

The Shoulders, Arms and Hands

Many people seem to make use of their shoulders as a kind of “tension barometer”, being acutely aware of “pulling my shoulders up around my ears” or of rounding them forwards in response to stress. It is tempting – and seemingly commonsensical – to correct such distortions by pulling the shoulders back and/or down, but this approach fails in three ways.

- The shoulders are only “wrong” because of active interference with their natural poise; to add another layer of “doing” (by pulling the shoulder blades together, or jamming the shoulder girdle¹ down onto the ribs) in an attempt to correct the situation is only to compound your problems.
- No-one knows what precise position the shoulders (or any other part of the body) should adopt at any given moment; that can only be organised by removing interference with the natural processes of balance and allowing the shoulders to right themselves.
- The poise of the shoulders (like, for example, the quality of breathing) is a *result* of the quality of coordination of the head, neck and back.

You will achieve little by working on the shoulders in isolation because the misuse of the shoulders is just a symptom of a more general and primary misuse of the central core of your structure.

The simplest useful direction to the shoulders is that they should widen.² This direction can be given as part of the fourth primary direction, back to widen. The shoulder blades, which support most of the strength of the arms, can legitimately be regarded as part of the back.

However, perhaps the most important consideration is a preventative one: aim to direct the shoulders in such a way that they do not compromise the overall lengthening of the neck and back. You might verbalise this direction as “Shoulders not to spoil the lengthening”. I find this idea particularly useful in semi-supine work and in activities where the back is strongly engaged, for example singing or horse riding.

Aim also to separate the movement of the shoulders from the movement of the ribcage. You should be able to allow easy mobility of the ribs in breathing without heaving the shoulders, and full mobility of the arms without restricting your breathing.

The poise of the shoulders can be further refined by inhibiting any tendencies to jam the arms into the shoulder joints, or to stick the elbows out.

When the shoulders are widening, the arms can lengthen out of and, at the same time, be strongly integrated with the back.

In turn the hands can release out of the forearm and wrist, to open out and soften onto any surface with which they are in contact. Awareness of the palms of the hands resting on the torso in semi-supine, the practice of crawling, and other procedures such as “hands on the table in monkey”, in which the hands are “used as feet” can encourage this coordination of the arms and hands.

In time, all the processes outlined on this page combine to establish a healthy fundamental pattern of use of the upper limbs which is appropriate for any use of the hands from the martial arts to bathing a baby, from playing a violin to making one.

1 *Shoulder Girdle*: The structure formed by the shoulder blades (*Scapulae*) and the collar bones (*Clavicles*).

2 Any misuse of the shoulders – pulling up, down, back, forward, slumping, bracing or any combination of these – amounts to *narrowing*.