

## The Legs and Feet

The legs contain some of the largest and most powerful muscles of the body, but without the back working dynamically to integrate them into an overall pattern of good use, the strength of the legs is wasted. The head, neck and back are the core of your structure, whilst the limbs are only out-branchings.

Activities which engage the legs strongly should engage the back equally strongly. Good runners are well aware that the movement of their arms affects – via the back – the movement of their legs, whilst cycling (particularly uphill) is very much a quadrupedal activity, similar perhaps to crawling or swimming “doggy-paddle”.<sup>1</sup> To attempt to confine such activities solely to the legs – by, for example, riding a bike of the “sit up and beg” style, or lifting by “using the legs, not the back” – on the assumption that this will be better for your weak back, merely deprives you of the health-giving pleasure of using yourself as an integrated whole, and incidentally your weak back will always stay that way.

Learning to use your legs in the correct way – as extensions of your back – can begin as part of your semi-supine practice; if there is any excessive tension in your legs it will be difficult to balance them so that your knees point easily at the ceiling, biased neither to pull in towards each other, nor to fall outwards, but directed effortlessly upwards in opposition to your hips and lower back releasing back into the table.

Many beginners complain that they cannot “relax” in the semi-supine position because their knees fall over, and they have to clench up to hold them still. However, if an analogy is made between balancing the knees pointing upwards in semi-supine and, for example, balancing a broomstick vertically on your finger, it becomes clear that the problem is not one of tension or relaxation, but one of *balance*, informed by accurate kinaesthetic feedback.

It may be worth pointing out that the above idea holds true not just for the upright balance of the legs in semi-supine, but for upright posture in general. In this way semi-supine teaches vertical balance, as well as fully supported non-doing. As your experience of the Technique increases, standing can become less and less a question of “holding yourself up”, and more and more a question of “resting on the ground and balancing”. The legs and feet are important here because they provide the all important contact with the ground.

When you get up from semi-supine onto your feet, you will no longer have your weight distributed over such a large area of your body as your back; you will have to make do with the relatively tiny area of the soles of your feet to support you. Alexander wrote of a voice teacher who advised him to “take hold of the floor with your feet”, and goes on to relate how the tightening and gripping with his feet in which he engaged in obedience to his teacher had a disastrous effect on his use, and not least on his breathing.<sup>2</sup>

When standing, you should in fact aim to allow your weight to settle your feet onto the floor, almost as if you were still lying down and your feet were “little backs”. This way of using the feet will help you “rest on the ground and balance” and, paradoxically, will correct gradually any tendency towards flat-footedness. Allowing the ground to support you in this way demands that all the muscles in your legs are releasing and lengthening out of your torso. A useful indicator of excessive tension in the legs is the knees pulling towards each other as you move in and out of the chair, stand in monkey, climb stairs, push on a bike pedal, and so on.<sup>3</sup> The most important direction for the legs is expressed as ***knees forward and away***. *Forward* is the direction towards the ceiling in semi-supine, and *away* is a prevention of the tendency to clamp the knees together. In the hierarchy of good use this is the fifth direction, coming straight after *back to widen*. Like all the primary directions, knees forward and away is a *constant* direction – applicable regardless of the position or the direction of movement of the legs.

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1 This is not to say that there will necessarily be noticeable movement in any part of the body other than the legs, but there *should* be an internal dynamic whereby the back is engaged to support the legs.

2 *The Use of the Self*, FM Alexander, 1932, Chapter 1 “Evolution of a Technique”.

3 See page 5, *The Startle Pattern*.