

# The Wrong Thing

By Michael Protzel

[Author's Note: In this article, the word 'falling' is used in the sense of falling *down to earth*, not in the sense of falling *off balance*.]

From the time I was first introduced to the work of F.M. Alexander, 27 years ago — when chronic knee, hip, back and neck problems were threatening my day-to-day well-being — I have been working to discover deeper and deeper layers of my mis-use.

Fifteen years ago, I had an unusual moment. I witnessed myself *mis-committing my body weight*<sup>1</sup> during a Qigong lesson. Only I had no words for it then. It was something I had never noticed before. I was 42 at the time. Thus began what has now been a 15-year exploration into how my *directing of the force of my falling* affects my functioning. This learning process has given me a new perspective on the roots of mis-use. At the same time, it has confirmed in my mind Alexander's understanding that the source of habitual misuse can be found in our "incorrect conceptions," "faulty sensory appreciation" and in our focus on ends over means. It has also clarified for me the well-known Alexander cliché, 'when we stop doing the wrong thing, the right thing does itself.' What follows represents my understanding of just what this 'wrong thing' is.

## *Organic Learning*

In the first year of life, our *will to be upright* is irrepressible. So too are the highly-evolved means that enable us to gain this end optimally. They are our biological inheritance. We lay claim to this inheritance by becoming sensitive to, and gaining control over, the tremendous force generated by our downwardly moving body mass. We learn to sit and stand by learning to direct the trajectory of our falling straight down through our balance points (the sit bones in sitting, the taluses in standing). This activates our innate uprighting system, extending us from ground to crown with minimal effort.

But, at the very same time this organic process is playing out, another kind of learning process is happening — one that will ultimately sabotage our innate uprighting capability.

## *Going Wrong*

As infants/toddlers, we constantly see our elders sitting-back. Sitting-back means leaning/falling backwards — back against a chair-support, back into a sofa, bench, car seat. It is the most normal thing in the world. These visual images make an indelible impression on young minds. They teach us that *falling backwards in sitting is a perfectly appropriate thing for human beings to be doing*. This is a major "incorrect conception." Well, it is not really a conception. It is pre-verbal. This is what makes it such a serious problem. Since no thinking (wording) is involved, we don't even know that we have established this 'belief.' Yet, because of it, when we eventually *do* the act ourselves — which we begin doing with alarming regularity around age four — all the sensations we experience we regard as perfectly appropriate too. Sitting-back is a familiar act before we ever do it! Thus, we feel no discomfort. Our "faulty sensory appreciation" keeps us unaware of the muscular straining and skeletal distortions we are creating. It never occurs to us that sitting-back could be damaging. Everyone in our world is doing it, to no apparent ill effect. We join right in — doing it all day long, at home and at school and everywhere else.

We soon lose the vibrant kinesthetic connection with our body weight that enabled us to activate and regularly employ our highly-evolved means of uprighting. Falling backwards kills innate uprighting, and forces us to concoct far less effective means of staying vertical and keeping a level head — ends we are gaining most of our waking lives.

## *We Fall, We Lift*

Human beings teeter atop tiny balance points. We are capable of falling in *any* direction. Whether we are aware of it or not, it is we ourselves who determine moment-by-moment the particular downward trajectory in which we are falling. Gravity would have us fall straight down toward the center of the earth. But we override this tendency — *we interfere*.

This interference costs us dearly — for it is the quality of our falling that determines the quality of our lifting (uprighting). When we direct our falling body mass away from our balance points (which we do with great frequency), we momentarily topple. We then use a chair-back or lean against a wall to stop this topple — or we stop it with uprightness-preserving, enervating muscular effort.

When we fall straight down through our balance points, however, we allow something completely different to happen. We naturally tip *forwards* (simply because we have more weight in front of our central line than behind it). There are skeletal structures on the ground waiting for us as we tip (the balls of the feet in standing, the whole feet in sitting). Our sensitivity to the pressure that our weight creates upon these front support structures, triggers an innate uprighting response, activating our deepest extensor musculature. Beginning with the plantar muscles on the bottom of the feet, this response rapidly ‘moves up’ the body segment-by-segment, uprighting us with minimal effort.

In sitting *back*, however, we send our weight in the exact opposite direction it needs to go. We send it *away from* our essential ground-contact in front. By doing this habitually, we lose the vital connection between how we fall and how we lift, thus losing our ability to direct the powerful force of our falling to our advantage. This negatively affects *everything* we do — our standing and walking activities as well as sitting.

### *Specific Consequences of Sitting Back*

Sitting back creates a set of inter-related problems:

- (1) To function normally requires a relatively level head. We seriously compromise this by tilting backwards the ‘pole’ upon which the head rests. When we fall backwards, immediate head/neck adjustment — tensing the neck — is needed to maintain level-headedness.
- (2) There is no way to fall backwards and simultaneously maintain an upright head and neck without shortening the stature (according to Alexander’s own definition of “shortening” as written in CCCI)<sup>2</sup>. When we move backwards from the hip joints, somewhere between hips and head, the spine is flexing. The farther back we fall, the more we flex.
- (3) Falling backwards in sitting produces the common ‘C-curve’ slump, which is most noticeable when we sit without a back-support. Actually, we create *two* slumps to make the “C”: a backward lumbar/lower-thoracic slump; and a forward upper-thoracic/cervical slump. In order to ‘sit up straight,’ we need to pull ourselves out of both of these slumps. This requires rigorous muscular activity.
  - (a) To lift our forward-slumping upper spine, we must tense large erector spinae muscles. This muscular effort cannot be sustained for very long. We soon are slumping again, or back against the chair (which can mask this slump).
  - (b) To lift our backward-slumping lower spine, we must tense the powerful ilio psoas muscles, narrowing the lower torso as we pull it forwards. Moreover, so long as we want to remain vertical, this tensing must continue. This is because we are still directing our falling backwards, even though we are not aware of it. As with the tensing of the large erector

spinae muscles, our psoas tensing cannot be sustained for very long. When we soon tire, back to the chair-support we go.

- (4) By using the chair-back to support the spine, our deep, intrinsic spinal muscles (interspinalis, intertransversarii, etc.) are denied the opportunity to do their job.
- (5) As we fall into the chair-back, the spinous processes of our thoracic vertebrae are forced to become weight bearing bones, a role for which they are clearly not designed.

### *Trapped*

Isn't it interesting that in this modern era of scientific advancement, science has been unable to clearly describe how our own innate uprighting system works, and how we interfere. Why? I believe it is because we have all become profoundly, but unknowingly, disoriented by habitually falling backwards in sitting — scientists included. In my view, it is this disorientation that has rendered us unable to understand the ABCs of uprighting.

Although our life experience is dominated by our falling backwards, we nonetheless believe that gravity gives us no choice but to fall straight down. This incorrect belief leaves us in denial about our backwards falling. We think we are falling straight down even when we are moving towards a chair- back! We are easily thus deceived because, when we fall backwards, our automatic, compensatory uprighting reactions (driven by our ongoing intention to be upright) are executed so quickly and seamlessly that we notice neither the falling nor the reacting. And, of course, by continually repeating our falling backwards, we reinforce its 'validity,' and the validity of all the neuro-muscular activity that goes with it. This renders us no longer able to recognize 'falling straight down and tipping forwards' as our 'natural habitat.' We regard our self-created, backwards-falling, *alternate* reality as the *only* reality. In other words, we are trapped in habit. Our innate uprighting system is long forgotten, off our radar screen, inaccessible. In this condition, no wonder we cannot say much about how it works and how we interfere.

### *Righting a Wrong*

Our sitting-back habit is a culturally induced 'wrong.' We all get drawn in, without knowing it. Falling backwards repetitively causes us to lose our kinesthetic compass and, with it, our innate ability to upright optimally.

As Alexander Technique teachers, we have the observational skills, and the dedication to 'process,' needed to deconstruct this mother-of-all-bad-habits. By directing our attention to it, and to its ongoing impact, we will come to experience and understand just how it interferes — and we will learn how *not* to do it. When we stop doing this 'wrong thing' — directing our body mass backwards — we will naturally fall straight down and tip forwards, and we will re-experience the working of the 'right thing', our innate uprighting system.

### *Endnotes:*

1. 'Mis-committing weight' means directing our body mass to fall down to earth on a trajectory *other than* straight down through the feet in standing — specifically the two taluses, or through the sit-bones in sitting. This is not a matter of positioning or aligning the body, but of directing its fall, which is continuous.
2. F. Matthias Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, Part II, Sensory Appreciation in its Relation to Learning and Learning to Do, Illustration, page 71 Centerline Press Edition, 1985.

***Michael Protzel** was certified to teach in 1986, and maintains a private practice in New York City and New Jersey. He was NASTAT News Editor 1989-1995, and has been Chair of AmSAT's Professional Conduct Committee since 2001. His work is explained in words and animated illustrations at [www.uprighting.com](http://www.uprighting.com).*

© Michael Protzel, 2007 All Rights Reserved