

Pulling Down, Going Up and Appropriate Tension

The principal characteristic of good postural coordination is the ability to maintain your full height. This does not imply military style “good posture” or even an ideal correct shape, but rather an on-going dynamic tendency to spring easily up in response to gravity throughout any movement, regardless of the particular bodily attitude required by a specific task.

If you try, in the name of “good posture”, to “sit/stand up straight” simply through direct effort, all you will succeed in doing is to add huge amounts of muscular tension to an already distorted structure. In so doing you will be *increasing* the level of discoordination within yourself. Conversely, when a person’s use begins to improve, there is a marked, often visible, process of *unravelling* towards her full height.

You should aim to “relax upwards”.

A useful way to understand this is to consider the postural role of your muscles. In maintaining posture, balance and integrity of movement it is the muscles’ job to support the skeleton at its full size. If the muscles are over relaxed and floppy, the skeleton will begin to sag and collapse; conversely, if the muscles are too tense, they will distort, compress and pull the skeleton down.

Most people exhibit a combination of both passive

collapse and active compression¹ interfering with their innate tendency to “go up”. It is precisely these layers of interference which the skill of non-doing seeks to eradicate.

Many people, particularly those with back problems and those involved in activities such as singing, horse riding or Tai Chi which traditionally demand a well organised back, experience a sort of oscillation between the perceived ideal of “good posture” which seems to demand a great deal of effort and tension, and the perceived ideal of “relaxation” which seems to result in loss of balance and strength and virtual cessation of breathing.

It is easy to fall into the trap of trying to find a happy medium – a mid point on an imaginary continuum – between these two extremes. This way of thinking is however a dead end because such a continuum progresses from “utterly floppy”, through “very collapsed and a bit stiff” and “a bit dull and very pulled down” to “completely rigid”. It *never* supports the skeleton at its full size and *never* passes through “poised, up and free-moving”. This is the reason why many Alexander teachers consider the very ideas of “good posture” and “relaxation” to be unhelpful.

It is necessary, therefore, to find a different approach which combines avoidance of *unnecessary* tension (inhibition) with a strong

intention to open out towards one’s full size (*direction*²). This facilitates the optimum functioning of the *postural reflexes*,³ part of the function of which is to organise balance, physical alignment and movement in such a way that maintaining your full height is practically effortless. This is what is happening when a student experiences a sense of “lightness” after an Alexander lesson.

In this situation your muscles are toned – there exists *appropriate tension*, analogous perhaps to the tuning of a violin. The two concepts of relaxation and non-doing are often confused; the distinction is to be found in the idea of appropriate tension. If you relax you become dull and lifeless. If you practise non-doing you cease to restrict yourself, and thereby come alive. strong, yet free from tension.

1 Whether or not this “pulling down” is experienced through specific symptoms of pain or loss of function, it is important to realise that it will *always* involve:

- chronic muscle stiffness
- inefficient breathing
- interference with the sense of balance
- excessive pressure on joints
- failure to maintain the correct environment for the optimum functioning of the internal organs, including the heart, lungs and digestive organs.

2 *Direction* : Conscious attention to a part of yourself which causes a quality of liveliness in that part. The partner of inhibition – together they form the mainstay of Alexander practice.

3 The “righting reflex” of a falling cat is a striking example from another species.