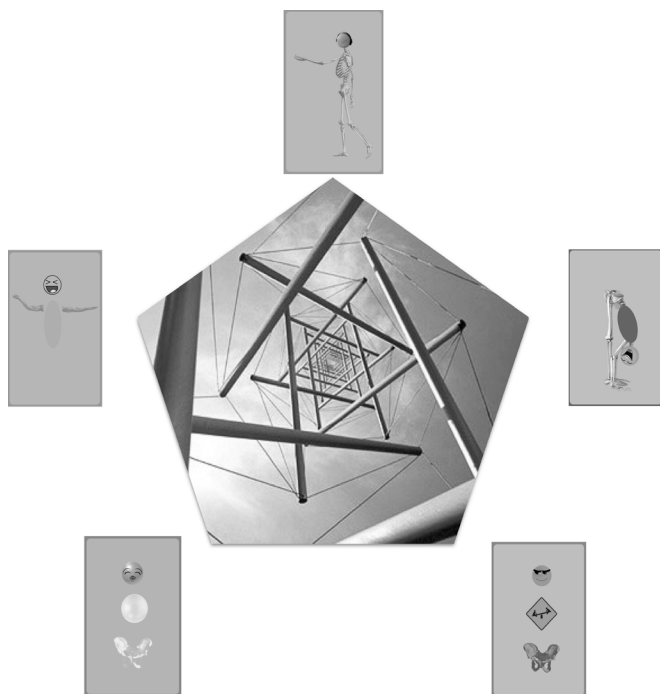


Qualities of Being

by Sandra Bain Cushman



THE FIVE RELATIONS make available to us a simple scheme for understanding and bringing about dynamic balance, the anti-gravity potentiality that is the lasting gift of F.M. Alexander's work. The pentagram below has at its center a tensegrity structure, representing the qualities of connection and suspension, characteristics of the term *up* as it is used in the Alexander Technique as the chief feature of optimal *use*. The five relations are depicted below, each represented by an emoji:



THE FIVE RELATIONS

Zero relation “Eyes free in the room;” “neck free, head forward and up” and—inseparable from these—opening our audial, visual, and kinesthetic awareness. The 0 relation corresponds to “right mental attitude,” a general and gentle state of mind that allows us to begin to effectively explore the other relations.

First relation Leg/torso counterbalance; legs release away from the torso in order to release the torso up into suspension (dynamic length, width, and depth); invite the legs to lengthen out of the torso to the tips of the toes, and then back up to the torso.

Second relation Head-pelvis counterbalance, activates and reactivates “up”; defines, frees, and expands the breathing container.

Third relation Natural breathing coordination; freedom, balance, and poise of the thorax, invite the ribs to drape with gravity on the exhale, spring open on the inhale.

Fourth relation The arms’ relationship to the torso: elbows release away from the shoulders, back from the fingertips, and in relation to one other; invite the arms to lengthen from the lower back up over the shoulders to the fingertips.

Fifth relation Invite the neck to be free/let the head tilt slightly forward on the top joint of the spine to release upwards, allow the head to freely rotate left and right at C1 to C2; engage all three in order to integrate and animate the total pattern of coordination.

A thorough discussion of the five relations can be found in “Dynamic Balance and the Five Relations” (Bain Cushman 2019).

THE QUALITIES OF BEING

The triads of the five relations

It is easy enough to visit all five relations in an Alexander Technique lesson. Whether or not you differentiate them one from another as five distinct relationships, most experienced teachers follow procedures that address each of the five relations in turn, often in the order in which they appear on the pentagram—where each relation, beginning with 0/5 and moving clockwise back to 0/5, has the capacity to unlock the next. This is one way to read and follow the pentagram of the five relations.

Of course, we would be wise to revisit “eyes free in the room” (0) and “allow the neck to be free in order for the head to go forward and up” (5), between each relation and the next. We must be sure to gather relations 1–4 into the primary and preventative orders and into the “up,” the dynamic efficiency of the whole.

This article will address another way of reading the pentagram, by addressing the relations in groups of three. The 0/5 relation heads—literally and metaphorically—each of the six triads of the five relations, for the reasons mentioned above. We turn now to a discussion of the triads of the five relations pentagram: why they may be useful, how we might apply them as individuals and in groups, and what “qualities of being” are invoked or invited by each of the six.

After an Alexander Technique lesson or group class a student has much to process. The questions often arise: “What should I focus on once the teacher is no longer there to guide me?” “How do I recreate the experience I’ve just had?” “How can I ‘do’ this without ‘doing it?’”

It is difficult for people learning the Technique to recreate for themselves the wholeness they have just experienced at the hands of a teacher. As students leave a lesson or a class and begin the rounds of daily activities, the Technique directions and principles can—especially in the beginning phases of study—seem fleeting, ephemeral.

Keeping three of these five relations in play gives us a reliable way to collect ourselves and improve our coordination as we move about in the world, even as we engage in complex and demanding tasks. It offers beginners a dynamic way to think about and engage with the relationships that their teachers have “put right” during a lesson, and allows them to continue working (and playing) on their own. It is no accident that this method of the five relations arises from decades of working with guitarists playing difficult polyrhythmic music. The five relations and the triads of the five relations (the qualities of being) provided them, and provide us now, with a cognitive and kinesthetic anchor even while engaging in demanding activities.

In private lessons we can sum up at the end by reviewing three relations we have focused on during the lesson, and by identifying which three the student—or we, if we are the students!—might keep in play until the next lesson. (I’ve developed refrigerator magnets of the emoji, so that students can paste up their learning set for the week/weeks between lessons and classes.)

In group work we have the opportunity to focus on specific triads—depending on the number of classes in a series, or the specialty of the students attending. It may be we are teaching a group of horseback riders, musicians, meditators, singers, or dancers. It may be that we are horseback riders, musicians, meditators, singers, or dancers. The following are examples of the triads we might choose to focus on for these activities: for horseback riders, balance, animation, and poise; for musicians, balance, differentiation, and poise; for meditators, poise, integration, animation; for singers (actors and public speakers), animation, integration, poise; for dancers, balance, span, differentiation.

Before we go further into defining and applying each triad, let’s take a look at the origin of the system. In the fall of 2009, I showed Robert Fripp, the founder and director of Guitar Craft and Guitar Circles, my diagram of the five relations. I handed the picture to Robert at lunch on a weeklong residential course. He pulled out a pencil and began making notes. As I left the dining room, I looked at the six triads of the five relations along with five tetrads, my next decade of work, scribbled in the upper left-hand corner of my diagram of the five relations pentagram.

In 2011, I took on the challenge of exploring the triads as my sole means of directing, each for a period of one month. In walking, teaching, lie-down, I focused on keeping three of the five relations in play.

Toward the end of this experiment, two trainees who were in their final year of training asked me to run a study group for them. Together we chose a triad, and individually we explored it on our own for one month. At the end of the month, we reported back with what we’d discovered. In only one case did the study group come up with a word—one word describing the qualities evoked by the triad—that was different from the

one I’d come up with months before. And thus, the qualities of being were born.

The first quality of being triad, *balance*, appears on the right side of the pentagram and is comprised of what I call the *structural relations*:

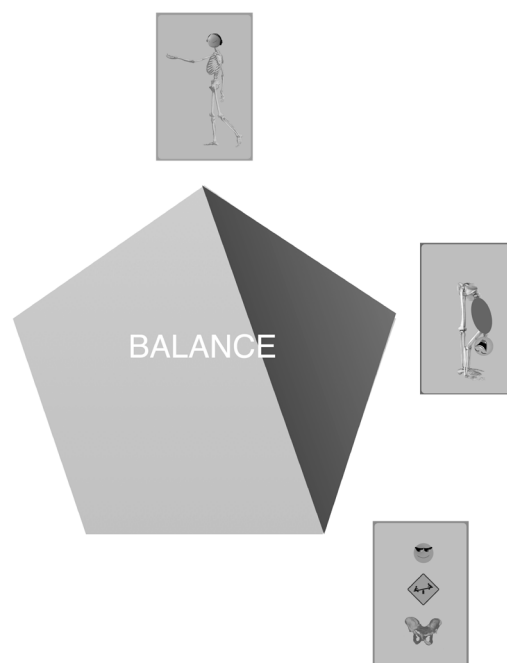
BALANCE

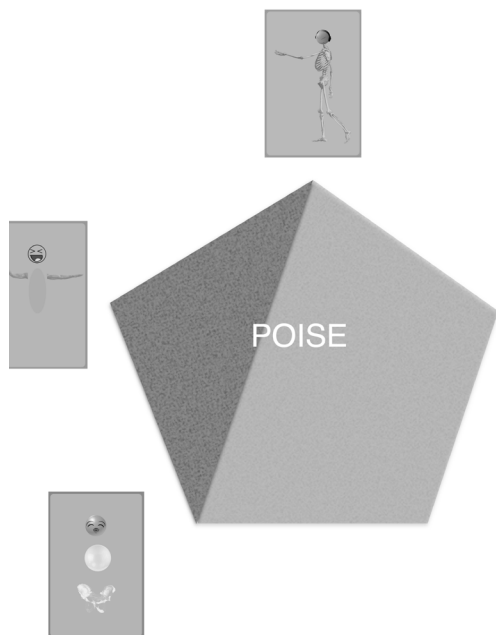
Zero/fifth relation ↔ first relation ↔ second relation

The balance triad arose from two lively professional predicaments in the Guitar Circle. In the spring of 2006, I was spending a week with a group of more than a hundred guitarists in a monastery near Mendoza, Argentina. We were two Alexander Technique teachers for 114 people, an admittedly impossible situation. I found myself reaching for a new teaching setup: a yoga block, a small model of a pelvis, and two chairs. In the courtyard of the monastery, I gave thirty-four turns in one afternoon. The second relation (head-pelvis counterbalance) came to life—and served to educate thirty-four guitarists about sitting balance while preserving my energy and sanity to address seventy-nine others.

A few years later, I was working with a performance ensemble of nine guitarists in Seattle, Washington, and noticed that no matter how they directed themselves or were directed up through the head, neck, and back relationship, the disorganization in their legs inevitably dragged them back down. I found myself standing in the middle of a circle of guitarists saying, “Oh my goodness! You need legs.” Enter the first relation—and the balance triad—as the guitarists “got legs.”

From that moment on, I have noticed that every time what I now call the lower suspension system properly balances and activates, the head-pelvis counterbalance—the





second relation—fairly pops the spine into springy upward release. While working with students in their chairs in private lessons and in groups, I am continually confident that when we get the legs going, there will come a reliable and repeatable moment—this “popping” of the torso into the “up”—along with an opportunity, a necessity, to move the sit bones back under the torso, off and away from the legs, into better line with the freely balancing head. This results—almost always and even with beginners—in increasingly effortless sitting balance.

When working with riders, or when working on the “horse” in an Alexander Technique session, we evoke the balance triad by first finding a soft and open gaze, or “eyes free in the room.” Then we allow the pupil’s—or our own—situation on the saddle to release the legs out and away from the torso, in this instance down and away with gravity, in order to allow “neck free, head forward and up,” free head balance, to guide the spine up into length.

We revisit the primary and preventative directions—“eyes free in the room” (0 relation) and “neck free, head forward and up” (5th relation)—to amplify, or if necessary to reboot, upward release. Then—and here is where the magic of the triads comes alive—we rely on the head-pelvis counterbalance (stimulated here by the articulated support of the sit bones on the saddle) to do its part in refreshing the up, to keep the torso dynamic both in relation to the release of the legs and the direction of the head. The spirals in the torso, allowing the eyes to lead and the head to follow while looking to the right and left, torso responding by following the head movement into gentle and connected turning on the sit bones and from the hip joints, complete the picture.

Now let’s turn to the *poise* triad to explore the interaction of breathing coordination, poise of the chest, and freedom and expression in the arms.

POISE

Zero/fifth relation ↔ third relation ↔ fourth relation

The *functional relations* are found on the left side of the five relations pentagram, and together create the poise triad. This is where the systematics—the dynamic geometry—of the five relations pentagram gets interesting.

The structural relations: 0/5 ↔ 1 ↔ 2 line up obviously with “neck free in order for the head to go forward and up in order for the back to lengthen and widen and the knees to go forward and away.”

The functional relations 3 ↔ 4 ↔ 5/0 have an affinity with doing the thing: riding a horse, playing an instrument, following our breath in meditation, singing, dancing—using the hands to teach the Alexander Technique. The functional relations and poise triad lie on the opposite side of the pentagram from the structural relations, to the left of what those familiar with systematics would call “the Great Divide.”

What is it that took Mr. Alexander and us across the Great Divide between stopping and organizing ourselves, finding our balance, to maintaining our balance in activity? Alexander (1946) found that he was able to maintain optimal use while speaking when he gave himself three choices:

to do the thing (in Mr. Alexander’s case, to speak the sentence)
to not do the thing
to do something else

The “three choices” put Alexander in the right state of mind (and body!) to cross the divide from sorting himself out and finding his equilibrium (balance) to maintaining his equilibrium in the course of activity (poise).

Let’s look at the poise triad in relation to the horseback rider, or the student on the “horse” in an Alexander Technique lesson:

We begin with “eyes free” (0 relation) and “neck free head forward and up” (5th relation)—which in the case of the rider on the horse directs not only the rider, but the horse. Having found our balance in the saddle (structural relations/right side of pentagram) we now turn to freeing the breath to support the arms and freeing the arms to help support and expand the breath, and to keep us alive and alert in the saddle. In the case of the rider, we explore the poise triad to keep from interfering with, and in order to stay in dynamic relation to, our own balance and the movement of the horse.

Free breath also keeps us quiet and centered, as any meditator will affirm, and keeps the stress reaction—pulling back of the head, lifting of the chest, shortening of the back, and the consequent holding of the breath—at bay. As always, while thinking of freeing the breath and releasing the arms, we keep returning to the balance of the head and the freeing of the gaze, which activates and integrates the total pattern of coordination.

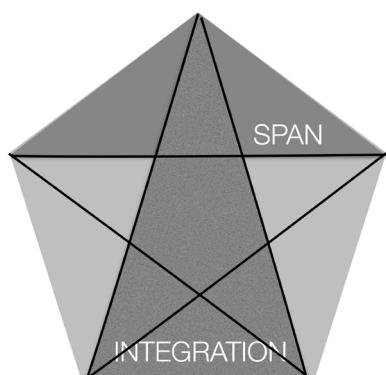
Finally, when we look at the pentagram, we see that the emoji for the second relation (head/pelvis counterbalance) is the same structurally as that for the third relation (breathing coordination). In other words, a torso integrated by the head/pelvis counterbalance gives us a breathing container available for free and fluid turnover of the breath. And free and fluid

breathing fuels the appropriate amount of tone and activity in the torso to support the arms.

Kathleen, a rider who has studied the quality of being triads, writes: “Movement in the torso stimulates breath, breathing coordination supports movement.”

She then says, “I am finding my limbs are squeezing in on me. Release, release, release.”

Prompted by Kathleen’s “release, release, release,” let’s move on to a second pair of triads: *span* and *integration*. Span and integration form the inner core—the inner star—of the pentagram, representing the total pattern of coordination:



SPAN

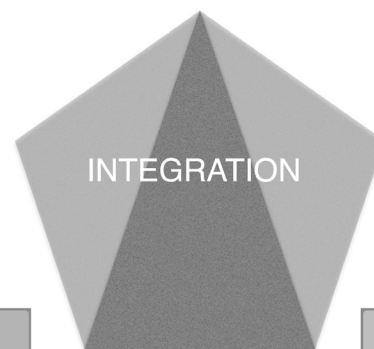
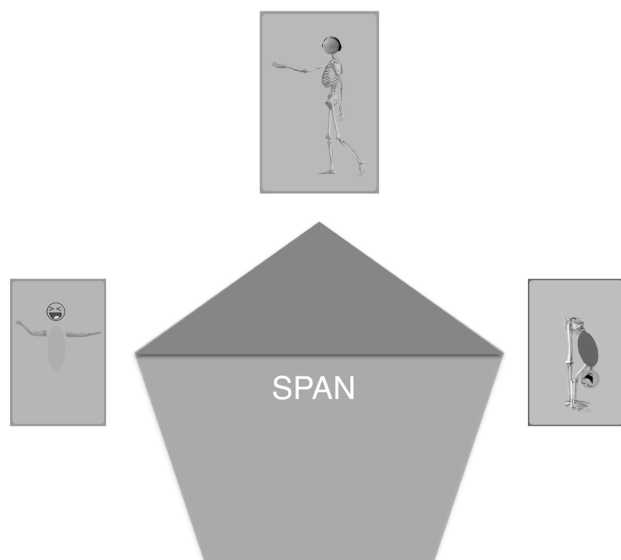
Zero/fifth relation ↔ first relation ↔ fourth relation

INTEGRATION

Fifth relation ↔ second relation ↔ third relation

In order to explore how allowing the limbs to release in relation to the torso frees up our torso and our breathing, let’s move through a span/integration table turn and lie-down.

First, we allow the head to come into support and relax the neck muscles in order to allow the neck to be free and the head to go forward and up (5th relation). For any but the most reticent students—or for ourselves when we are in any but the most retiring of moods—eyes open and “free in the room” will make things easier all around (0 relation).



Already we may have tapped into integration: often the breath opens by simply relaxing the neck and bringing the head into better orientation and support.

Next we “take” the legs, if we are a teacher, or “give” the legs, if we are a student, or tent the legs to balance them if we are working by ourselves in lie-down, while keeping the preventative orders going: relaxing the neck in order for the head to rest into its easy nod on top of the spine; inviting the easy rotation of the head from C1 to C2 as we occasionally look—or are at least available to look—side to side.

Next we take, give, or release the arms in similar manner, while continuing to attend to the primary relationship, the o/5 relation, in order to continue to allow free head balance to begin to guide the spine out into length along the table.

Next comes the dramatic moment when the teacher can scoop her hands under the student, one hand on either side of the student’s spine, or if you are the student you can allow the teacher’s hands to slide down along your already actively releasing spine, or if you are working on your own you can take yourself into the tiniest of yoga bridges in a sequence I will explain shortly.

Almost every time (except where the spine and surrounding musculature are densely compacted) the spine—having not been “worked with” prior to now, with only the head balance, the leg release, and the arm release in play—will spring out long onto the table like one of those Jacob’s Ladder toys, popping into the up (at the moment, up in the horizontal) in a way similar to what we find when we establish the balance triad while sitting in the chair. The expansion and freeing of the torso into three dimensions to stimulate the opening of the breath occurs simultaneously.

Working on one’s own in lie-down, the teacher’s “scoop” can be simulated by:

- saying “no” to bringing yourself into the tiniest of yoga bridges
- thinking “knees to the ceiling”
- thinking “open and springy feet in contact with the table or floor”
- thinking “free ankles ready to crease gently into flexion”
- thinking “back of thighs active and available for activity”
- leaving the natural shape of the legs, arms, and breathing container alone
- neck free/head forward and up/eyes free in the room

and then

- very gently pressing into the feet while
- sending the knees forward toward the toes while
- allowing the back of the thighs to become active while
- releasing the torso back
- allowing the breath to be free
- marveling as the pelvis springs up gently and delicately off of the table into the hammock of gently activated back and back-of-leg muscles—without being lifted—while
- the spine springs out long and free and the suspension of the lower body transmits up through the whole torso

There are many other ways to play with the span of the limbs leading to integration of the torso—in sitting meditation, in hands on back of chair, in lunge, in other yoga poses, while reaching, and while stretching. The beauty of the qualities of being triads is that they invite you to explore and discover their mysteries on your own, to puzzle out the Technique directing in a creative and dynamic way.

Let’s look at the next quality of being, *animation*, through the dual lenses of a singer going up on her toes to organize

and stimulate the spontaneous turnover of the breath and a meditator sitting cross-legged during his practice, working to maintain an upright and free sitting posture in order to focus on the breath.

ANIMATION

Fifth relation ↔ first relation ↔ third relation

When a singer comes up into extension by pressing her toes gently and firmly into the floor to release up into her full stature—head leading, spine following—and then floats her heels back to the floor while maintaining full extension, she discovers, and over time develops, dynamic—animated—vocal support.

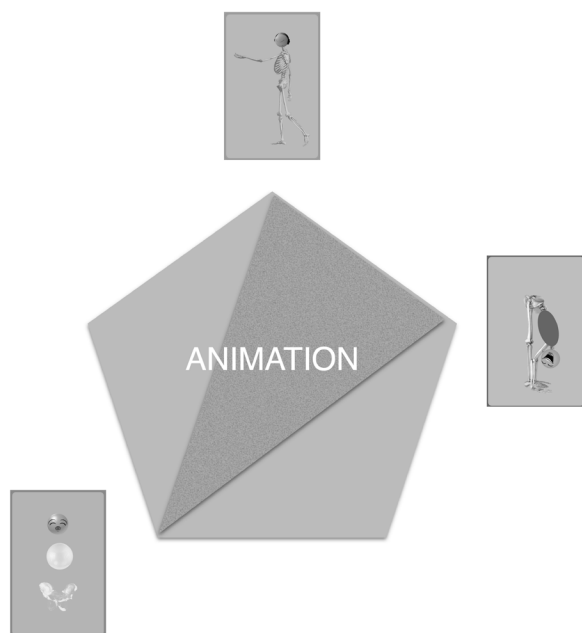
We begin this sequence by first juxtaposing the o/5 relation with the first relation prior to focusing on the breath. After several repetitions of coming into extension by sending the legs away, all the way to the toes, and the torso up, head leading, spine following, we add in the third relation by introducing the whispered “Ah,” or a gentle SSSSSSS, or (adapted from Jessica Wolf’s *Art of Breathing*) a silent “la la la.” After warming up this way to the full combination of three relations—o/5 ↔ 1 ↔ 3—we may move into sounding and vocal practice, if the conditions of the student, or our conditions if we are practicing on our own, allow.

For the meditator sitting with legs crossed and sit bones poised on a supportive cushion (determining the right height of the cushion is as precise a process as determining the right number of books to support the head in lying-down work), the animation triad provides a simple, practical approach that helps practitioners maintain an easy upright posture during meditation while expanding the thorax and freeing the breath.

First, we organize the pelvis on the cushion and cross the legs, making sure that the rotation bringing the knees to the center line of the body takes place at the hip joint rather than at the knee itself. We then establish the primary and preventative orders “allow the neck to be free in order for the head to go forward and up.” “Eyes free in the room” is an approach I myself use, as the school of meditation I ascribe to asks that eyes remain open during sitting, but if eyes are to be closed during sitting, we may leave the zero out of the o/5 relation.

If the knees will not quite settle in cross-legged posture, they can and should be supported from underneath by cushions or rolled blankets or even small yoga blocks, so that they have a surface to release toward as they give in to gravity. As the legs release—as they did for the guitarists sitting in their chairs in the circle—the release has the potential to pop the torso up, sending the torso/breathing container back and away from the legs. This makes necessary that little movement of the sit bones back under the torso that puts them more in line with the free head balance and establishes activity—lengthening, widening, deepening, spirals—throughout the torso. This activity stimulates and supports the natural turnover of the breath.

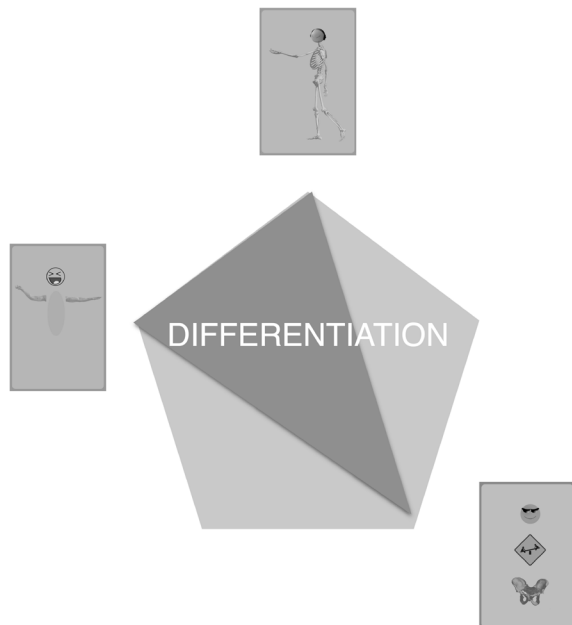
During a longish period of sitting, strain may build up in the spine, or we may begin to use undue mental or physical effort to breathe. The simple release of the legs out and down and away from the torso, while the head releases into “forward and up” on top of the spine, reboots the suspension and restores both the sitting balance and the breathing coordination.



The sixth and final triad of the five relations is *differentiation*:

DIFFERENTIATION

Zero/fifth relation ↔ second relation ↔ fourth relation



As we complete our exploration of the qualities of being, let's come back around to our guitarists. In the same monastery in Argentina in the fall of 2015, a young man, Pedro, walked up to me in the hallway and said, "I need help with my shoulder!" He then brought his right arm around the guitar to rest his hand on the strings and in doing so:

- pulled his head forward and down
- hunched his upper back
- pulled his shoulder joint forward toward his arm and toward the guitar in such a way that
- any semblance of a shoulder joint, of widening, or of upper back extension disappeared.

I laughed. "Yes, you do, Pedro!"

Standing next to Pedro in the long corridor of the convent, I took a hand and gently reminded him of his head/neck balance, and his head/neck/back connection. I asked him to free his eyes and look about. We then took a moment to find the whole of his torso, from sit bones to the top of his head, and spiral it gently right and left, eyes and head leading, spine and ribs and pelvis following, one after the other and all at the same time.

Then—and here the differentiation triad came to the rescue, with the 0/5 relation and the second relation in play—while Pedro maintained his length and width, depth and mobility, I stood opposite him and asked him to mirror me as I:

- dropped my left arm to my side
- opened my palm to the front
- leading with the fingers, allowed my arm to extend gently out and away from the torso
- stopping at shoulder height (while keeping 0/5 and 2 relations going all the while)
- I released my elbow back from my fingertips and away from my shoulder joint to bend at the elbow in order to bring my hand across the front of my body, while Pedro, who had followed every action with his right arm
- bent his elbow in similar fashion to bring his hand across the front of his guitar and rest it on the strings

Pedro broke into a huge grin as the miracle of an organized—a differentiated—shoulder and arm came to pass. We both laughed with delight.

Perhaps the power of the quality of being triads lies in what we leave out as we restore the total pattern of coordination, in knowing that we need only address "these three things" for now. Perhaps the five relations and the triads of the five relations give our pupils—and ourselves—a little less to think about a little more clearly and offer us a little more agency while working with—while playing with—the Alexander Technique directions.

Perhaps the next best thing about the qualities of being is that, more often than not, they work.

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About the Author

SANDRA BAIN CUSHMAN (Virginia School for the Alexander Technique, 1990) is the founder of Orchestral Maneuvers, born of thirty-two years transforming the Alexander Technique into group practice in Robert Fripp's Guitar Craft and Guitar Circles North America, South America, and Europe. OM is based on the premise that the group informs the individual: as our presence within the group develops, our capacity as individuals flourishes.

Sandra's most recent teaching includes "Freedom and Ease for Singers" a nine-class series available online for individuals, choruses, and choirs (Heather Hightower, the Center for Vocal Study Charlottesville, Virginia, producer); "Intro to the Intro" for Introduction to the Guitar Circle August, 2021, with Robert Fripp (DGM Live for more information); the McIntire Department of Music, the Meriwether Lewis Institute, and the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia; Violapalooza at Virginia Commonwealth University; and OM spoken word performances at the University of Pennsylvania and the Virginia Festival for the Book.

Sandra's articles in *AmSAT Journal* feature her group-centered pedagogy: "Dynamic Balance and the Five Relations" (no. 15, Summer 2019) and "Safe Space Mini-Retreat for Educators," written with Heather Dennee (no. 16, Fall 2019). "Dynamisches Gleichgewicht und die Fünf Beziehungen," translated into German by Philipp Quaet-Faslem, appeared in ATVD's Infobrief in March of 2019.

Photograph of the author by Laura Dillon Rogers. The illustrations in "Qualities of Being" were made collaboratively by Sandra Bain Cushman and Laura Silberberg.