or relevant to the task at hand.

8. *Integrate Rather Than Segregate* — “*Many hands make light work*”

By putting the right things in the right place, relationships develop between those things and they work together to support each other.

Internally, we need to coordinate our whole selves (or allow the coordination of our whole selves) rather than artificially conceiving of only a part as magically working in isolation from the whole. We are best served by including outside and inside both. When we start to investigate the self, it is tempting to separate our focus from the world around us. But this study of self is not intended to be a study in isolation from the world. It is intended to be fully connected to the life we are living, the goals we have out in the world. We notice our neck AND the toothbrushing. We notice the room around us AND the feeling of ease in the body. This doesn't need to be a big deal, it isn't a matter of strenuous effort, it is simply not squeezing our attention in, narrowing in to just one thing. Alexander was trying to change the fundamental nature of education itself as well. We as a society have mostly been trained to learn in a school environment that tells us to narrow our focus, so it takes getting used to the opposite. Unlike “putting things in the right relationships” we are interested here simply in not taking them away from the right relationships they were already in in the first place.

9. *Use Small and Slow Solutions* — “*Slow and steady wins the race*” or “*The bigger they are, the harder they fall*”

Small and slow systems are easier to maintain than big ones, making better use of local resources and produce more sustainable outcomes.

The idea of focus on the way is applicable here. Rushing to the finishing of a goal at the expense of the way there means a net loss. Allowing enough time to get there has more of the use of the "local resource" of one's primary movement, the reflex support. However, Alexander's discoveries don't require slowness to be used—we simply need to not "hurry," where "hurry" is way of doing based on flawed premises. We can move quickly; athletes can use the discoveries in fast action while not interfering with reflex support. Alexander observed that runners, nearing the finish line, and attempting to put on a last burst of speed, would pull their heads back and strain in such a way that they worked against themselves exactly. You might say that the belief in hurry is a kind of superstition. A gazelle runs fast, but generally doesn't hurry.

10. *Use and Value Diversity — "Don't put all your eggs in one basket"*

Diversity reduces vulnerability to a variety of threats and takes advantage of the unique nature of the environment in which it resides. There is naturally occurring diversity in our movements if we're not narrowing our way of moving in to a small set of movements—by holding rigidly to learned ideas of how to move. All of us have these ideas—obvious ones include "sit up straight," "look alive," "pay attention"—all psychophysical attitudes; and, more generally, "always work hard." But the diversity of ways of moving, of subtle movements within our daily activities, are thereby reduced. To take a more obvious, crude example: if one is "always working hard" by holding the breath in and refusing to allow full exhale and release of the diaphragm, then this will result in a lack of variety of movement in the patterns of breath. A direct result of this is a reduction of the variation of pressure on the other organs—what Alexander called in internal massage of the intestines, liver, etc. This deprives these other organs of their stimulation and aid to the movement of fluids through them. The medical benefit or necessity of this is a subject beyond the present paper, but if you take as desirable the general idea of diversity and natural state of affairs as a non-sitting-up-straight, well-mannered animal, you can see how an arbitrary interference with this pattern of movement would be a loss.

11. *Use Edges and Value the Marginal — "Don't think you are on the right track just because it's a well-beaten path"*

The interface between things is where the most interesting events take place. These are often the most valuable, diverse and productive elements in the system.

The moments of transition are important. Frank Pierce Jones described the postural patterns as "preceding and accompanying a movement." For example, if I'm sowing a seed, the movement of my arm starts when I have a conception of "I want to move my arm to sow this seed," then (if I'm like most people), "OK, let me tense up between my head and my spine to get control of my arm, then push it forward, then drop the seed, etc." That moment of transition is a moment when I've gotten habituated to making an extra effort—and if at that moment, at the "edge" of the new segment of time, instead of putting that effort into micromanaging the movement, I let my reflex support inform the movement, then the movement is easier and gentler on my system.

12. *Creatively Use and Respond to Change — "Vision is not seeing things as they are but as they will be"*

We can have a positive impact on inevitable change by carefully observing and then intervening at the right time.

Intervening at the right time—the study of conscious body-mind movement "gives" us awareness of the usually hidden segment of time between stimulus and response. That one moment when instead of reacting in habit we sense the availability of a nanosecond of choice. If every time that person has criticized me for being unproductive I have tensed up between my head and spine before and during the next segment of time in my saying something in reaction, and in my physical tension have therefore felt deserving of that criticism and decided to try a little harder—having a moment where I can choose instead not to feel at ease and not give agreement to the critic's viewpoint is invaluable.

A word on privilege: in my country we have been having more of a conversation about privilege recently; and in fact our country is founded on the idea "that all men [and all persons] are created equal." What is unequal among us is distribution of things we have, things outside ourselves. Even if we were all homesteaders, some of us might have better soil or climates than others.

What would always be equal would be our choices in response to conditions.

The well-coordinated have more ease and less injury. Whether you are rich or poor, you alone get to choose whether you allow your postural reflex to support you in gravity or try to do its job for it.

I am not saying that this eliminates the entire issue of privilege and external wealth.

However, I am saying there is an observable, physically measurable (to a great extent), internal factor that we have, as a society, not paid much attention to at all. For a long time, I perceive, the well-off have been getting weller and the ill have been getting iller. The people with the most kinesthetic (inside the body) awareness have sought out movement education much more than those who have less of this awareness. In fact, the people who've been getting the most out of an Alexander Technique learning session are those who have trained for 1600 hours to teach.

But it doesn't have to be this way. This resource is available to anyone, anywhere, at any time, anyone who has a body and a mind. In fact, only those with absolutely no motor neurons are bereft of this, I don't know enough about their situation to speak to it.

Anyone who can read can read Alexander's books, or Frank Pierce Jones's research (my recommendation), and can decline to hold excess tension preceding and during movements.