

Giving Directions

If a rugby player is asked to kick the ball between the posts from the half-way line, he must strike the ball with his foot in a way which takes into account not only the basic aim (which must be accurate to within about one degree) but also the weight and wind resistance of the ball, the shape and resilience of his boots, the weather conditions and the ball's parabolic trajectory. It is clearly an impossible task to calculate all these variables, and yet a skilled player can achieve consistent results simply by "thinking" the ball where he wants it to go.

A cabinetmaker can plane the edge of a board precisely straight and square, without first measuring or marking it, simply by "asking" the plane to cut true.

A french horn player can reproduce a given pitch and tone quality simply by "imagining" the sound before playing it.

These are all skilled activities in which "trying to *do* it" is much too gross a process to ensure success. This kind of "trying too hard" is known as **endgaining**.¹ Rather, if the person has sufficient positive experience and her intention is clear enough, success follows naturally. In the language of the Alexander Technique this kind of "focused wishing", which has a clear effect on objective reality, is called **directing** or **giving directions**.

Although the above cases are valid examples of direction, the Alexander Technique is generally more concerned with *internal* direction (to parts of yourself, to optimise basic patterns of movement, postural activity, breathing and awareness) than with *external* direction (to, for example, rugby balls).²

In giving yourself a direction (for example directing your back to lengthen), it is important to avoid certain common errors and misconceptions which might otherwise subvert the process.

- Do not endgain by trying to "do the direction". The Alexander Technique aims to establish the easiest conditions for the body; it should not encourage you to push towards a preconceived posture which requires direct effort to maintain.

- Don't imagine that you can "hold yourself in the right shape"; the spine can adopt an infinite number of shapes in order to perform an infinite number of functions. Direction is not a muscular action, it is rather the "inner dynamic focus" of an activity. If the direction is right, the shape will look after itself.

- Avoid "just thinking the words", this is a little like writing a letter and then not posting it. Remember, the purpose of directing is to bring about an observable change.

So, if you're not allowed to do it and you're not allowed to think it, how are you supposed to give directions? A key element in giving yourself directions is that they should have a genuine emotional content; you must physically desire your back to lengthen, whilst simultaneously observing the principle of non-doing.

I said before that "positive experience" is a prerequisite for good direction. The giving of this correct experience is, of course, the primary function of Alexandrian hands-on work, without which the student obviously has no real idea what she is aiming to achieve.

1 *Endgaining* : Unconsidered effort towards a goal; not pausing to consider the most appropriate way to proceed in a given situation. Endgaining is characterised by excessive tension, often accompanied by anxiety or a tendency to rush. It always leads to failure sooner or later.

2 It is perhaps worth noting that highly skilled individuals often experience a "blurring" of the boundary between their own body and their tool - the chisel/flute/tennis racket/long bow becomes an "extension of the self".