

Guiding Directions

An isolated phoneme in language does not designate anything. One can only find [meaning in language] through usage...through its integration into the system of signification.
Lacan

An isolated muscle contraction in movement does not designate anything. One can only find the significance of an individual muscle contraction through understanding its usage within the system of muscle functioning.

Alexander encouraged “self-resourcefulness and [the] ability of the mind to use knowledge.” (Westfeldt: 1964:127)¹ “Before he can impart what he knows...a teacher must have experienced in himself enough change to understand the process operationally.” (Jones, 1976:153) The teacher must evolve a “grammar of directions.”²

Directions are volitional.³ They can be wished at any time—lying, sitting, standing, walking. They apply to all activity. Directions do not prescribe correct position, correct movement or correct relaxing. Directions are for clarifying intention. The direction “neck free” intends a releasing of neck muscles to allow a subtle head movement—an adaptability that we deny when we lock our head into a fixed position by chronically tensing our neck muscles. The direction “head forward and up” intends a balanced, easily supported head.

Directing is the process involved in projecting messages from *left* brain to *back* cerebellar mechanisms and in “conducting the energy necessary to the use of these mechanisms.” (Alexander, *UOS:20*) *AT* education is thinking and feeling in activity. But directing is not thinking as commonly understood. It is *left* cortical attention to *back* cerebellar process, without interference by evaluation or reaction. *Left* intends, attends, inhibits habit, allows *back*—and waits.

We are always directing our activity, be it consciously or unconsciously. Unreasoned, unconscious habitual directing is compulsive, unchosen. It is based on habitual, delusive self sensing which mis-structures functioning. *AT* lessons bring the directing process to awareness, to enable more control.

Directing makes the pupil an active participant in the *AT* lesson. Directing improves muscle tone without increasing muscle activity. To direct a lengthening and widening of *back* brings the back muscles to awareness, encouraging more efficient back extensor support and inviting muscles to release to resting length.

Deconstructing Habit with 'Directions'

| | | |
|----------|---|---|
| Express | E | The teacher's directions—"neck free, head forward and up"— are internalized by the AT pupil. They become acts of imagination, which change muscle tone relationships. |
| Imagine | ε | |
| Manifest | δ | |

Table 5-1

Three Directions

Directions are wishes not actions. No direct muscle movements are undertaken. That would be forcing not directing. "It is not necessary to do anything in a muscular sense only to refrain from stiffening." (McDonald, 1989:47) The three primary directions are:

Let the neck be free,

To Let the head go forward and up,

To Let the back lengthen and widen.

Let the neck be free

encourages neck muscles from the base of the skull to the upper torso to release excess tension, be free of effort. The direction includes releasing flexor and rotational cervical muscles and jaw muscles.

Let the head go forward and up

encourages the whole head (from the tip of the chin to the back of the skull, from the base of the occiput to the crown) to be at an optimal distance from the torso.

Let the back lengthen and widen

To lengthen is to avoid excess muscle contraction of the torso—to wish the maximum distance between the top of the cervical spine and the base of the pelvis, without disturbing natural spinal curvature.

To widen is to wish the maximum width across the collar bones and between shoulder blades and to allow the maximum pliability of the rib-cage for optimal breathing—undoing shoulder elevation, pronation and retraction, and allowing costal compliance.

After primary directions for head and torso are introduced, secondary directions can be:

Let ribs be free
Hips free,
Thighs releasing away from hips,
Knees releasing out over toes,
Calves releasing into heels,
Ankles free, feet lengthening
and widening,
Toes lengthening,
Shoulders out and down to the sides,
Shoulders free,
Arms releasing to the elbows,
Elbows free, forearm lengthening,
Wrists free,
Palms lengthening and widening,
Fingers lengthening.

AT teachers may speak the directions gently while guiding the pupil manually, but

[the meanings]...are not fixed...What is wanted is subtle. [Directions] have two contents—a negative or preventive one (to stop the old, familiar reaction) and a positive one which *does itself*. A new pupil is asked to repeat the verbal instructions ...while the teacher, through the use of hands, gives the actual experience associated with the words. (McDonald's italics, 1989:45)

Initially, the experience of a new, more integrated postural coordination brings attention to use. Subsequently, pupils learn anatomical *right* pictures and *left* names to mark, remember and inform the *back* kinesthetic experience of teacher/pupil communion.⁴ This (a) helps the pupil become aware of, and eventually able to choose or reject, a particular use pattern; (b) helps pupil and teacher to remember and study this use; and (c) provides a language for communication beyond the *tactile* lesson (Barker, 1991; Brennan, 1991; Caplan, 1988; Drake, 1991; Gelb, 1994; Grey, 1991; Park, 1989; C. Stevens, 1987).

Release from habitual misuse shifts support from hip flexors to hip and back extensors. Conceptualizing the muscle groups that work in reciprocity to balance pelvis while experiencing this, leads to

understanding muscle function in the context of postural support. This “physiology of the living psychophysical organism” (Dewey) invokes experiential learning in triologue with visual and verbal learning.

As we mature, we lose touch with our compelling inner forces. As toddlers, our inherent will to be upright is so strong that nothing short of trauma aborts its manifestation. The *AT* directions reunite an adult consciousness with that toddler will.

Words In Silence

AT teaching involves the transmission of palpable messages from the teacher’s *back* cerebellar motor process to the pupil’s *back* cerebellar motor process. The messages are initially communicated tactually, through the teacher’s hands. By communicating indirectly with the cerebellum in mute conversation, tactual directions enable the pupil to experience a less habitual, more coordinated motor organization.

The use of words follows and builds upon this kinesthetic communication, establishing a connection between the ongoing, vivid *right* and *back* experience and the *left* words intended to represent (and eventually evoke) it. In *AT* education, developing a language is inevitable, from the first moment to the last. The key to success is to realize that, as the pupil’s *back* system changes and new kinesthesia evolves, language needs to be re-integrated again and again.

Initially, as directions are spoken by the teacher, they become a sharable resource, a vehicle for communication and learning. As lessons progress, the directions become a new subjective sign for the pupil. Directions, as silent thoughts to one’s self, become personal acts of imagination in which “each instance of it [embodies] a definite quality, say of freedom, which renders it fit to call up in the mind the idea of a like object [in this case a certain palpable muscle organization].” (Peirce, *PWP*:116)⁵

Directions Vary

Even the most experienced teachers vary in their use of directions:

[T]he teacher’s skill, particularly his manual skill, . . . is the vital factor in bringing about the necessary changes. He must be a real craftsman—indeed, an artist—in being able to detect with his fingers the often minute changes in the texture of the pupil’s body and to persuade that body to orient itself in the proper way. . . . It must be done by persuasion—intellectual and manual—of the most subtle kind. (McDonald, 198:65-66)

One of the results [of giving *AT* lessons] is that the body, [of the pupil] takes on a particular texture or tone. This tone can be recognized by an experienced pair of hands. I call it feeling the flow of a pupil's body or feeling the life in a body, and it is to get our pupils to produce this actionless activity in themselves that...our efforts, as teachers, are directed. (ibid:82)

The teacher's pauses (indicated by "..."), in the following passage taken from a lesson, are vital to the communication:

Let me help you now further. You do nothing, just follow my hands. Feel your body in between them. Use my hands as mirrors for your body shape ... all right, now you listen to my hands ... let your neck be free ... right, leave it that way ... no, do nothing to leave it that way, just let it be in your awareness ... direct attention to continue contact with your neck-throat and give your head the opportunity to go forward and up ... no, don't do it, just feel my hands ... give your head to me ... that's it ... let's rehearse, neck-throat free ... to let your head go forward and up ... now, keeping your attention spread over neck-throat and head, we extend this conscious area with your shoulders ... drop them ... no, not by tensing your neck ... right ... neck-throat free, to let the head go forward and up, yes ... leave your shoulders alone ... just be aware of them in combination with neck-throat and head ... okay, feel your chestcage between my hands ... be aware of back and front at the same time ... use my hands as mirrors ... they take over the shape of your chestcage and direct it to widen and broaden ... no, don't take over, now you lost contact with your neck-head area ... again, all together one after another: neck-throat free ... yes, to let the head go forward and up ... yes, give the upper trunk opportunity to lengthen and widen ... yes, now you follow my hands ... register your breathing between my hands ... don't interfere with the breathing process ... let it work on it's own. (Bredius and Meulendijks, 1986:6)

These teacher-crafts persons install their kinesthetic ideals in their pupils by persuasion. Other hands-on teaching is less prescriptive, less verbal.

What I experience myself is that [teaching effectiveness] directly arises from the sensitivity of my hands. Obviously my hands have become much more sensitive over the years. At this level

of sensitivity, I can pick up what is happening in the way of resistance and stiffness and contraction and also what is happening in the right direction, in the way of release and going up in someone as I work on them. I get the impression that when things are working right, the pupil takes my hands up. I don't take the pupil's head forward and up, but the pupil's head takes my hands.

I sense what's going on sufficiently to...facilitate and encourage *it*, to say sort of: 'Yes, yes, more, more. More of that.' That's what I suppose they pick up from my hands, so they say 'yes' and they give 'more', and you get a stronger result. In my mind and observation I'm not thinking: 'Now I'm going to take it in this direction, this is where it goes, I'm going to do this.' What I'm saying is 'Now this seems to be going in the right direction, at least it certainly isn't going in the wrong direction, there's no sign that there's anything wrong with this, so let's encourage it and see where it leads to.' (W. Carrington 1988:151-152)

All *AT* teaching approaches make contact with cerebellar process and encourage pupil notice. This brings *left* and *back* into rapport, into serving one another. In some lessons, a teacher may talk about anything except *AT*. This disarms *left* ego vigilance—allowing *back* experience “to speak for itself.”

The teacher places his hand where neck muscles attach to occiput. A gentle manual traction to the head encourages neck and back extensor muscles to release excess efforting. A hand placed near the front upper arm, where chest and shoulder muscles attach to the arm, encourages their release.

It is the tone of the teacher's muscles that conveys the release. Tight, overly contracted muscles in the teacher produce unconscious muscle resistance in the pupil. Released, balanced muscles in the teacher facilitate pupil release.

In the following passage, reconsider Alexander's plowing metaphor (Chapter 2) with “pupil” replacing “plow” and “teacher” replacing “plowman.”⁶

[T]he 'give and take' of the joints of the arms and legs are the chief moving factors which should meet the different movements of the [pupil]. An experienced [teacher's] highly trained guiding sensations will not permit him to make more physical tension with any part of the muscular system than is absolutely necessary, and only the particular muscles best

adapted for the control of his equilibrium and his [pupil] will be called into special use.

Directing Your Self

All *AT* students (teachers included) are regularly constructing and reconstructing a languaged idea of what *AT* is about, of what conscious directing means. This enlarges our kinesthetic framework. But what people choose to emphasize varies. As lessons continue, the ability to imagine and practice self-directing evolves. Most teachers and pupils have found it useful to employ self directions in a resting position:

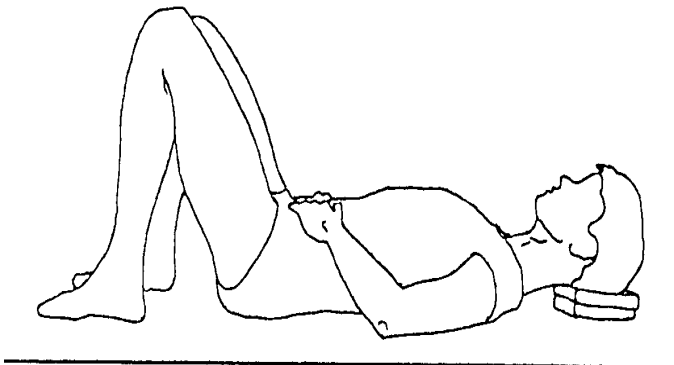


Figure 5-1

AT Rest Position

(Drawing by Gretchen Sommers, 1989)
Courtesy of *Direction Magazine*

Lie on your back on a firm surface with your head supported by a book to avoid neck hyperextension. Bend your knees with the soles of your feet on the floor to reduce lumbar back hyperextension. Or rest your lower legs on a chair to disengage hip flexors and reduce lower back stress.

Place your arms either on the floor beside your body or on your rib cage. Keep your eyes open to integrate kinesthetic awareness with cortex focusing. Think the directions—“let the neck be free, let the head go forward and up, let the back lengthen and widen”—but do absolutely nothing except to notice what happens. *Allow* anything. *Do* nothing.

