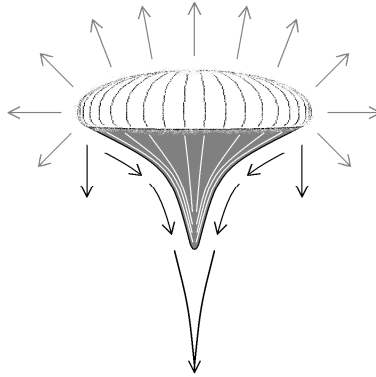


Where is the Alexander Technique's 'right brain'? or Use and the use of imagery



by John Appleton

This article has been edited and amended since it first appeared on alexandertechnique.com.
Comments are appreciated.

This article proposes that mental imagery is the 'missing link' in the understanding of the nature of use and a tool for bringing about an experience of improved use.* Specifically, I am proposing that what I have come to call "posture release imagery," represents, in large measure, a "right brain" understanding of the Alexander Technique, addressing specific principles such as "inhibition," "primary control," "lengthening and widening," and "direction" through visual and tactile/kinesthetic means. As such, the specific imagery can let us into an understanding of ourselves that otherwise is not available.

* Published articles I have written that address some of the material here from different perspectives:

(2007) Illustrations and mental imagery of archetypal forms of early organisms – a new approach to exposing and releasing habitual and dysfunctional posture. *Journal of Bodywork and Movement Therapies*, 11 (issue 1): 25-36. This article has the full text available for reading online as part of the current sample issue.

(2006) Postulating that our neurological models for musculoskeletal support, movement, and emotional expression come from archetypal forms in early organisms. *Medical Hypotheses*, 66 issue 5): 1029-1035.

(Summer 2004). Use and the Use of Imagery. *AmSAT News*.

Any language, whether used to describe the Alexander Technique or to assist with invoking an experience of improved use, induces images. Those images may be conscious or less conscious, sharp or fuzzy. The imagery here differs because it is introduced expressly to be an image. It is illustrated as well as described both visually and tactile/kinesthetically in order to provide some control of the inevitable and necessary images of the mind.

We have all heard of the categories of ‘verbal,’ ‘visual,’ ‘auditory’ and “tactile/kinesthetic” learners. People not only have varied performance skills but also have varied perceptual skills. People predisposed to absorb information verbally and tactile/kinesthetically learn well through The Alexander Technique. Teachers talk to their students and touch them. Some teachers verbally describe visual imagery to assist with one aspect of the work or another, but I am not aware of any imagery that is actively promoted to deal with all aspects of use. I happen to be one of those people with a strong tendency to visualize. I try to create a visual picture and sometimes a tactile picture of most concepts that I entertain. It is for this reason that I write this article. The Alexander Technique can reach more people, without degradation of principles, with the addition of visual and tactile constructions.

While the methods I describe may seem unorthodox, I believe they can be of great benefit to practitioners of the Alexander Technique.

Mental imagery – telling your body what to feel

Mental imagery involves substantial “right brain” thinking. What is “right brain” thinking, in the context of this article? It is feeling. We have all learned the lesson on numerous occasions that we cannot necessarily trust our feelings, at least when it comes to normal everyday use. We know that to attempt to sense how we are doing...standing, sitting, moving...can be a dead-end effort. Sensing what the body feels or attempting to name what the body feels is a minefield.

The value of the specific mental imagery that follows, however, is that it is temporarily *telling* your body what *to* feel; not asking the body what it does feel. This point is very important. The reason that this task is valuable, that of telling the body what sensations to have, is because varied intentions and sensations direct the body to various configurations or postures. How you “feel,” specifically, on different parts of your body surface determines how you are postured.

The effect of mental imagery on posture and movement has been used in the development of a wide variety of imagery used primarily in the dance world. It is generally known as Ideokinesis. All of the images “work” and have undoubtedly been very helpful to dancers and non-dancers who have studied it. It is worth exploring if this article interests you. The imagery presented here, however, I consider superior for development of improved general use. It is directly related to the brilliance of the Alexander Technique in its constant consideration of the whole of the self as well as its consideration of areas of primary importance.

The Alexander Technique *and* Posture Release Imagery

There are features of common AT practice that can be augmented with mental imagery. Inhibition is considered first. The directions that include and follow "...back to lengthen and widen..." are second. Third, is primary control. Included are imagery exercises that need to be attempted in order to develop an understanding of this article. Please give these exercises a bonafide chance in order to fully understand these concepts.

Inhibition *and* mental imagery

Inhibition is paramount in the process of finding a new way to respond. Whether we are good at it or not, AT practitioners know that it is one of the keys to unlocking a new world of response for us. The implied rules for using mental imagery, and the explicit rules for its use here, are compatible with the concept of inhibition. To experiment with a mental image is to *think* something, not *do* something. To do something directly, in this context, is to *imitate*, which is a completely different activity. *Imitating* an elephant, for instance, involves very different musculature and creates very different results than *imagining being* an elephant.

Inhibition, as important as it is in creating space for choice and conquering habit, is *implicitly* fostered in the mental images I propose. Inhibition can be *explicitly* fostered in the coming exercises, as well. Every effort to imagine but not to imitate is useful. Oddly, you can even imagine that the changes you will be imagining are happening against your will! That may sound complex, but it works and succeeds in "purifying" the experience, reducing the chance that imitation will creep in.

Imitation (which undercuts inhibition) and imagination (which supports inhibition) are not always easily separable. Most of us who have studied the Alexander Technique for a while, I am sure, have experienced being an "Alexandroid." This "condition" demonstrates the problem of imitation vs. imagination. Our strong desire to succeed as Alexander Technique teachers and students can cause us to "do," rather than imagine or think through, our concept of good use. It causes us to be, and appear to be, uncomfortably "up." What we need, instead, is to keep in mind principles of good use, which I suggest can be especially well kept in mind as specific archetypal images.

If imagining does not interfere with inhibition, would imagining being an individual with good use be effective? Actually imagining being someone else, with or without good use, can have some interesting and educational effects. Imagining being another person, in effect, is imagining having his or her structural style and this can give you an experience of structural variation and options. However, it will not teach you how other people have learned to inhibit their habits or dysfunctional aspects of their style. The somatosensory and structural ideals imbedded in the archetypal imagery introduced here, on the other hand, do provide the goal and direction needed for appropriately inhibited use.

Giving directions for the “...back to lengthen and widen...”
and the cooperation of the dorsal and ventral body surfaces

To experience some “right brain” clarity from imagery we first need to acquaint ourselves with the dorsal and ventral surfaces of the body. Look over the illustrations of Figure 1. The white area represents the dorsal surfaces and the black are the ventral surfaces. These are my own images, as I have not found a complete mapping of the dorsal and ventral distinction on humans as shown here. However, I believe that, generally, it will hold up to a review by zoologists and anatomists. The specific location of dorsal and ventral elements is probably most questionable on the face, but imagery results suggest the pattern presented here.

Part A of Figure 1 shows where the dorsal (white) and the ventral (dark gray) surfaces are found on the body. The “bear rug”-like creatures in part A (as well as the horizontal creature in the inset below them) represent simple archetypal forms of four legged creatures (tetrapods) that have their dorsal and ventral surfaces simply delineated. On those creatures, the dorsal is up and the ventral is down. As humans have evolved to an upright position, the dorsal and ventral surfaces maintain some of the top and bottom distinction but much of the dorsal appears on the back side while some appears on the front side.

By comparing the dorsal and ventral surfaces, it can be seen that some associated surfaces on humans have spiraled, arched, or otherwise moved. The dorsal part of our legs, for instance, no longer faces the same direction as the dorsal back. In addition, elements of the face that are dorsal (by origin) also face opposite to the dorsal back. This process of dorsal and ventral change was structurally necessary for an upright structure to develop. Part B perhaps better displays the dorsal and ventral surfaces on several views of a more human model. (The head is enlarged in order to show detail.)

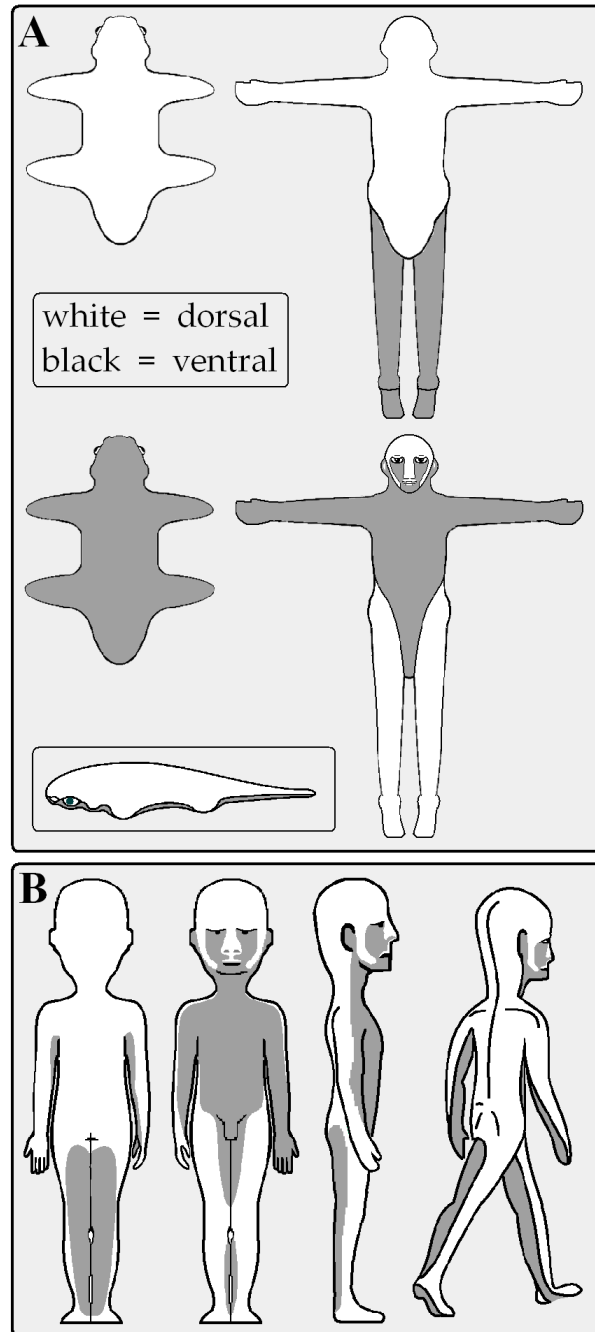


Figure 1 – Dorsal and ventral surfaces

The dorsal/ventral concept relates to the Alexander Technique's "...back to lengthen and widen..." if one accepts the the following principle:

Early organisms' means of support (against gravity) became the instrument for neurologically directing efficient support in higher life forms (with internal skeletal systems). That is, the dome- and arch-shaped qualities of the dorsal surface and the more toned or gently contracted qualities of the ventral surface, which provided actual support for early organisms, became not the actual but the neurological model for appropriate human structure (posture).

Figure 2 illustrates this concept. It shows how the dorsal and ventral surfaces can act together to bring support and "lift" to a single cell or early creature or provide neurological guidance to later skeletal structures that support bigger and heavier organisms. Box A depicts an archetypal boneless organism that supports itself against gravity only by control of its surfaces, dorsal and ventral. By expanding its upper dorsal surface and contracting its lower ventral surface, it comes up a bit in the world. Box B represents support of a larger archetypal organism with a skeletal system. This tent-like figure shows a skeleton that is structurally similar to the earlier organism, promoting full dorsal and flat ventral surfaces. Box C shows how the organism in Box A, in contrast, might be poorly supported if it reversed forces and contracted the upper dorsal surface and expanded the lower ventral surface. A skeletal structure to support Box C would be necessarily complex and inefficient by comparison to Box B.

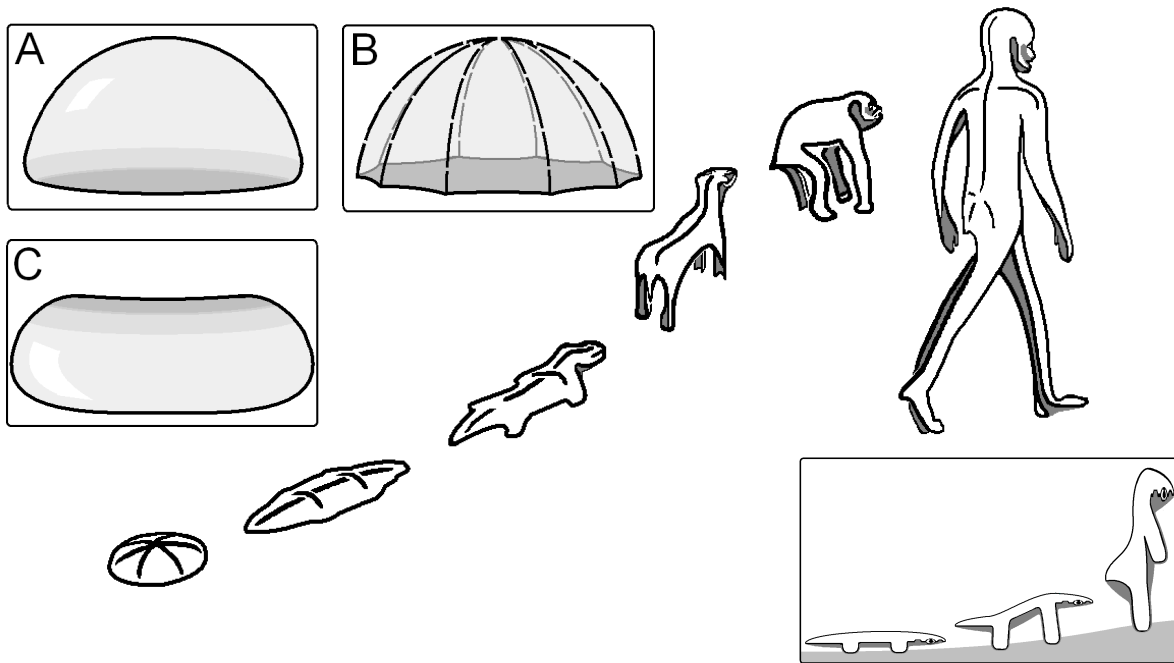


Figure 2 – “Dome- and arch-shaped qualities of the dorsal surface...”

The familiar “evolution” drawing in the middle of Figure 2 shows evolving of the dorsal and ventral surfaces. Though organisms have gone through considerable change, the original dorsal surface still remains *generally* up and ventral surface remains *generally* down. The small insert to the lower right of Figure 2 perhaps makes this clearer. The final question is: Could this simple arrangement... that is, generally maintaining a gently expanded dorsal surface and a gently contracted ventral surface... be part of man’s “supreme inheritance”?

Exercises

Calm up and tense down

Now let us turn these illustrations and concepts into an image exercise. Sitting in a chair is probably the best way to experiment with this exercise. The very first and simplest image is short: Imagine that, due to uncontrollable forces, you are beginning to “*calm up and tense down*.” This means more specifically that the dorsal surface is “calming up” and the ventral surface is “tensing down.” This is not linguistic silliness. They are orders that tend to prevent us from either tensing *up* or calming *down*, neither of which are functionally ideal outcomes. Play with this image and idea for a while and then proceed to the next exercise.

This next exercise adds qualities, in addition to “calm up and tense down,” for you to imagine as existing on the body’s surface. These added qualities are visual or tactile/kinesthetic. The archetypal creature *A*, in Figure 3, is the same model as introduced before. Creature *B* is the antithesis of the archetype on the left, exhibiting opposite qualities. That illustration shows a taut dark dorsal and a full puffy and white ventral surface. (It is not an ideal structure for a land-bound tetrapod, though it may be useful for fishes of the sea. Water pressure and buoyancy in water changes the simple physics of support considerably.) This next exercise involves imagining being like creature *A* but at any point in the exercise, you can spend a moment imagining the qualities suggested by this antithetical creature *B*. However, I do not suggest you imagine it for long. It does not feel good nor is it good for you. I suggest it merely as a test that will help you to understand the potential effectiveness of the positive imagery.

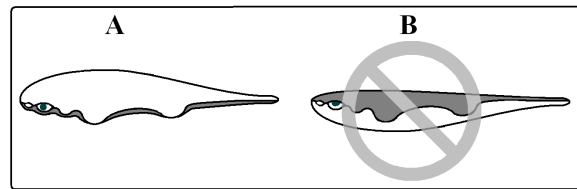


Figure 3 – Structural archetype of a tetrapod

Posture by sensation control

So, to begin: Sit a bit forward and up on a chair. Do not lean back in the chair. Sit without you legs crossed or you fingers clasped together. Imagine that not only is your dorsal surface “calming up,” but it also appears to be bulging or puffing up a bit like a parachute, with some helium trapped underneath it (Figure 4). It looks very white with a very dry and soft fluffy, furry, or cotton ball-like surface. Spend time applying these qualities to as much of the dorsal surface as you can. That includes places like the upper

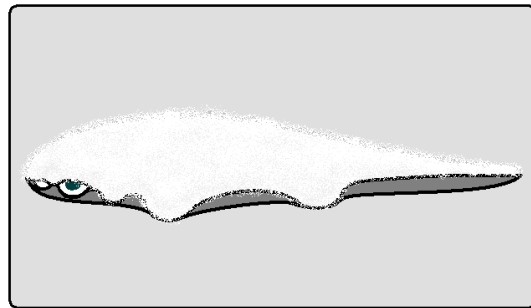


Figure 4 – Calm up and tense down

eyelids, behind the ears, the top of your head, the nose and upper lip, and the dorsal side of your “tail” (vestigial as it may be). Some areas will be decidedly more stubborn at accepting the new sensations than others. Work to include all areas, since it is the sum total of a complete image, the gestalt effect, that is most valuable. You will hopefully make some “break throughs” which will cause not only the image to be sensed as more complete but will also bring shifts in your habitual postural set.

Now, imagine that your entire ventral surface is “tensing down.” Even if you do not quite know what that means, try thinking it. Add to that thought the image that the ventral surface is quite opposite in qualities to the dorsal. Imagine that the ventral surface is becoming taut, more contracted (just imagine, do not actively “do” it), as well as dense, dark, damp, and heavy. Perhaps there is a layer of water or wet sand inside that makes the ventral surface feel heavy. In addition, unlike the dorsal surface that can hold helium under its light fluffy surface, the ventral surface is somewhat contracted, weighted down and leaks a bit, dripping wet sand. Search out areas that are ventral but you have not thought about...perhaps the bottoms of your feet, lower eyelids, groin area, or bottom of the “tail.”

Imagining is not nearly as easy as seeing, so do not expect to succeed at aspects suggested immediately or in one session.

The combined images for the dorsal and ventral surfaces should make you feel for a while that you are being “pulled apart at the seams.” This sense of separation is good and change like this can sometimes have an ache accompany it. Whereas strong pleasure is a form of contraction, strong release often contains an ache, or “growing pains.” If you have difficulty experiencing anything, it may just take trying to think more vividly. There is nothing wrong with exaggerating the images more to see what happens (Figure 5).

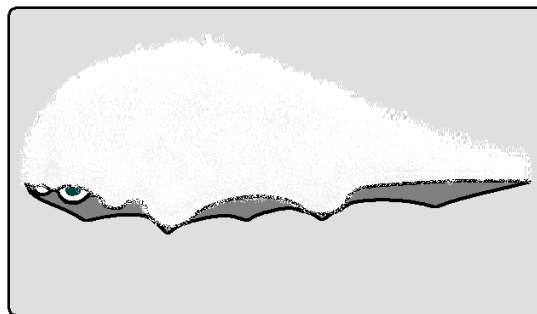


Figure 5 - Exaggeration

The dorsal and ventral in 3-D

The illustrations included in this article have not yet been rendered in three-dimensional state-of-the-art drawings. However, once you have some success with the exercises, you can add the three-dimensional dorsal and ventral qualities suggested by Figure 6. In this schema of dorsal and ventral, the dorsal is more accurately depicted as expanding upward but also *outward* and the ventral is depicted as creating a funnel shape as a result of the combined contracted and weighted qualities of the ventral. Try adding these 3-D qualities to the above and later images. They can provide another unique, yet, appropriate psychophysical experience.

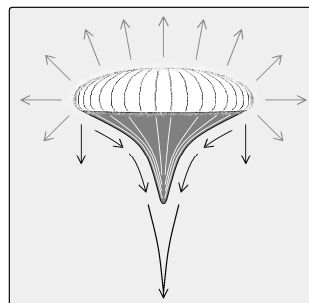


Figure 6 – 3-D Schema

In our chosen quest to attain excellent use, we often *try* where we should just *dream* or *wonder*. It would seem that these imagined allusions to visual and tactile cues as well as playful language (*calm up*, etc.) are valid avenues to healthy lengthening and widening. Imagining these various qualities can make us aware of where we are “faking it.”

I consider the dorsal-ventral relationship presented here possibly more basic and primary than Primary Control, and so have presented it first. However, the Alexander Technique’s concept of Primary Control is addressed next in the following discussion and exercises.

Primary control *and* the body's three functional segments

The illustration below, Figure 7, relates to our evolutionary past just as did the earlier images. This illustration describes three functional segments in the bodies of tetrapods. I have named them the “director,” “motor,” and “rudder” segments. These are not currently recognized anatomical categories but with some thought and imagery work, I trust that they will become at least intuitively accurate distinctions to the reader. Looking at the completely horizontal tetrapod, creature #1, it can be seen that director and rudder segments cantilever or hang over their supports or limbs. Because of this, they enjoy, in a physical sense, greater freedom of movement than the motor segment typically does. They are also, by their physical locations, less involved in the actual muscular work of life, hence, the term “motor” for the center segment. The suggested separations between the three segments are used in imagery to promote a sense of freedom between the segments, where they influence each other but do not necessarily exact a dominating control on each other.

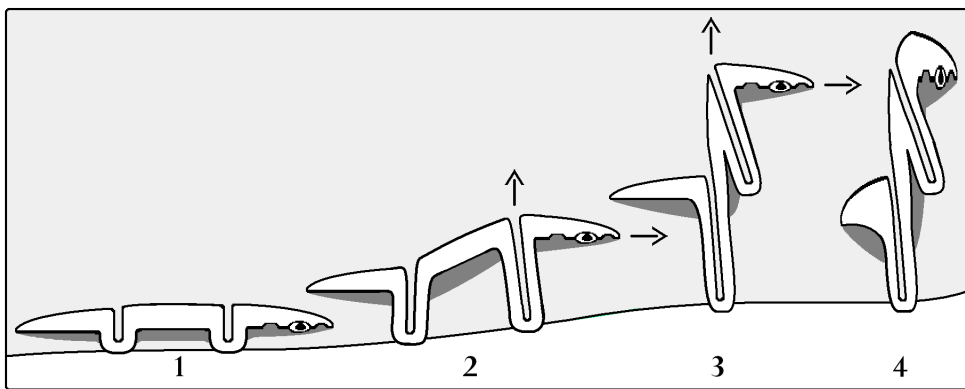


Figure 7 – Evolution of the “director,” “motor,” and “rudder” segments



To sum up, I consider that mentally separating the dorsal and ventral surfaces, in terms of the sensations experienced on them, is primary to establishing a healthy *structure* or postural *base*. In contrast, I consider that separating, in the mind's eye, the “director” from the “motor” and the “rudder” from the “motor” is primary in healthy and graceful *movement*. The next exercise is an image that promotes the special sense of freedom at the junctures between the three functional segments. From the imagery, you may come to think, as I do, that a secondary or tertiary control system seems to be isolated in the rudder segment, having both lateral directional control as well as a strong effect on movement/energy style in the body.

Exercises

Re-evolution of the three functional body segments

The exercise, here, just as with all the image exercises, asks the experimenter to imagine that they have become as exactly like the drawn characters as possible, even if only momentarily. Take more than a few seconds experimenting with this image.

Examine, for a moment, Figure 7. Then, starting with the horizontal creature, #1, imagine that you are becoming, passively or without effort, that creature. Imagine having that face, that body, that tail. The creature is essentially the same as the archetype with the ideal dorsal and ventral relationship that you have encountered. So, imagine being that character, with a light, fluffy dorsal and a contracted, dark, dense, ventral surface. Then add the quality of being split almost entirely into the three segments. Try not to allow yourself to sense an attachment where the drawing shows none. In your mind's eye, you can see light and space by looking clear through yourself along these splits. It may not be immediately evident but, with some diligence, you will have a sense of postural changes taking place.

Next, you can imagine yourself as creature #3. (Creature #2 merely illustrates the evolutionary development of the center segment, the "motor.") Both the director and the rudder segments maintain their horizontal bearing. As you feel yourself becoming more upright, it is important to continue to imagine that the director and rudder sections remain oriented horizontally and are shaped as they are in creature #1. There should be no sense that you have to "haul" up your motor section to become upright. Rather the sense should be that it springs up of its own accord or is pulled upright by outside forces.

The human figure on the end shows, more realistically, where the locations of the splits are on us. A split occurs at the very base of the neck (and not higher!), where the vertebrae change from cervical to thoracic, and across the shoulders, and down the middle of the dorsal surface of the arms. The other split is just before the tailbone (and not higher!) at the bottom of the back. This is where the vertebrae change from lumbar to sacral. This split travels across the hips and down the front of the legs (which is the dorsal side of the legs!). The right leg of the human model is turned out to show the progression of the split.

Imagine that the splits to the arms and legs end in the middle of the back of the hand and the middle of the top of the foot. This feature of the image demonstrates and allows us the experience, over time, of major body segments being relatively independent but still connected to each other. In this way, the director and rudder portions of our body definitely influence the core of the body but do not overly control it.

Movement of tension away from the core of the body toward the "edges" of the body, which is the border of the dorsal and ventral surfaces, is appropriate. That is why the image shows the segments connected close to that line. The sense of "work" along the sides of the body at the seam between the dorsal and ventral surfaces is appropriate. It is also appropriate at the hands and feet, which derive from the "edges" of our body. It is not appropriate or ideal to feel the sense of work taking place more to the center, such as between the shoulders or in the lower back. Those locations should be "at ease."

Creature #4 gives a crude idea of how #3 became more human like, by horizontally foreshortening the face and tail while bulging the head and tail segments up and down. One can experiment with imagining these "finishing touches" in the march toward our present and "better" selves.

One postscript to this exercise might be to imagine that "forward and up" takes place in your body precisely at the locations of the arrows in Figure 6, in creatures #2 and #3. Forward is right out the front of the mouth and up directly up from juncture between the director and motor segments.

This image exercise is difficult. It is difficult because you cannot imagine features of this (and the other exercises) without significant non-habitual body changes temporarily taking place. To have complete success initially is very unlikely, but mentally working at it can bring you closer each time.

You are now upright but still “level headed.” From a merely visual examination of the exercise illustration, its positive effect may seem counterintuitive. Creature #3 looks to have a truncated neck and perhaps a dowager’s hump. However, you are not experiencing those qualities. You are feeling more naturally upright than usual (unless you are *imitating* the drawing instead of *imagining* it).

Now it is worth considering if the preceding image exercise had anything to do with Primary Control. AT directions for promoting a healthy version of Primary Control are variously stated but often something like “let the neck be free, head to go forward and up, back to lengthen and widen....” For the neck to be “free,” it would seem to have to be free from “something.” That something would be the remainder of the body. It appears the “right brain” image of a nearly separated base of the neck from the remainder of the body evokes this principle. It requires working with the image to see that imaginarily dividing the head from the body somewhere else along the neck is not the same thing and, in fact, can be detrimental to function.

A schema for appropriate inhibition and Primary Control

Figure 8 is a combined schematic drawing of the *cooperative dorsal-ventral view of support* and the *three functional segment view of movement control* that have been introduced. It makes a useful image exercise as well. With this exercise, we can induce inhibition of the major habits that interfere with Primary Control as well as positively inhibit some habits of lesser importance.

Box B represents the archetype tetrapod that evolved to be upright and bipedal (us) from Box A. Imagine all the light lifting forces in the dorsal area and the heavier dropping forces in the ventral area (in the manner described in earlier image exercises). Also, imagine the forward impulses and the lesser backward impulses or “drag” shown here, we can induce inhibition of the major habits that interfere with Primary Control as well as positively inhibit some habits of lesser importance.

If it all seems too complex at first, try imagining just the director section illustrated separately in Box C. Remember that the end of the director section includes half of the shoulder and arms.

Remember that you can add the three-dimensional perspective illustrated in Figure 6 whenever you wish.

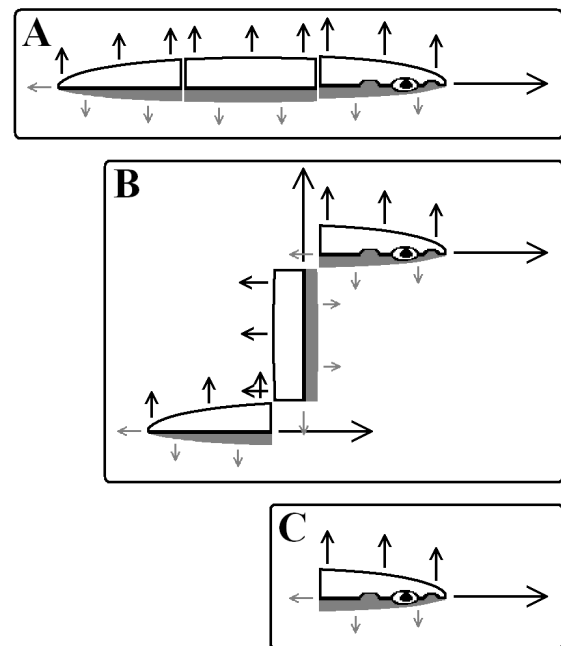


Figure 8 - Combined schema

Imagining that the three segments just discussed are frozen in different configurations of the body yields some interesting experiences in postural diversity. People are certainly not alike, even when they exhibit relatively good use. The variations that can be experienced from the following exercises demonstrate a range of personality/posture that is common (and not necessarily deeply dysfunctional).

Figure 9 is an overhead view of a generic tetrapod. This allows us to see variation in lateral movement possibilities by imaginarily orienting the director and rudder segments differently. An exercise to experience those differences follows.

Body orientation - laterally

This exercise works well while walking. Before starting, study Figure 9. The figure on the left outside the shaded box is a neutral template from which the other depictions vary. Start by imagining that you are out walking your pet alligator, let's say. As you are walking, the pet shifts its "director" and "rudder" segments and holds them in the different positions shown in the illustration. You are merely following your pet.

Remember that the changes in the body (the alligator's and hopefully yours) happen only over the shoulders and down the forelimbs (or arms) as well as over the hips and down the legs.

You will find that two of the four ways of orienting the parts yield a movement that tends to turn you left or right and two others essentially promote straightforward movement but involve a diagonal orientation of the body. Which of all the ways of orienting the functional segments is easy to execute and which is more challenging for you? Once again, endeavor to imagine and not to imitate. Imitation can creep in unannounced and uninvited.

I have had it suggested to go on the walk with two alligators, with leashes in each hand. Explore the possibilities there. I suspect that this helps free up your left and right sides independently, as the laterally split neutral figure on the right outside the box suggests. (This vertical split is one more feature that can be added to exercises.)

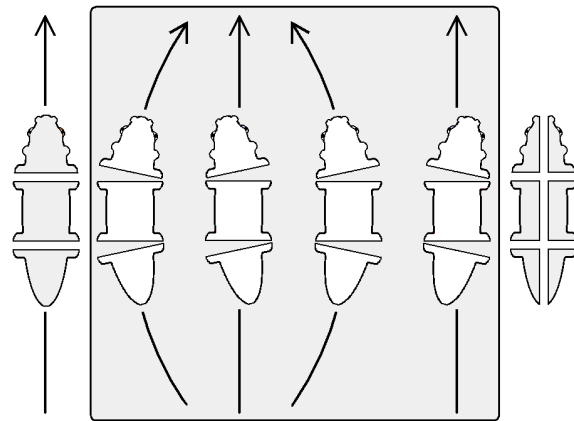


Figure 9 – lateral variation

Body orientation – dorsoventrally

Figure 10 depicts the four variations in dorsoventral orientation of the “director” and “rudder” segments (aside from the neutral position shown outside the box). Study it for a moment and then move on to studying Figure 11, which works better as an imagery aid for us, being upright tetrapods.

Remember to imagine the separations between the segments. The shoulders and point between the cervical and thoracic vertebrae is, in this exercise, where the tipping takes place. This is even though a cursory look at the figures may seem to suggest that the point is at the back of the head.

Now, imagine one or another of the variations shown. It can be fun as well as illuminating. For instance, one position of the segments may even cause you to have a momentary experience that you are in another person’s body, perhaps a friend’s. Most probably, you will have just experienced a significant part of their tonal habits, which is tied to personality.

People obviously vary in the manner they tend to hold themselves. This is one way that the variation can be shown. The various tendencies that this illustration depicts must be experienced through the imagery, which requires some time and mental effort, to have much meaning. As illustrations alone, they may seem useless or simplistic. Remember to avoid direct imitation of the various forms.

Incidentally, with this and other type-specific images I have developed, the version of the image you find the most rewarding, over time, is undoubtedly your “opposite,” which promotes tonal tendencies opposite from your own. It can, as such, educate you towards a more functionally neutral and healthy use. By contrast, the image that represents your own tendencies will be annoying or even painful, since it is encouraging you to greater extremes than you already have. This method is not masochism, so stop doing that version.

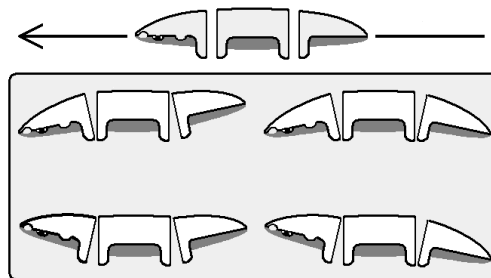


Figure 10 – dorsoventral variation

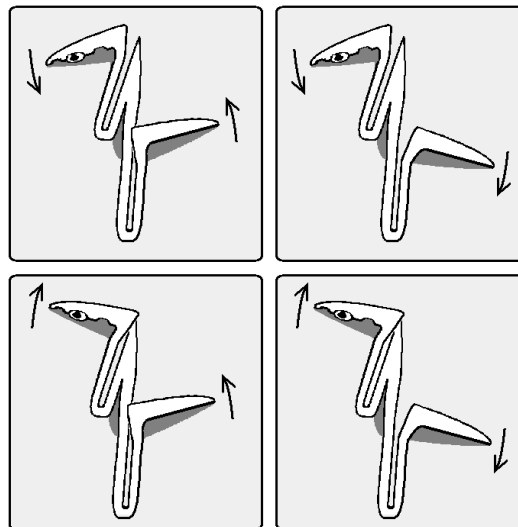
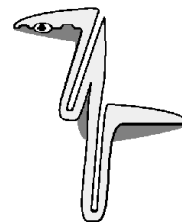


Figure 11 – dorsoventral variation

This has been an introduction to some new concepts and newly described concepts concerning human structural support. They are discoveries resulting from my experimentation with specific mental imagery. The article has concentrated on how I see the work as demonstrating and supporting aspects of the Alexander Technique. Most of its origins are in the Alexander Technique.

The Alexander Technique has within it a healthy skepticism of somatosensory information. We know that we cannot “feel” our way to better use or we would have succeeded long ago. However, I think that the sort of exploration with our somatosenses that I recommend can help to make us more at home with sensation. We can trick it into our service and experience new potential for wellbeing at the same time. I hope that readers take time to understand the ideas advanced here and continue to experiment with the imagery. The Alexander Technique requires a patience to appropriately understand and experience and what I call Posture Release Imagery is no different.

John Appleton is a writer and teacher of the Alexander Technique in southwest Missouri, USA. He studied at the Urbana Center for the Alexander Technique (UCAT) and was certified in 1986. He has been on a quest for greater understanding of mind/body unity all of his adult life. Along the trail were experiences and reading in Reichian therapy, encounter group therapy, Rolfing, and tai chi. Years spent as a carpenter were very valuable in providing him numerous opportunities to experience the physics of use and the exhilaration in the physical.

He has a website, <http://posturereleaseimagery.org/>, which has other articles available for downloading as well as many image exercises not found in this article. John can be contacted at appleton.john@yahoo.com.

