

# Lengthening and Widening

The most noticeable distinguishing feature of an experienced Alexandrian is her back. A well coordinated back is effortlessly erect, it appears both immensely strong and stable, yet at the same time improbably fluid and supple. Above all, a good back seems natural, easy, inevitable – as if it could not be any other way.

This integrity of the back is cultivated through the third and fourth primary directions:

### 3 *back to lengthen*

### 4 *back to widen*

#### **Lengthening**

When well coordinated, the spine, combined with the musculature which stabilises and moves it, acts a little like a compression spring; it responds to being “loaded” (in bearing the weight of the head and upper body, and in providing support for work like digging or carrying) by generating what might best be described as an “upthrust”. In the Alexander Technique this upthrust is referred to as the *back lengthening*. This is the essence of going up.

#### **Widening**

A great many structures of the body, from the larynx to the heart, the diaphragm to the digestive organs are suspended, more or less directly, from the spine. These structures depend upon the natural spring of the spine or lengthening of the back to support them correctly so that they can function optimally.

This is most obvious in the way that a lengthening back supports the shoulders and the ribs in an open, strong and mobile way. If the back is not lengthening then the chest cavity collapses and/or rigidifies and the shoulders narrow; if then there is any aerobic demand or the arms have to act vigorously, there is no option but to employ huge amounts of inappropriate effort in order to gain the desired end.

When the back is working well and its natural upthrust is supporting the shoulders, ribs, internal organs, abdominal muscles and so on, we say that the back is not only lengthening but also *widening*.

#### **Giving The Primary Directions**

The widening of the back depends upon the lengthening of the back which in turn is dependent upon the head going forward and up, which is only possible if there is an absence of excessive tension in the neck. So, in giving yourself the primary directions, you should aim to do so cumulatively. Alexander used to say “All together, one after the other”. Ideally then, the four primary directions are *not*:

1 neck free

2 head forward and up

3 back lengthen

4 back widen

but rather:

1 neckfree

2 neckfreeheadforwardandup

3 neckfreeheadforwardandupbacklengthen

4 neckfreeheadforwardandupbacklengthenandwiden

I sometimes liken directing in this way to building a house of cards – with each successive layer the process becomes more skilful, and if you make the slightest mistake, you’re back at the beginning. Aim to learn to enjoy starting from scratch and seeing how many layers of direction you can maintain before you begin to lose sight of the first layer – and when you think you’ve “got it” don’t be frightened of throwing it away and seeing how efficiently you can build it up again.

Learning to direct in this way gradually diminishes the knots, distortions and weaknesses which get in the way of our using ourselves well. It is not a question of forcing our bodies into “the right shape” – skilled direction erodes tension habits in the same way that the sea and sand soften the contours of a pebble - slowly but inexorably.