

THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE SET OF DIRECTIONS

This paper is intended as a guide for those who are already having individual Alexander lessons.

- DIRECTIONS:**
- Neck free
 - Head forward and up
 - Back lengthen and widen
 - Knees forward and away
 - Heels down

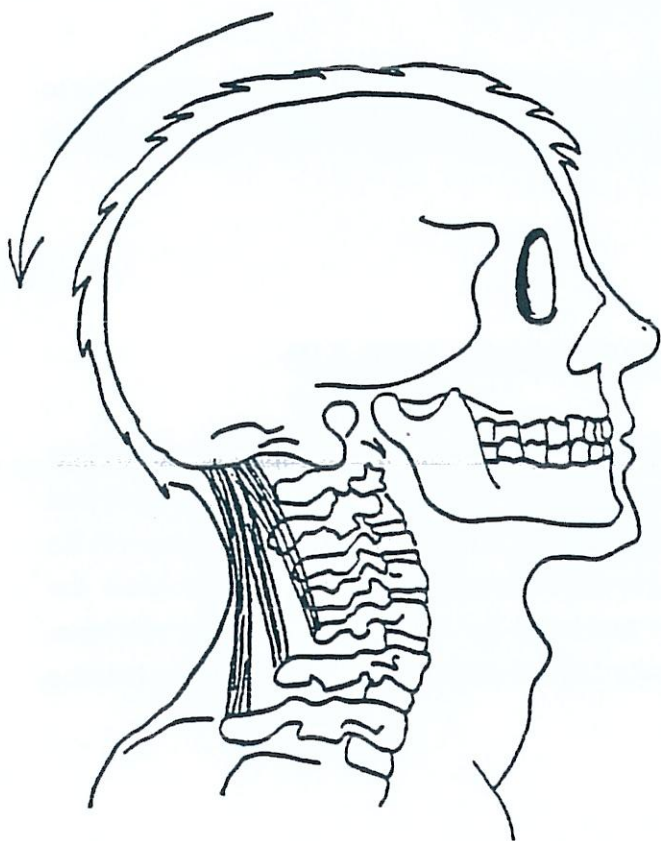
These are the directions in which the parts of the body should be simultaneously tending to go relative to each other for optimum functioning of the whole system.

The role of the conscious mind in direction is repeatedly to formulate a wish for the right thing to happen, to release any muscle tension that may prevent it from happening, and then to let the body's own processes get on with it.

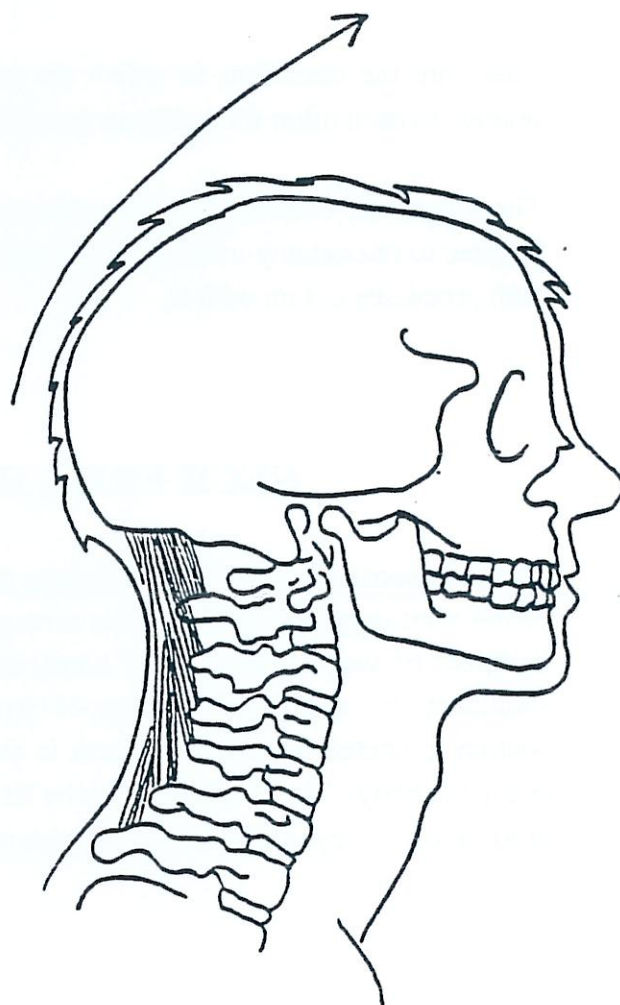
NECK FREE, HEAD FORWARD AND UP

The neck consists of the top 7 vertebrae of the spine, forming a column which supports the weight of the head (approx. 10 lbs). This arrangement is anchored by "guy ropes" of muscle, fascia and ligament of varying degrees of elasticity to the upper part of the body, i.e. to the top of the shoulders, the upper back, and upper chest. These guy ropes need to be free enough to allow the column to stretch out from the trunk in the direction that takes the head to its maximum elevation above the body. The head must also be left free to make any movements necessary to adjust balance or to follow the eyes wherever they wish to focus.

In stress situations we habitually tighten the guy ropes, drawing the column of neck and head down towards the body, as if we are afraid of "losing our heads". Because the strongest of the guy ropes attach to the back of the skull, behind the point at which the head pivots on the top vertebra, we also, at the same time, draw the head back on the top of the neck column. Hence, as Alexander teachers say, we pull the head "back and down", and in many people this is so habitual that it has become part of their permanent posture. "Forward and up" is the opposite of "back and down", and is the direction in which we need to encourage the head to go to avoid the stress reaction.



Back and down.



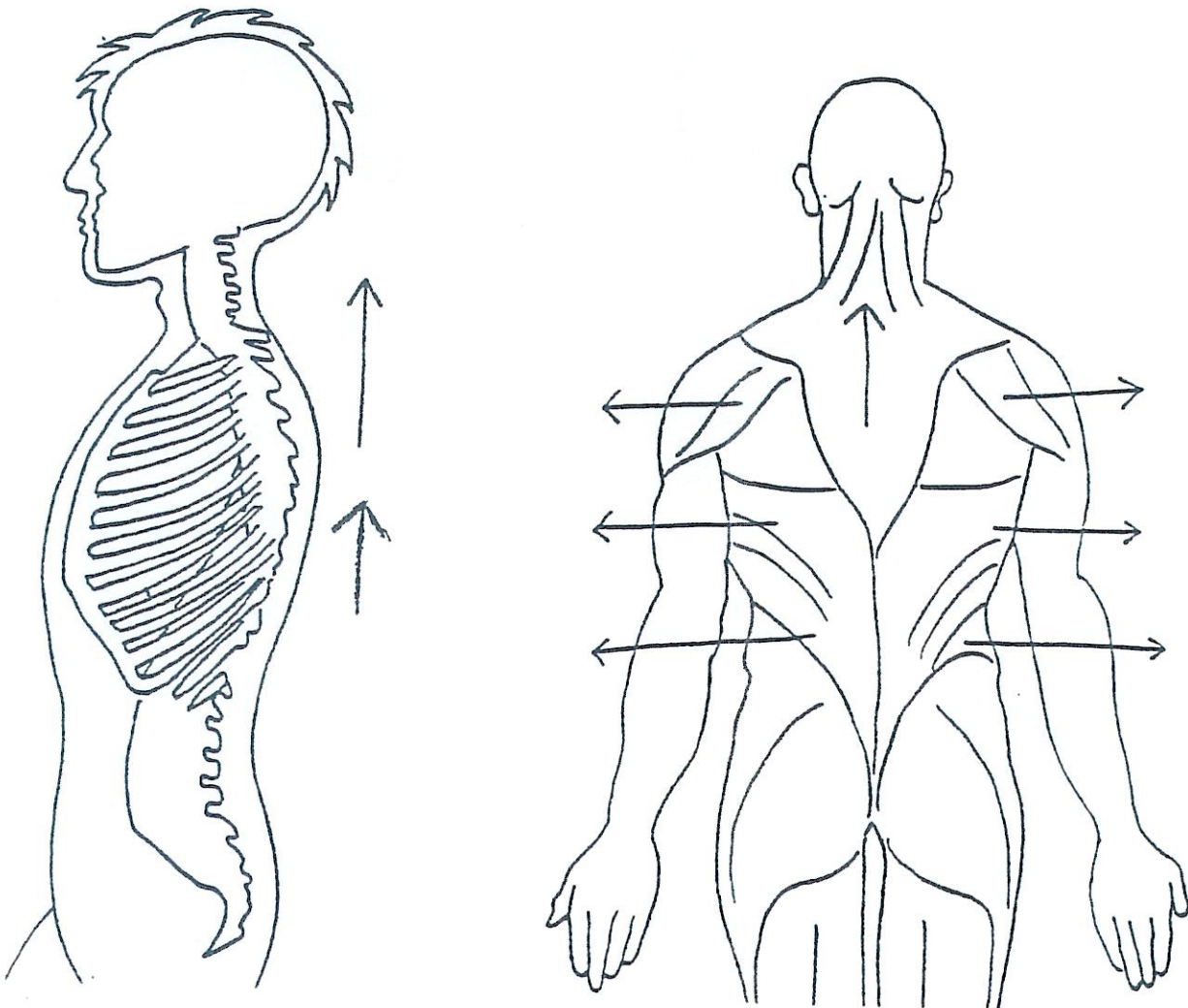
Forward and up.

BACK LENGTHEN AND WIDEN

The back means all the remainder of the spine from the base of the neck to the tailbone, all the muscle, fascia and ligament that attaches to the spine, and the back of the rib-cage. (The ribs come from the breast-bone at the front, around the sides to the back to join the upper half of the spine).

We need to encourage the back to extend so that the vertebrae are tending away from each other, rather than compressing the discs between them, and the curves of the upper and lower back to be as shallow as possible (though not, of course, absolutely straight). In this way, the upper back will stretch and straighten, the lower back fill out.

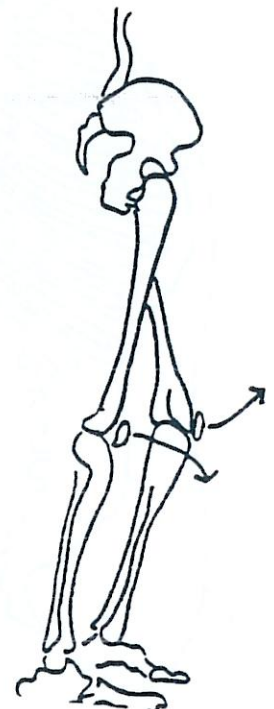
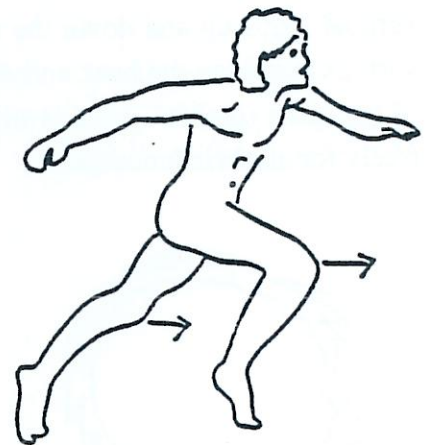
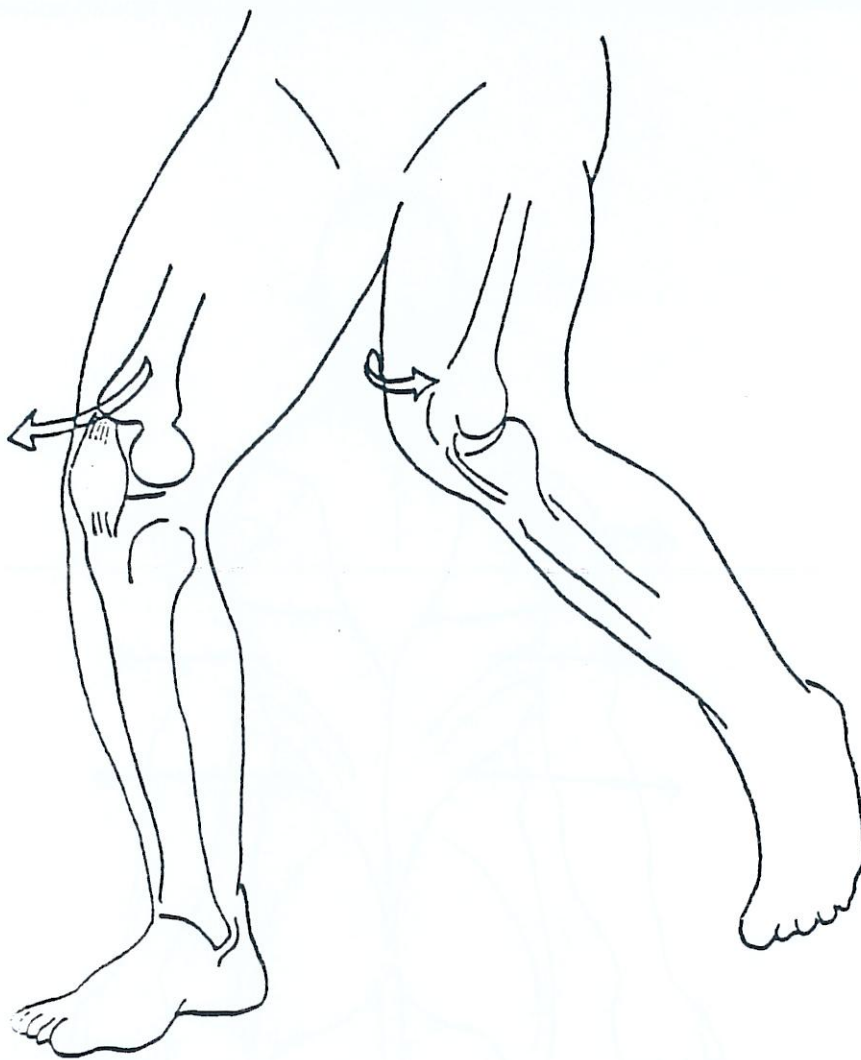
The back must also be directed to widen because the powerful muscles of the back do not just run in vertical strips up and down the spine. Many of them fan out diagonally from the spine to attach at various points on the back and sides of the rib-cage, and even right through the shoulders to the tops of the arms (inner). All this musculature must be as elastic as possible to allow the ribs to move freely for all their functions.



KNEES FORWARD AND AWAY

In most people, when the back is over-contracted the legs tend to have the thigh-bones turned inwards so that the knees no longer point out over the toes, but more inwards towards each other. The big thigh muscles, especially those at the backs and the insides of the thighs, need to release to let the knees point "forward and away" over the toes.

This is true in all activities, not just sitting or standing still, but in walking, running, climbing stairs etc.

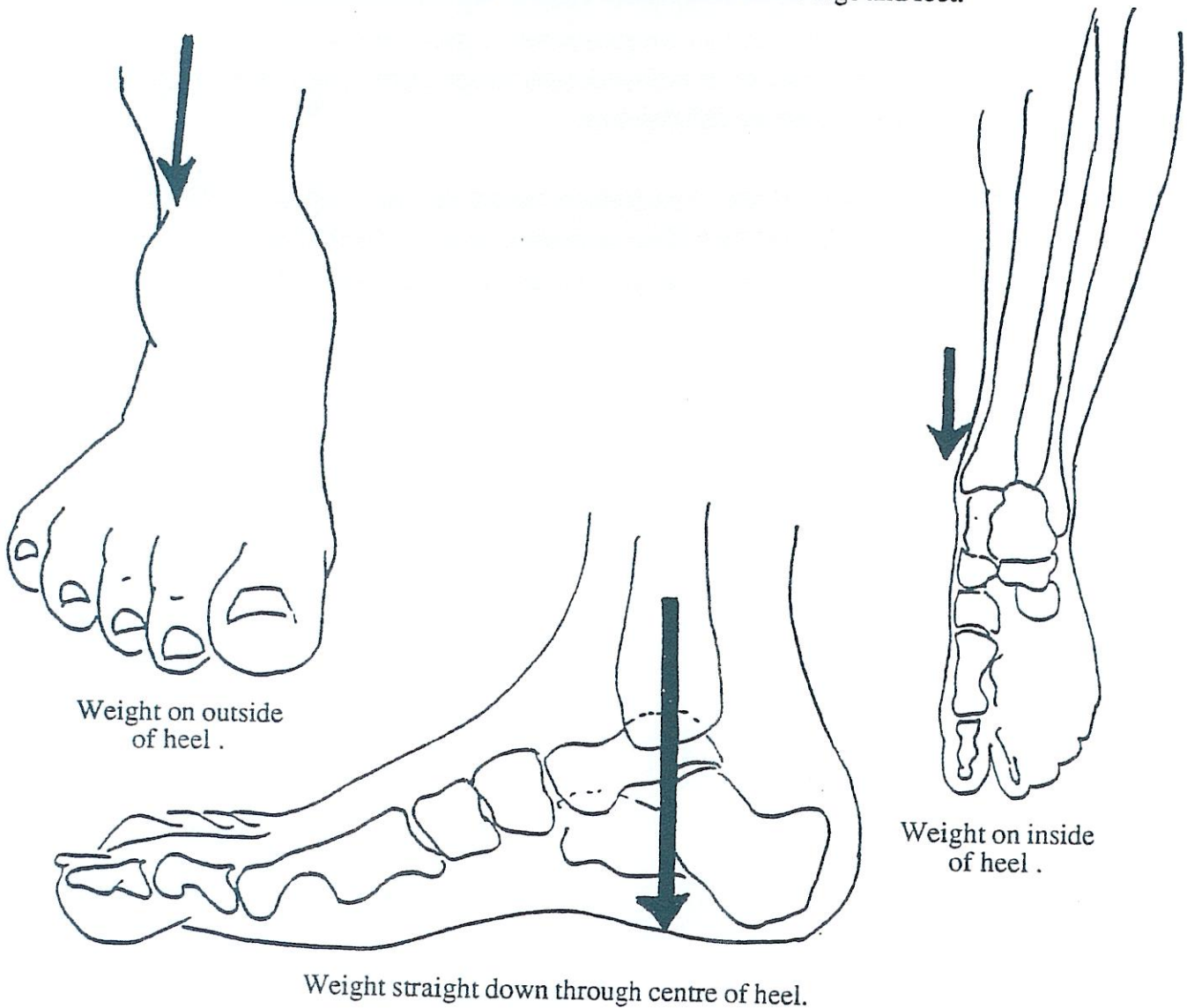


HEELS DOWN

The aim of all these directions is not to be using unnecessary muscle power to try to keep the weight of the body up off the ground, but to let the weight pass through the bones of the spine, pelvis, legs and feet into the ground, while the natural spring mechanisms support the body with the head up at its full height.

The direction "heels down" reminds us not to tense the leg muscles in an effort to push or pull ourselves off the ground, but to let the bones take the weight. The pressure of the ground against the heels also helps to activate the complex muscular reflexes that erect the spinal column and maintain our upright balance.

It is worth noting that the weight should be directed down through the centre of the heel. Often it will be found to be carried more on the outside or inside of the heel. Encouraging the weight down through the centre of the heel will help to correct distortions in the legs and feet.



GENERAL POINTS

Always begin with the neck and head, then follow through with the other directions. This is because the flexible balance of the neck and head conditions the balance of the rest of the body (Alexander's "primary control").

If there seems no time to think of the whole lot, at least remember, your neck and head.

PRACTICE DIRECTING ANY TIME, ANY WHERE. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE SITTING OR STANDING STILL OR IN "SEMI-SUPINE". YOU DON'T HAVE TO ADOPT ANY SPECIAL POSTURE. Practice directing when sitting watching TV, talking with friends, climbing stairs, washing and cooking, and even lying in bed. You will find your body gradually adopting the most efficient balance for the activity you are engaged in.

Practice in simple situations will stand you in good stead when you are faced with stressful moments and emergencies where there seem to be too many other things demanding your attention. Treat the simple situations as rehearsals for the difficult ones.

Once again: The role of the conscious mind in direction is repeatedly to formulate a wish for the right thing to happen, to release any muscle tension that may prevent it from happening, and then to let the body's own processes get on with it.

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