

The Alexander Technique

The Alexander Technique helps you learn to take care of yourself in every activity that you do.

The Alexander Technique is a skill that may be learned to improve movement, coordination, and posture.

The Alexander Technique is a process of re-education of how we use ourselves.

It can help to:-

- Relieve and prevent back, neck and limb pain, headaches and other muscular-skeletal problems
- Reduce tension in activities that are repetitive and/or strenuous such as bending, lifting, or typing
- Improve performance in skilled activities such as dance, music, acting, or sport
- Manage stress, improve well being and self understanding
- Restore freedom of movement after an accident or chronic illness.

Our bodies are brilliantly designed, many of our problems from depression, to back pain to voice loss, occur because we don't allow our bodies to function in the way they were designed. The process of not interfering with the natural way you use your voice, walk, dance, play a musical instrument etc, is a skill that can be learned through the Alexander Technique.

Tension in our bodies be it physical or mental, requires more energy to move. If you use more muscular effort than is necessary, the effect can be stiff joints, undue fatigue and even pain.

The Alexander Technique is a means of eliminating unnecessary tension while learning to move in an easier more effective way.

The origin of the Alexander Technique

F.M. Alexander was a successful reciter and actor in Australia in the late 1880's. In attempting to correct a disabling voice problem, he discovered that he was misusing himself in such a way that he was interfering with his body's natural functioning. After a period of patient observation he identified certain basic principles of flexibility and co-ordination. Gradually his voice problem disappeared and he showed a remarkable improvement in his general health. Alexander spent the rest of his life in England and America perfecting his Technique and training others to teach. He died in London in 1955.

Today, the Alexander Technique is taught and respected in 31 countries. It is taught in most performing arts institutions around the world

What is it?

The basis of the Technique is Alexander's discovery that a certain dynamic relationship of the head, neck and torso is the main factor in determining the most efficient use and functioning of the body.

As we become more aware of this dynamic balance, we can begin to change habitual patterns of movement which are stressful to us.

How does it work?

The end product of an Alexander lesson is to give you a new experience which helps you recognise patterns of tension in your body. As you learn to let go of this tension you often experience a lightness of movement, because the way you use your body determines how well it works, how clearly you think, and how good you feel.

Applying the Alexander Technique is a combination of understanding how the body works and how to co-operate with its design, and then learning to trust the power of your thoughts. You send an idea to your mind and body about how you would like to be. For example you invite your head to balance on top of the spine so your body and breath can function easily so you can then do something - sing, dance, tell a story or vacuum the floor.

Definition of the Alexander Technique by Cathy Madden

"The Alexander Technique is a constructive, conscious kindness to ourselves, cooperating with our design and supporting our desires and our dreams."

From her book *Onstage Synergy Integrative Alexander Technique Practice for Performing Artists*.

A quote from Jeremy Irons

For all of us, not just actors, life puts great stress and strain on our bodies. The Alexander Technique has given me a self-help method of teaching me to relax and adjust my posture so that my body, which for an actor is an instrument, can work as well as possible."

For more information on the Alexander Technique or to book a private lesson contact

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Penny's 13 tips on applying the Alexander Technique

1. Be aware of your body and your breath. If you are holding either choose to release it and trust that it can change.
2. Change comes by thinking positively about how you would like to be. You cannot DO the Alexander Technique – you just think it. Perhaps think of bringing change by directing or re-directing energy in your body. The role of the conscious mind in direction is repeatedly to formulate a wish for the right thing to happen, to release any muscle tension that may prevent it from happening, and then to let the body's own processes get on with it.
3. "I Have Time". Say these words often, especially if you are feeling rushed. It allows space for something different to happen and for the right thoughts to come.
4. All of Me. Run your hands over your feet, up your body and into the air saying "all of me" as you go. It reminds you of the connection in your body and rebalances the body and mind.
5. Allowing the head to balance freely on top of the spine gives you a co-ordination through the whole body. The top of the spine is between your ears. If you put your fingers in your ears and imagine them meeting in the middle of your head, that is where the top of the spine and the skull meet.
6. Are you allowing the weight of your body to move into the Earth by evenly balancing weight between your heels and the balls of your feet. If not think about the front of the ribs being in front of the front of the pelvis, and stand on your legs, and let the weight of your body flow into the earth.
7. Are the knees soft. If you realise your knees are locked think about the head leading, and gently release the knees.
8. Are you working with your breathing mechanism? The air needs to flow freely in and out of the body, and this means there is movement through the whole torso (front and back) right down to the pelvic floor.
9. Have an intention to be present with each moment.
10. Invite every activity you do to be one of enjoyment and have fun.
11. Say yes to everything. Most of us look at the negative, there is no space to allow change if your thoughts are negative.
12. Lie on your back for ten minutes every day with you head on a book supporting the bony bump at the back of the head, (the height of the books varies from person to person), bend your legs so that the knees are balanced between your feet and your hips. The arms should be placed with the elbows on the floor and the palms of the hands across the midriff. Think about the connections in your body, be as clear with your body mapping as you can be, this is called Semi Supine.
13. You are not learning to relax with the Alexander Technique, you are learning to distribute energy. The Alexander Technique can help give your work an energy that is elevated and big, and it is this energy that makes connecting with an audience possible because it comes from a connection from your whole body.

Penny McDonald

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THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE SET OF DIRECTIONS

This paper is intended as a guide for those who are already having individual Alexander lessons.

TO ALLOW

- DIRECTIONS:
- > Neck free
 - > Head forward and up
 - > Back lengthen and widen
 - > Knees forward and away
 - > Heels down

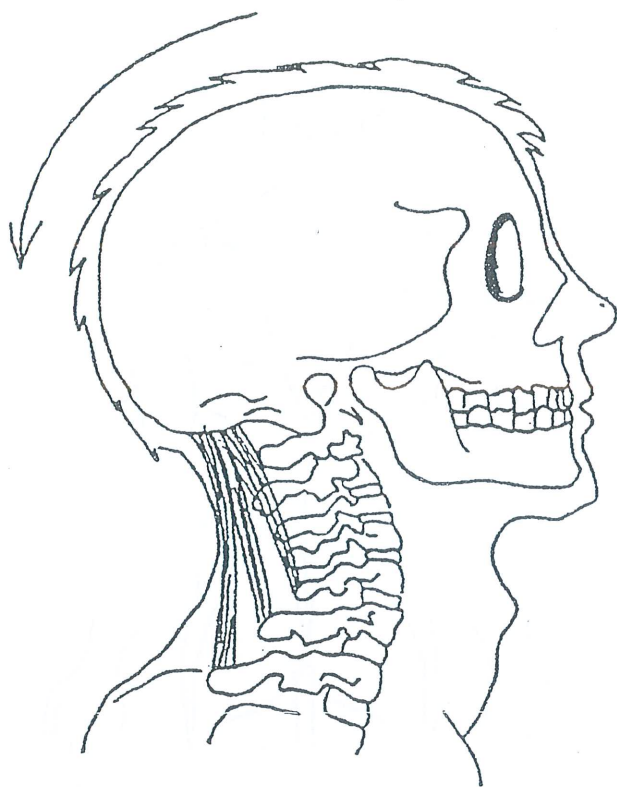
These are the directions in which the parts of the body should be simultaneously tending to go relative to each other for optimum functioning of the whole system.

The role of the conscious mind in direction is repeatedly to formulate a wish for the right thing to happen, to release any muscle tension that may prevent it from happening, and then to let the body's own processes get on with it.

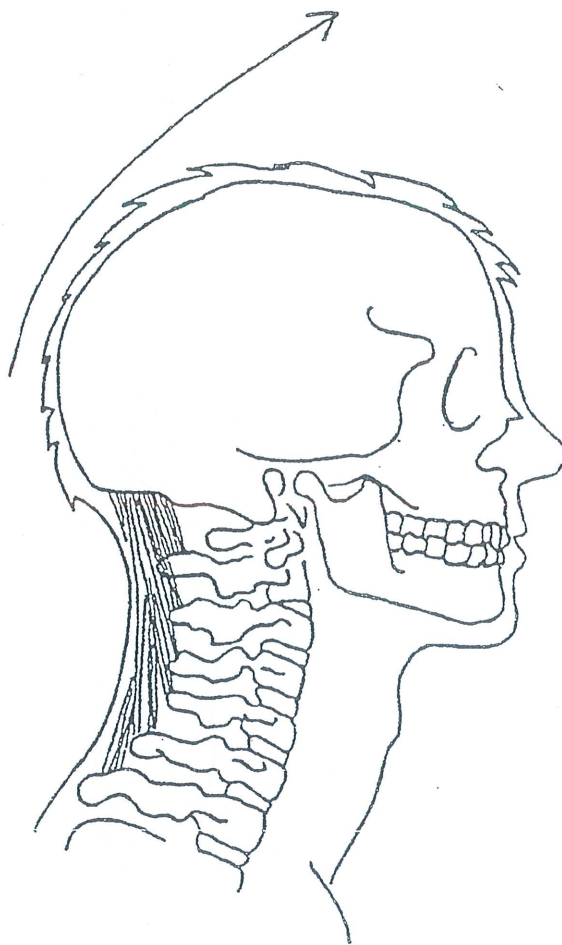
NECK FREE, HEAD FORWARD AND UP

The neck consists of the top 7 vertebrae of the spine, forming a column which supports the weight of the head (approx. 10 lbs). This arrangement is anchored by "guy ropes" of muscle, fascia and ligament of varying degrees of elasticity to the upper part of the body, i.e. to the top of the shoulders, the upper back, and upper chest. These guy ropes need to be free enough to allow the column to stretch out from the trunk in the direction that takes the head to its maximum elevation above the body. The head must also be left free to make any movements necessary to adjust balance or to follow the eyes wherever they wish to focus.

In stress situations we habitually tighten the guy ropes, drawing the column of neck and head down towards the body, as if we are afraid of "losing our heads". Because the strongest of the guy ropes attach to the back of the skull, behind the point at which the head pivots on the top vertebra, we also, at the same time, draw the head back on the top of the neck column. Hence, as Alexander teachers say, we pull the head "back and down", and in many people this is so habitual that it has become part of their permanent posture. "Forward and up" is the opposite of "back and down", and is the direction in which we need to encourage the head to go to avoid the stress reaction.



Back and down.



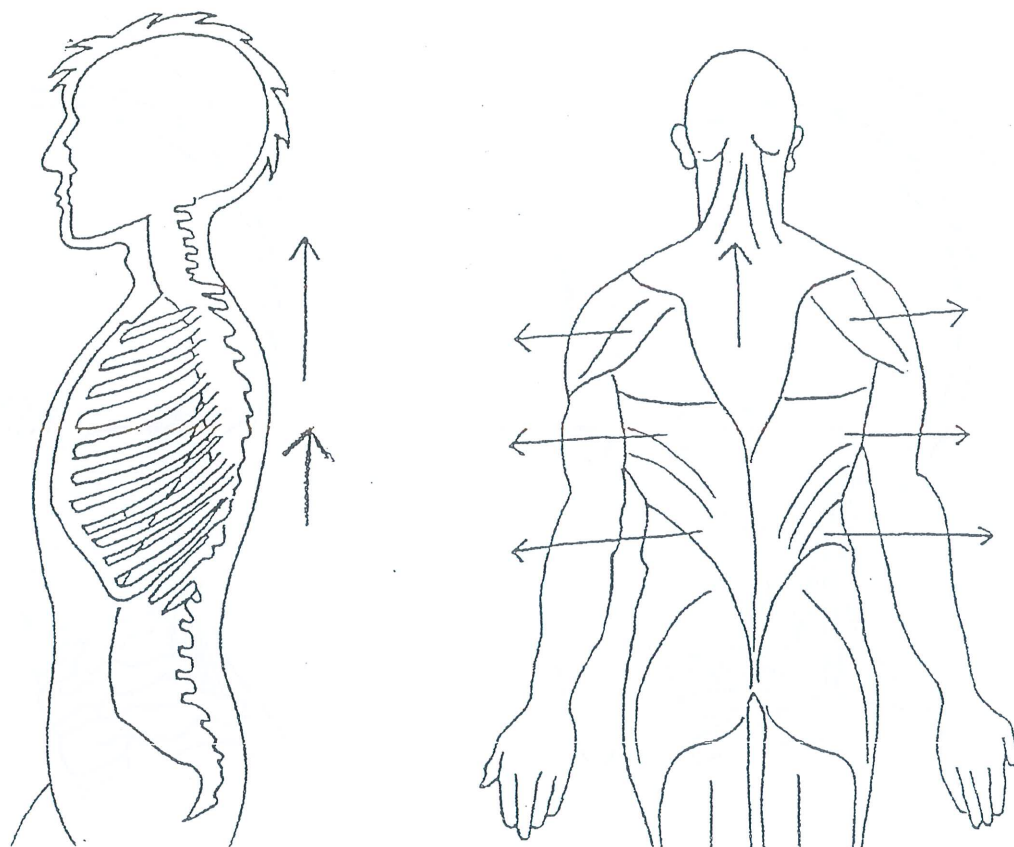
Forward and up.

BACK LENGTHEN AND WIDEN

The back means all the remainder of the spine from the base of the neck to the tailbone, all the muscle, fascia and ligament that attaches to the spine, and the back of the rib-cage. (The ribs come from the breast-bone at the front, around the sides to the back to join the upper half of the spine).

We need to encourage the back to extend so that the vertebrae are tending away from each other, rather than compressing the discs between them, and the curves of the upper and lower back to be as shallow as possible (though not, of course, absolutely straight). In this way, the upper back will stretch and straighten, the lower back fill out.

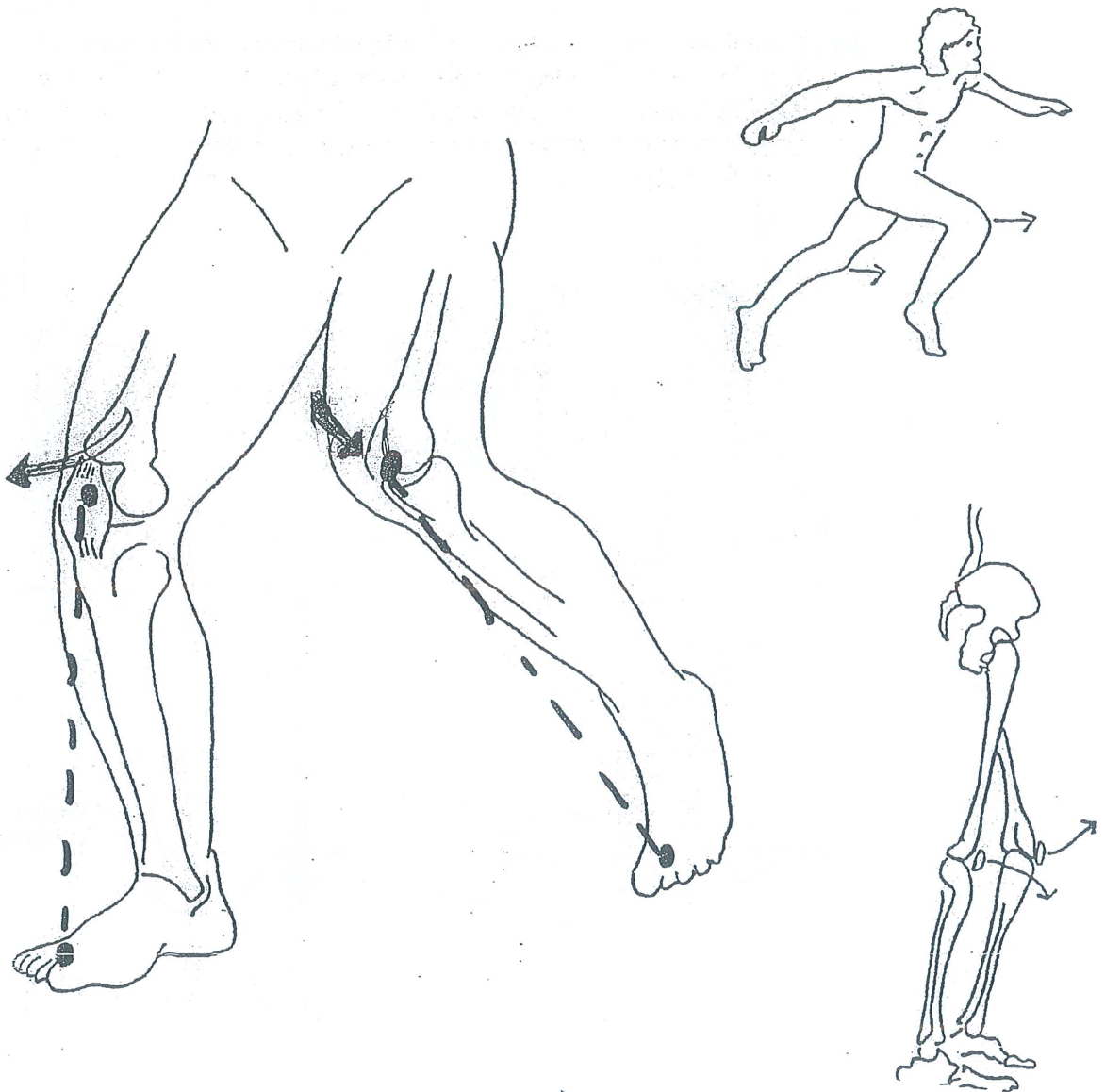
The back must also be directed to widen because the powerful muscles of the back do not just run in vertical strips up and down the spine. Many of them fan out diagonally from the spine to attach at various points on the back and sides of the rib-cage, and even right through the shoulders to the tops of the arms (inner). All this musculature must be as elastic as possible to allow the ribs to move freely for all their functions.



KNEES FORWARD AND AWAY

In most people, when the back is over-contracted the legs tend to have the thigh-bones turned inwards so that the knees no longer point out over the toes, but more inwards towards each other. The big thigh muscles, especially those at the backs and the insides of the thighs, need to release to let the knees point "forward and away" over the toes.

This is true in all activities, not just sitting or standing still, but in walking, running, climbing stairs etc.

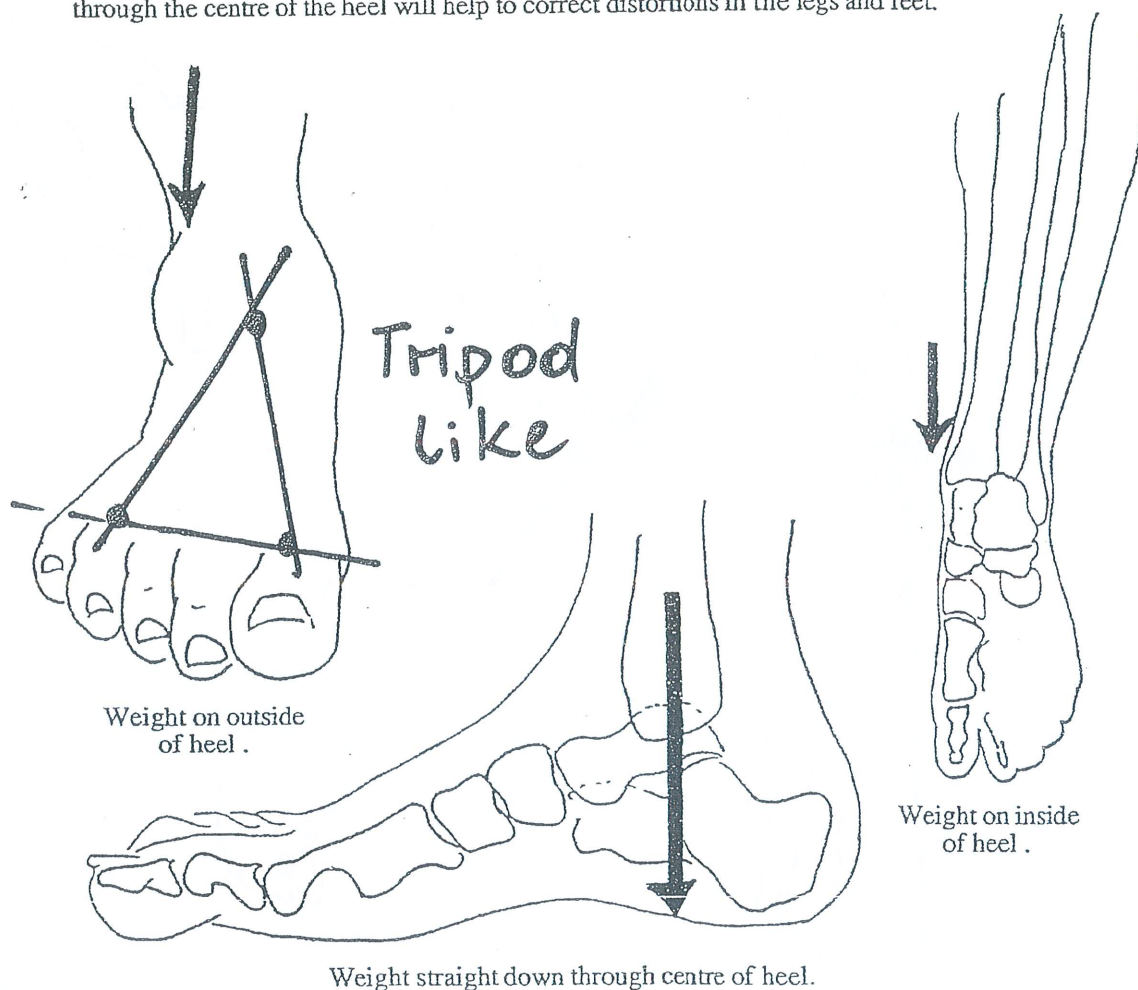


HEELS DOWN

The aim of all these directions is not to be using unnecessary muscle power to try to keep the weight of the body up off the ground, but to let the weight pass through the bones of the spine, pelvis, legs and feet into the ground, while the natural spring mechanisms support the body with the head up at its full height.

The direction "heels down" reminds us not to tense the leg muscles in an effort to push or pull ourselves off the ground, but to let the bones take the weight. The pressure of the ground against the heels also helps to activate the complex muscular reflexes that erect the spinal column and maintain our upright balance.

It is worth noting that the weight should be directed down through the centre of the heel. Often it will be found to be carried more on the outside or inside of the heel. Encouraging the weight down through the centre of the heel will help to correct distortions in the legs and feet.

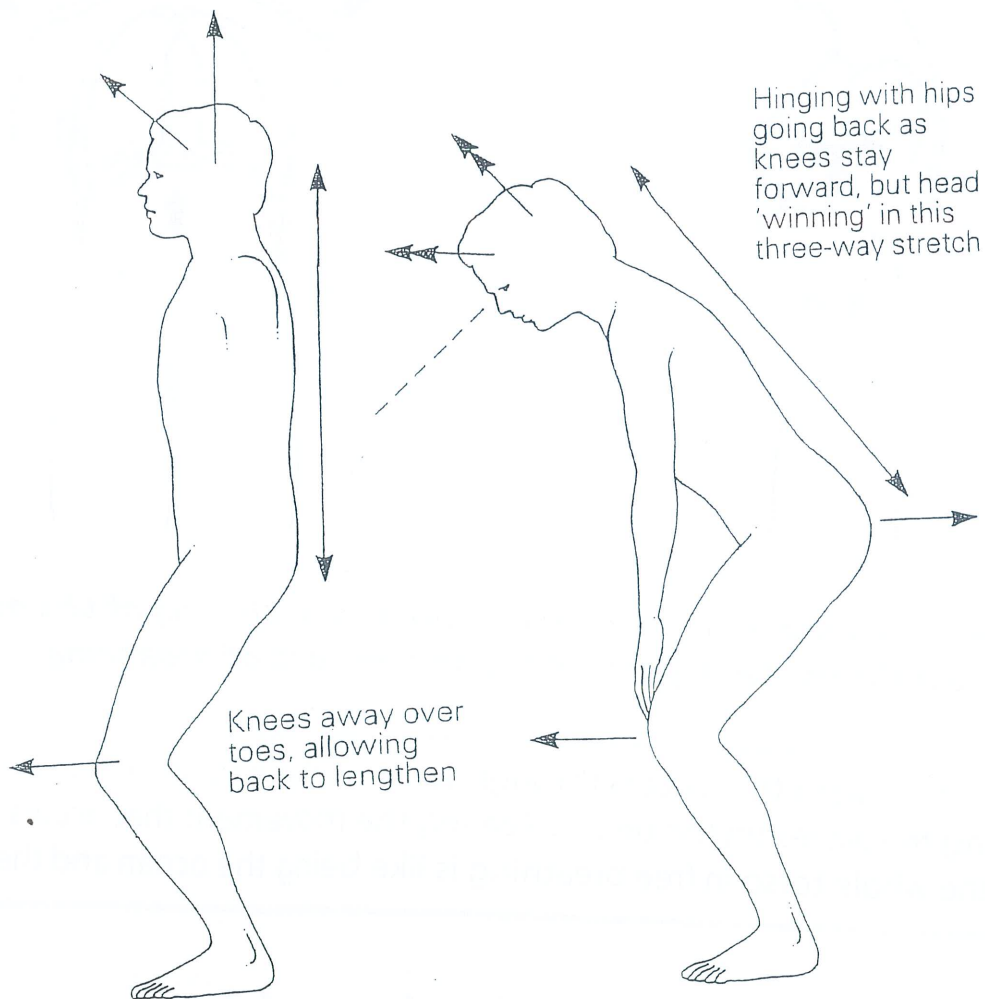


ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

The main objective of the Alexander Technique is to maintain the poise of the head on top of the lengthening spine in movement and at rest. Our immediate response to a stimulus is a mind/body set - a habit. Once you have reacted habitually, you have prevented a new pattern from taking place, so the habitual response must be stopped before it starts. Therefore, to consciously control your behaviour you must consciously decide to prevent the habitual response. In the Alexander Technique this process is called inhibition. Inhibition goes hand in hand with mental directions, which define what should be taking place in the body during movement. A series of verbal instructions are used to define this process. The words are: "Let my neck be free, to let my head go forward and up, to let my torso lengthen and widen, to let my legs release away from my torso, and let my shoulders widen."

from "The Alexander Technique" Judith Leibowitz & Bill Connington, 1990, Harper & Row, NY

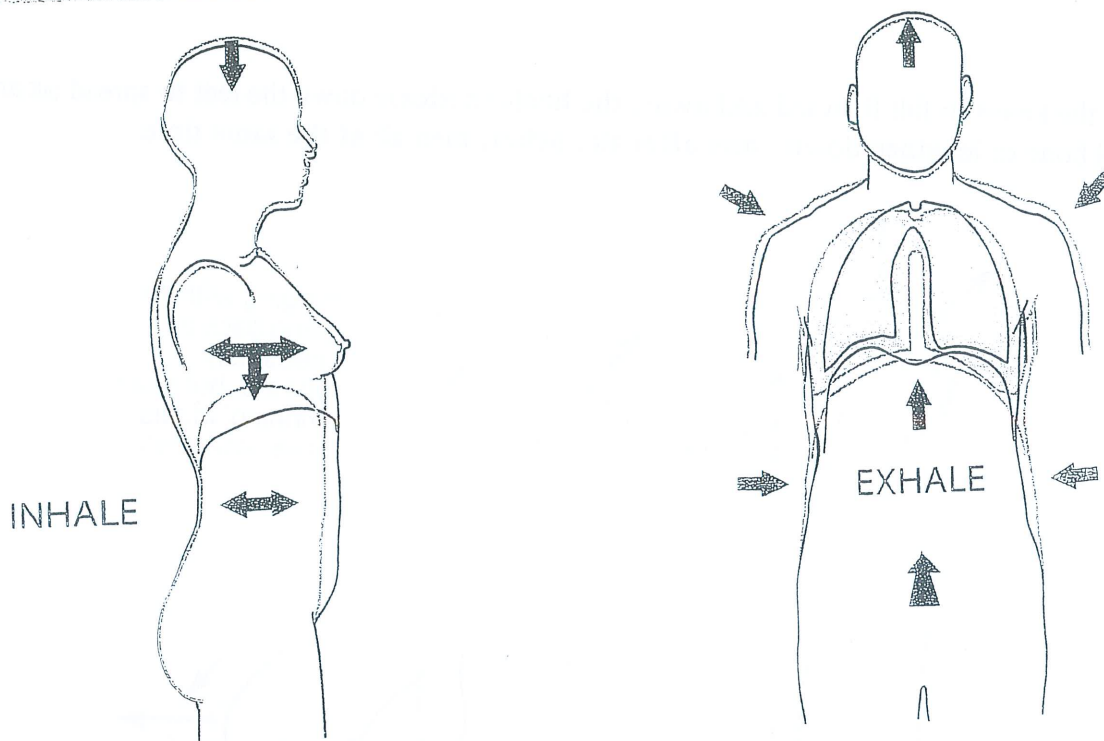
Allow the knees to fall forward and away, the heels to release down the feet to spread out and the tail bone to lengthen down...one after the other, then all at the same time.



from "The Alexander Technique", John Gray, 1990, St Martin's Press, NY

Breathing is like a wave!

This is what happens in breathing: Movement occurs throughout the whole torso in an organized, wave-like pattern. As the lungs fill with air, the torso gathers slightly (top to bottom), the ribs move up and out, and the diaphragm descends, forcing the contents of the abdominal and pelvic cavities outward against the abdominal wall (front, sides, and back) and downward against the pelvic floor. As the lungs empty of their greatly-altered air, the torso lengthens slightly, the ribs move down and in, and the diaphragm ascends, allowing the contents of the abdominal and pelvic cavities and the pelvic floor to spring back.

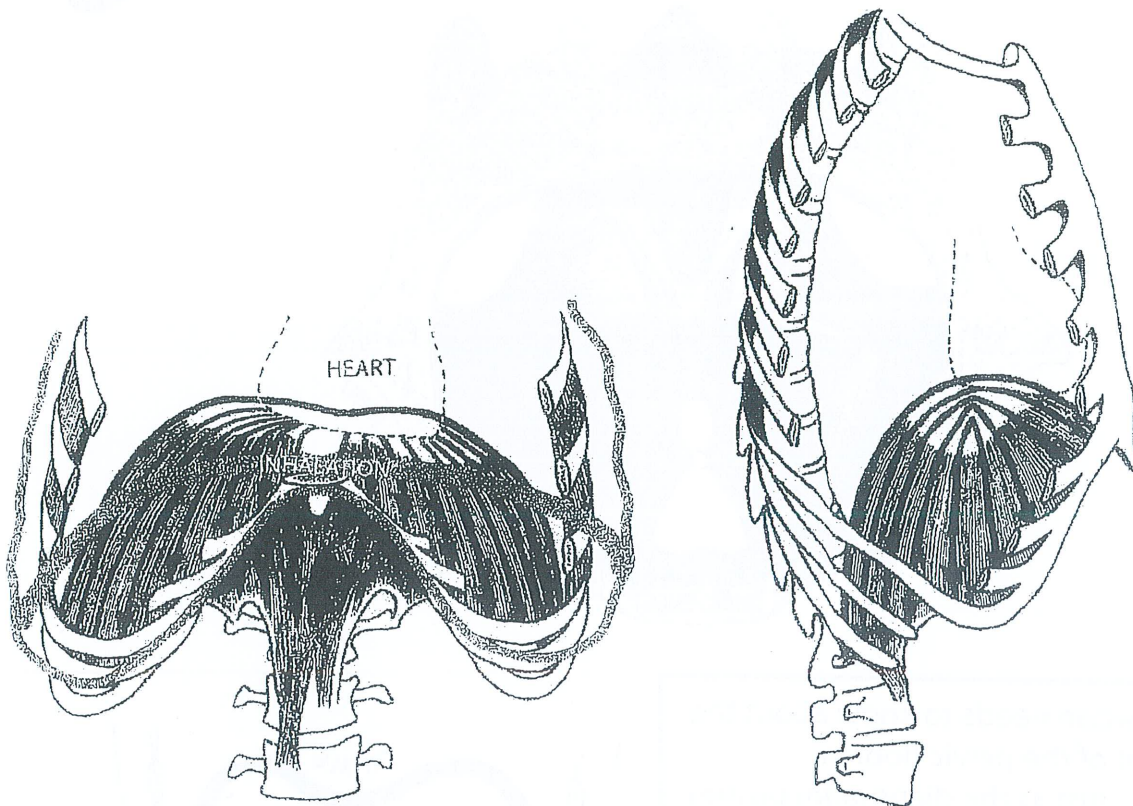


*Remember the unconscious lengthening and gathering of the spine?
It is an important part of the movement of breathing.*

Watching the movement that occurs throughout the whole torso in free breathing is like watching the waves on the beach. Feeling the movement that occurs throughout the whole torso in free breathing is like being the ocean and the beach.

We love the beach!

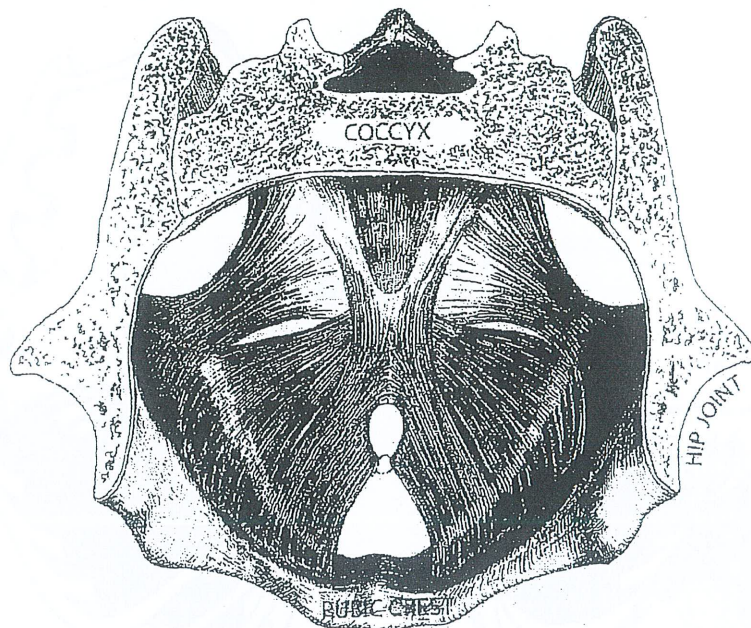
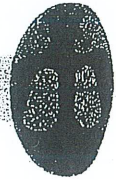
The diaphragm is a muscle!



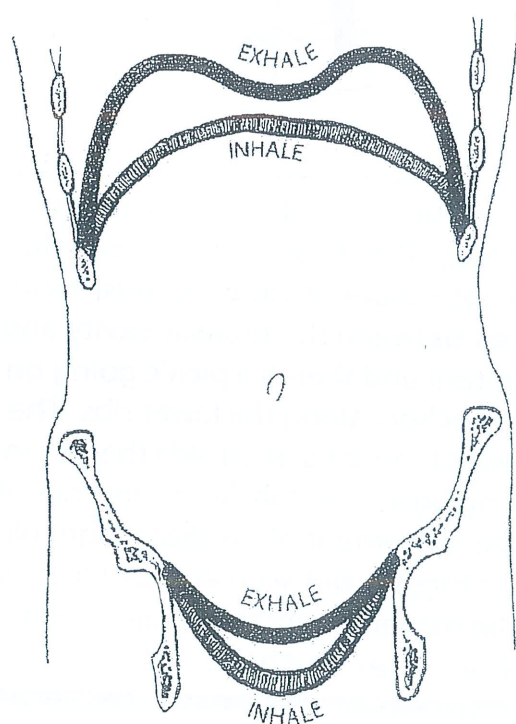
Every musician needs to know about the movement of the diaphragm in breathing. The diaphragm is a splendid dome-shaped muscle (some say parachute-shaped; some say mushroom-cap-shaped) that spans the entire rib area between the thoracic cavity and the abdominal cavity (it's a great round tent and there's a picnic going on underneath it). The base of the dome anchors along the lower ribs. The diaphragm's descent (flattening somewhat) on inhalation aids the ribs in moving up and out; its ascent (doming again) on exhalation aids the ribs in coming down and in. You can't feel the movement of the diaphragm directly the way you can the movement of your tongue, but you can feel it indirectly. You can feel the rib movement and the movement of the viscera (organs and gut) against the abdominal wall, front, sides, and back.

Work it out!

The pelvic floor moves in concert with the diaphragm!



Every musician needs to know about the movement of the pelvic floor in breathing. Just as the diaphragm pushes out the viscera that fill the abdominal and pelvic cavities, it also pushes the viscera downward against the pelvic floor. Just as tension in the abdominal muscles impedes rib and diaphragm excursion, so does tension in the pelvic floor. Pelvic floor muscles must be left completely free in breathing, because tensed muscles can't spring back as the diaphragm returns to its domed position. Experiment with tightening the pelvic floor and breathing, and you'll see what I mean. Then release the pelvic floor and release it and release it until it's completely free. How? By intention, the way you sing a pitch.



They get raves everywhere they go!

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

CONSTRUCTIVE REST

10 Minutes - Lying down on your back, with knees bent, and a book under your head for support.

The process:

Awareness of your Self

Consider how your body is in contact with the floor.

Consider what thought(s) is dominating your thinking.

(Is it conducive to your best use or does it interfere with your best use?)

Consider what is dominating your emotions.

(Is it conducive to your best use or does it interfere with your best use?)

Inhibition - The space between stimulus and response.

The space in which you have an opportunity to make a choice. Choose to set aside the above thoughts & emotions while you proceed with your 10 minutes of

Constructive Rest.

Direction - Thinking and conducting energy.

Begin to give your Self directions by thinking of allowing your neck to be free of any unnecessary tension,

to allow your head to release away from the spine, to

allow your back to release into length and width, to allow

your knees to release away from the hips and to allow the

feet to be on the floor. Repeat this. - Allow your

thinking to circulate your energy.

Towards the end of your Constructive Rest spend a few moments extending your exhale. This is done by Whispering an *Ah* or by silently saying *Lalalalala* until the exhalation is complete. Pause, rather than "take in a breath" and *allow* the breath to come in. Repeat this a few times.

Make a decision to complete your Constructive Rest. Get up easily, monitoring the relationship of your head/neck/back. Continue with your day...in a mindful way. Enjoy.

I have
TIME

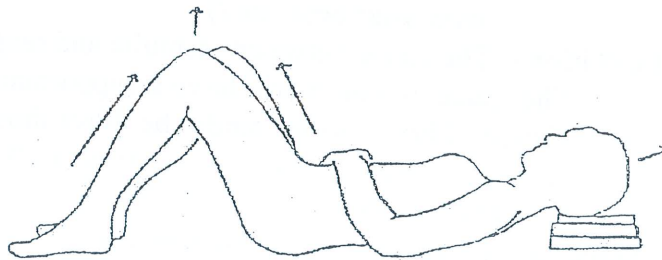
Semi-Supine:

This is an invaluable practice that encourages the changes the Alexander Technique aims to promote

The Basic Position:

Lie on your back on a firm surface - a carpeted floor is best - with the knees bent so that the feet are drawn up as near to the body as is comfortable. Feet should be far enough apart to enable the legs to balance with minimum effort (about shoulder width), the knees neither falling apart nor together, but pointing up to the ceiling.

Place some paperback books under your head so that they are supporting the bony bump at the back of the head (the occiput). The books should not be in contact with the back of the neck. The height of the pile of books varies from person to person, and may even vary at different times for the same person. It depends on many factors, e.g. length of neck, size of head, curvature of spine. Reducing the size of the pile should not be seen as an end in itself. If you have too few books, your head will tend to tilt backwards (chin higher than forehead) and it will be difficult to encourage muscular release through the back and neck. If the pile is too high, your chin will press uncomfortably on your throat. The optimum height is somewhere between these two extremes. The arms should be placed with the elbows on the floor and the palms of the hands across the midriff.



Weight Bearing Points:

Ideally the weight should be distributed between the following points:

- The feet - on the heel and the pads at the base of the big and little toes
- The back rim of the pelvis - a little below the waist
- The shoulder blades
- The back of the head

GENERAL POINTS

Always begin with the neck and head, then follow through with the other directions. This is because the flexible balance of the neck and head conditions the balance of the rest of the body (Alexander's "primary control").

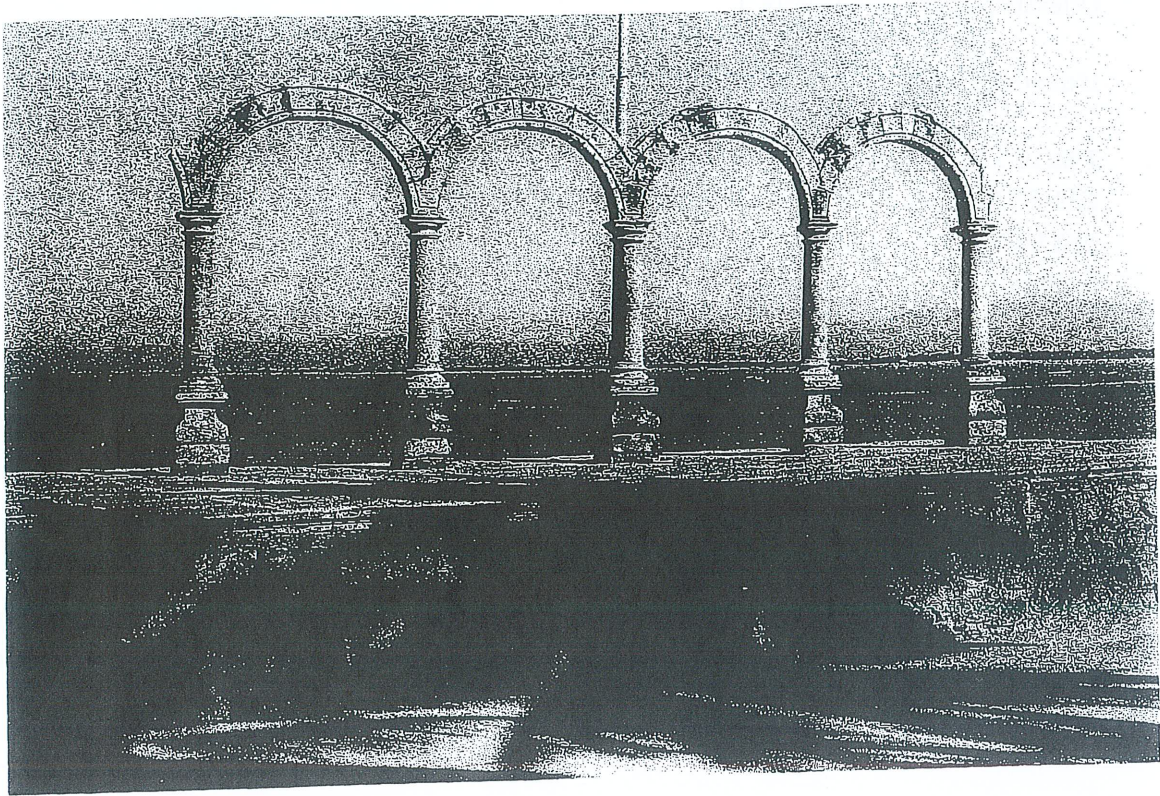
If there seems no time to think of the whole lot, at least remember, your neck and head.

PRACTICE DIRECTING ANY TIME, ANY WHERE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SITTING OR STANDING STILL OR IN "SEMI-SUPINE". YOU DON'T HAVE TO ADOPT ANY SPECIAL POSTURE. Practice directing when sitting watching TV, talking with friends, climbing stairs, washing and cooking, and even lying in bed. You will find your body gradually adopting the most efficient balance for the activity you are engaged in.

Practice in simple situations will stand you in good stead when you are faced with stressful moments and emergencies where there seem to be too many other things demanding your attention. Treat the simple situations as rehearsals for the difficult ones.

Once again: The role of the conscious mind in direction is repeatedly to formulate a wish for the right thing to happen, to release any muscle tension that may prevent it from happening, and then to let the body's own processes get on with it.

Text: JOHN NICHOLLS
Drawings: DAVID GORMAN



The force of earth will lift us...we don't have to lift ourselves.