

YOGA

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LOVE, LIVE & LET LIVE

Partner
Yoga

HAPPY
Valentine's
DAY

The
Alexander
Technique

Yoga in Prison

Children's
Mental Health
& Yoga

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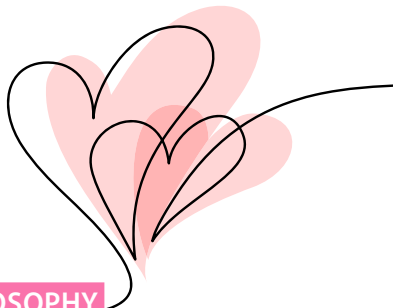
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On Cover: Eli & Patrick @wildsoulsretreats
Mat: Move Breathe www.decommune
Yoga Set: Spica www.shopspica.com



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Transform Your Yoga Practice With

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Words: Richard Brennan & Kecia Chin

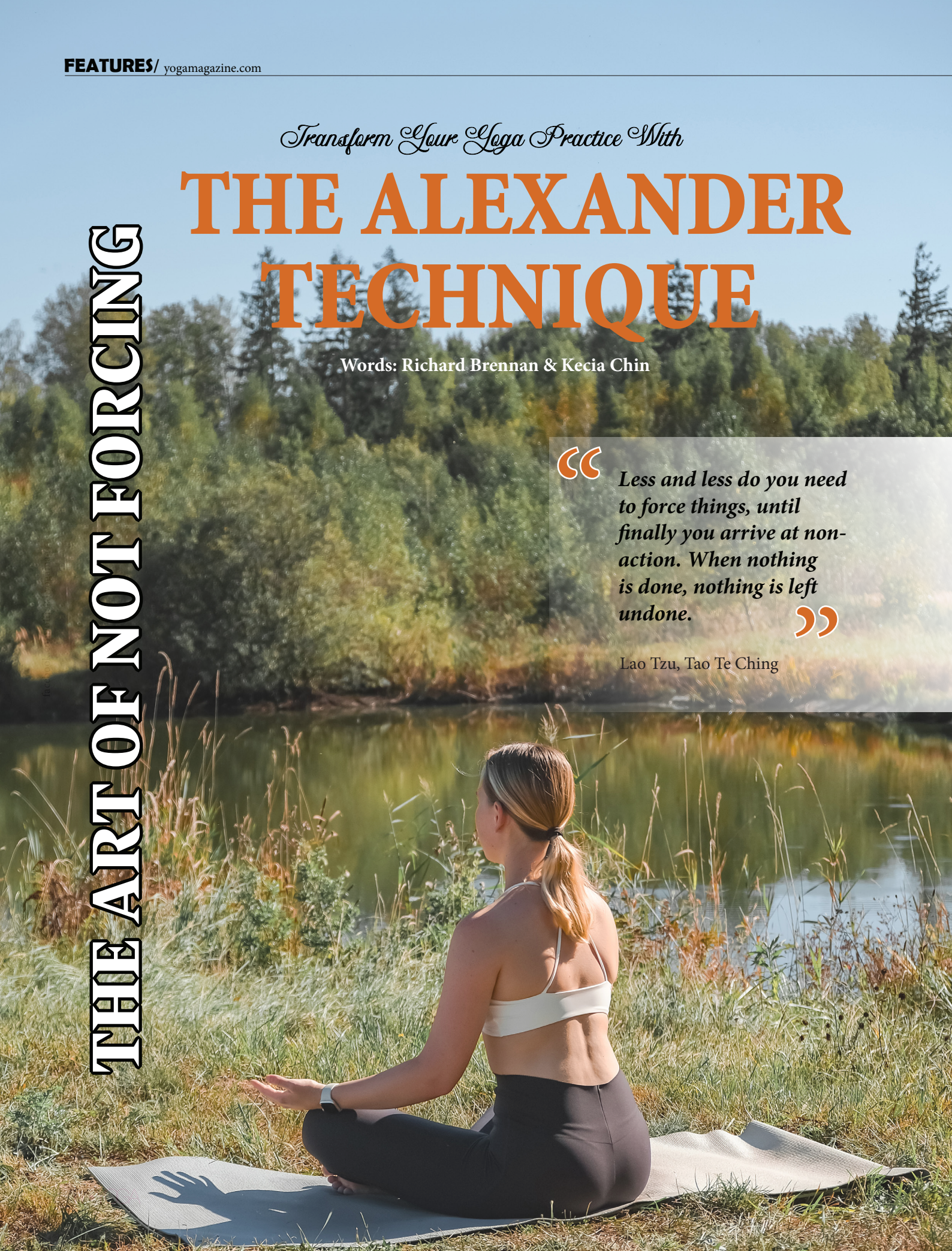
THE ART OF NOT FORCING

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Less and less do you need to force things, until finally you arrive at non-action. When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.

”

Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching



Since the 1970s yoga and the Alexander Technique have been deeply intertwined though very few people understand or even know about this connection. Both disciplines aim to enhance awareness of breathing, movement and presence fostering a sense of mind-body unity in many areas of life. Some of the earliest yoga teachers in the UK went on to also train as Alexander teachers during the 1970s to improve their practice which also enhanced the quality of their yoga teaching. The goals of yoga and the Alexander technique are remarkably similar and when used together they create a powerful synergy. Over the years many people have found that applying the Alexander principles to their yoga practice has led to significant improvements, but what exactly is this elusive Technique and how does it work?



THINKING IN ACTIVITY

The Alexander Technique does not teach any specific (correct) positions or movements; instead, it teaches a person how to move effortlessly with poise, grace, and ease, transforming each yoga posture (*asana*) into a dynamic expression of connection to your whole self and the universal oneness. To understand this practically requires examining exactly how we move.

It is widely known that muscles contract (shorten) to cause movement. The contraction of any muscle pulls on the tendon causing our bones to move, acting as a lever. Muscles always work in pairs; as one set of muscles contract while the opposite set of muscles lengthen. The contracting muscle is called the agonist, while the muscle that is relaxing or lengthening is called the antagonist. The main difference is that they perform opposite functions during movement.

However, Alexander realised that movement could be initiated by the antagonist muscle. This revelation has profound implications on how we move making it a powerful insight for enhancing yoga practice. Initiating a movement with the antagonist instead of the agonist allows for a greater range of movement with less effort significantly reducing strain on the body. This effortless way of moving is evident when watching a young child walking, jumping and running with balance, grace and ease. While tensing to initiate a movement may be faster especially in protective situations, releasing into movement can help to perform *asanas* more effectively with minimal effort.

For example, consider lifting an arm during the *Surya Namaskar* (Sun Salutations) sequence. Most people lift their arms without much thought. However, if we allow the antagonistic muscles to initiate the action it creates a lengthening effect making the movement smoother and more efficient. In Alexander practice this is achieved by first thinking of the underside of your arm lengthening before actually moving it.

PAUSING BEFORE MOVEMENT

One of the Alexander Technique's core principles is to avoid trying too hard to achieve a goal Alexander referred to this process as Inhibition - a pause that allows you to first think, plan and choose the best way to perform an action before actually doing it. This is a practical application of '*sthira sukham*' - a state of balance between effort and ease, which is essential for mindful awareness in any yoga practice. Inhibition can also be applied to everyday actions like taking a step or getting up from a chair.

The word inhibition here does not imply a suppression of feelings as Freud used it. Rather it's like a cat pausing when it first sees a mouse; it waits while choosing the best moment to pounce. When applying the Alexander Technique to yoga it is beneficial to allow plenty of time between each *asana* and pausing briefly at the beginning of each movement allows you to begin from a place of stillness which in turn allows you to be connected to yourself

and your environment. This lets you start each asana in tune with mind, breathing, and body and lets you synchronise your movements with the breath creating a practice that is not only more effective; it also will create a presence that can prevent personal injury. As a result, your yoga practice will be much more beneficial and enjoyable.

It is crucial to understand that each muscle has a stretch reflex; when a muscle is overstretched or stretched too quickly it contracts reflexively to prevent injury. Moving slowly and mindfully in asanas not only enhances your range of movement, but also aligns you with a greater consciousness and connectedness.

UNRELIABLE SENSORY PERCEPTION

One fundamental concept the Alexander Technique brings to yoga is the awareness of unreliable sensory perception. Simply put we often think or feel we are doing one thing when in fact we may be doing something entirely different. Alexander discovered this through personal experience around 1890 when he struggled with voice and breathing issues as an actor. He was observing himself in a mirror for a solution to his curious problem when he realised he was pulling his head back with a great deal of force which he had not been aware of before. Even when he tried to correct this, he did the exact opposite and pulled his head back even further which only worsened the condition. Alexander initially thought that this unreliable sensory perception was a personal idiosyncrasy, but when he started to teach others he discovered that this is practically universal. In yoga, this means that when you try to follow your yoga teacher's instructions without knowing that your own sensory feedback is inaccurate, you might be doing something quite

different from what you feel. Learning and applying the Alexander Technique enables you to improve your asanas naturally, relying less on 'feeling' and more on clear external intent.

GIVING DIRECTIONS

Another fundamental Alexander principle that can enhance your yoga practice is called 'giving directions'. These are mental instructions given to specific parts of the body you wish to engage differently. For instance, you can direct your fingers to lengthen, or you can think your entire rib cage or back expanding. Giving directions can also facilitate your movement through space by consciously deciding how to move before any given action. Giving 'directions' is an actual experience that takes time to master. Most people need Alexander's lessons to learn this sufficiently. It is essential to only 'think' the directions rather than actively do them. This will enable you to achieve freedom and ease throughout any

movement making your yoga practice more effective.

A DEMONSTRATION OF THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE IN YOGA

In 1989, Dr. Chris Stevens, an Alexander teacher and one of the earliest yoga instructors in the UK, vividly demonstrated the application of Alexander principles to yoga. In preparation for *Bhujangasana* (Cobra Pose), he lay on the floor, pausing for an astonishing full two minutes, to channel his breathing and give himself directions. Then, with a quick, fluid motion, he spontaneously adopted the cobra pose which resembled a poised snake - it was really very impressive. The precision and the mindfulness in movement he exhibited was a striking example of the power of the combination of yoga and the Alexander Technique.





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SERENITY IN PRACTICE

When you move intending to release into action rather than force it, yoga becomes more relaxed and gratifying. This approach also helps prevent strain on your muscles and joints, allowing you to experience the serenity and aliveness that are central to the aims of yoga. Rather than obsessing over “perfect” postures, you can focus on achieving a state of oneness in both your practice and daily life.

As Alexander once said, “My Technique can improve anything you do. If you are a thief, I can make you a better thief.” If you do yoga, the Alexander Technique can enhance your practice in transformative ways.



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Richard Brennan has been teaching the Alexander Technique full time for over 35 years. He travels extensively internationally giving workshops, talks and interviews about the Technique. His eight books on the Alexander Technique, posture and health, which have been translated into 22 languages, have sold over 250,000 copies worldwide. His 9th book, *Evolved to Move*, is set for publication in summer 2025. Richard is based in Galway, Ireland where he directs the Alexander Teacher Training College.

Kecia Chin qualified as an Alexander Technique Teacher in 1999 from ACAT New York. She teaches in both private practice and groups in New York and is also a certified yoga instructor with expertise in Hatha, Vinyasa, and Bikram yoga. She integrates yoga and Alexander Technique to manage postural issues and prevent pain and injury. She also uses the Schroth Yoga method and has designed specific yoga asanas for those suffering from scoliosis. Kecia is currently working on a book

about the benefits of combining the Alexander Technique with the practice of yoga. She is the assistant director at the Alexander Training in Galway Ireland and collaborates internationally with Richard teaching a combination of yoga and the Alexander Technique

For further information please email: info@alexander.ie or visit: www.alexander.ie

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