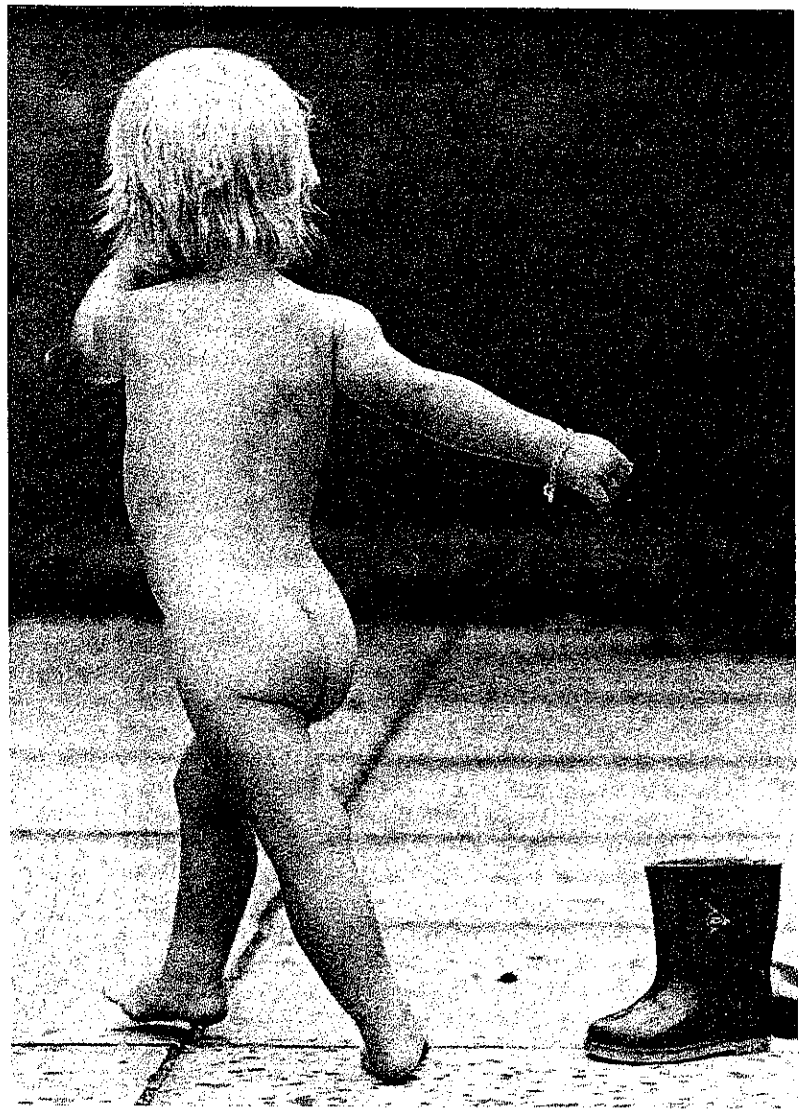
Direction

The conscious mind must be quickened.

Alexander realized that he had never consciously thought out how to direct his Use of himself and that he had always depended on what felt right. Having recognized that his feeling was not trustworthy, he found that the key to discovering 'the knowledge of the means whereby trustworthiness could be restored to feeling' lay in subjecting himself to a new experience – the experience of trusting his reason rather than his habit, even if this felt awkward.

His experiments taught him that the best conditions of Use were brought about when he released the tension in his neck, so that his head could go forward and up and his back could lengthen and widen. The problem was that he could not *do* this, he could only let it happen. His attempts to 'put' his head forward and up were based on his habitual feeling of rightness, which is why, at the critical moment, he continually failed to maintain the new Use. He realized that he had to give up any attempt to 'do' anything about securing these conditions, at least as he had always understood the word 'doing'.

He reasoned that the best procedure for his purpose was first to inhibit any immediate response to a stimulus (the example he chose was 'to speak a sentence'). Then he would consciously project a psychophysical pattern that can be described in words as 'allow the neck to be free to let the head go forward and up so that the back may lengthen and widen', taking care to inhibit the translation of these directions into habitual muscular action. The elements of the new pattern were to be projected sequentially and simultaneously – 'all together, one after the other'. In other words, he would continue to give directions for the first part (let



DIRECTION
'Allow the neck to be free to let the head go forward and up so that the back may lengthen and widen.' The expansion which these directions suggest takes place

he neck be free) while giving directions for the second part allow the head to go forward and up), thus building each element into a whole pattern. Projecting conscious directions in this way required a great deal of practice, as indeed was only to be expected, given what Alexander later described as the human race's 'inexperience in projecting conscious directions at all, and particularly conscious directions in sequence'.

The whole business may seem very complex. However, much of an Alexander teacher's training is devoted to simplifying it. The teacher imparts to the pupil an experience of enhanced kinaesthetic perception that helps to raise the pupil's awareness of the manifestations of his own misuse. With such increased awareness, the pupil can learn to inhibit his habitual patterns. In this his teacher's hands not only help to prevent unwanted responses but also remind him of the direction that is wanted. Eventually conscious direction becomes simply a matter of knowing where one is going. Right now, as you read these words, your head, shoulders and knees are all going in some direction. In most cases, the head tends to go back and down in relation to the neck, and the back tends to narrow and collapse. Were you aware of this? Did you choose this pattern of direction? The activity of all your parts reflects the direction of yourself as a whole. An Alexander teacher attempts to help you to organize these parts into a coordinated pattern; when you are working with her, your head *is* going forward and up, your back *is* lengthening and widening. As this experience becomes more familiar, you begin to get a better idea of the directions in which you are going and of where you wish to go.

'Free the neck to let the head go forward and up so the back may lengthen and widen' has wrongly been interpreted as an Alexander mantra, which it most certainly is not. Remembering these words can help to keep one's intention focused, but the experience they represent is clearly beyond words. As a result it is possible to repeat the words constantly without producing any signs of lengthening. Although Alexander's 'directions' may start as a verbal formulation, eventually they become part of one's attitude towards life. This new attitude begins to make sense when we consider that our entire lives take place within a

gravitational field that is continually pulling us down. In his book *On Growth and Form*, the biologist D'Arcy Thompson wrote:

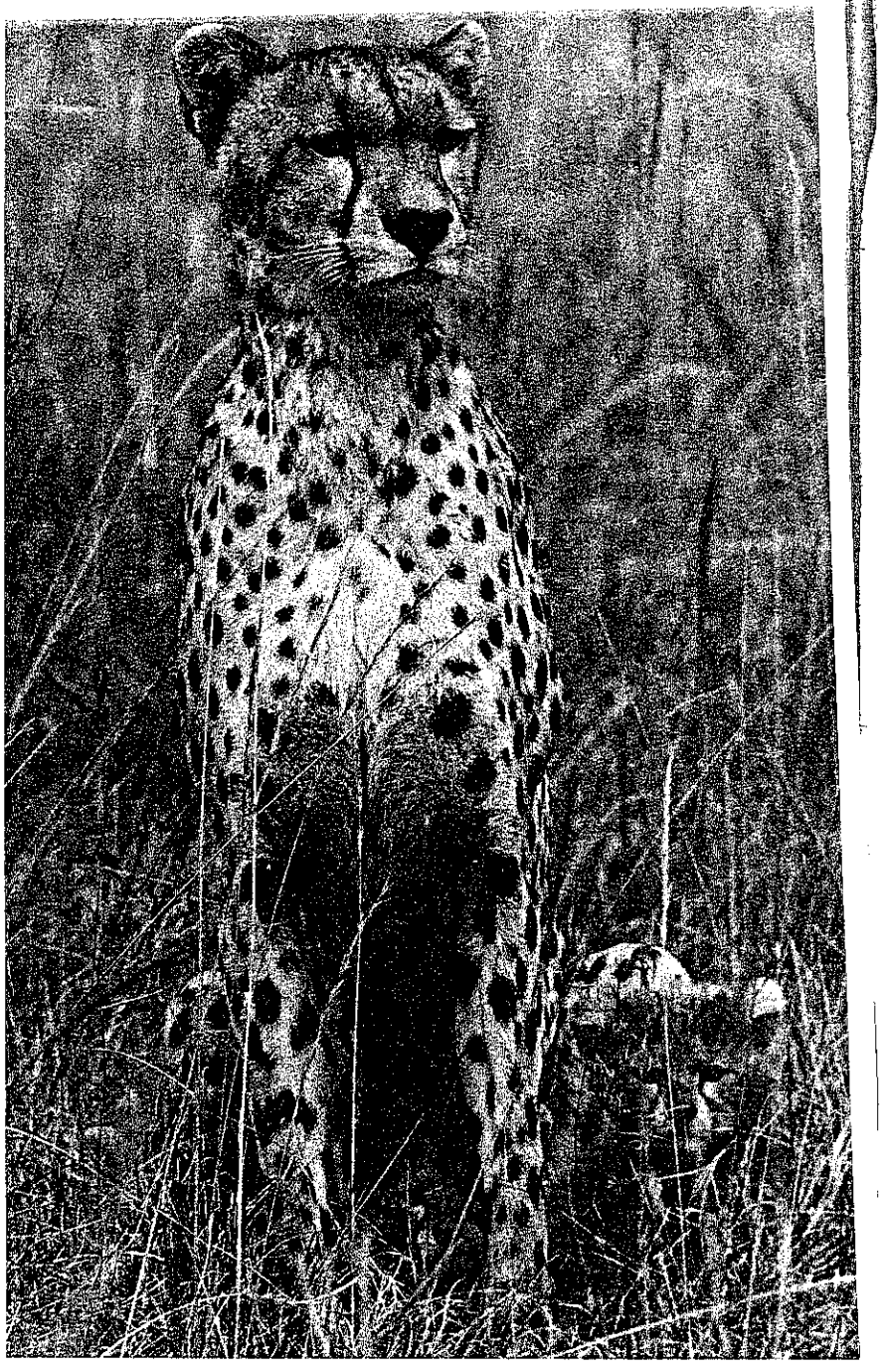
> Man's slow decline in stature is a sign of the unequal contest between our bodily powers and the unchanging force of gravity which draws us down when we would fain rise up. We strive against it all our days, in every movement of our limbs, in every beat of our hearts. Gravity makes a difference to a man's height, and no slight one, between the morning and the evening; it leaves its mark in sagging wrinkles, drooping mouth and hanging breasts, it is the indomitable force which defeats us in the end, which lays us on our death bed and lowers us to the grave.[33]

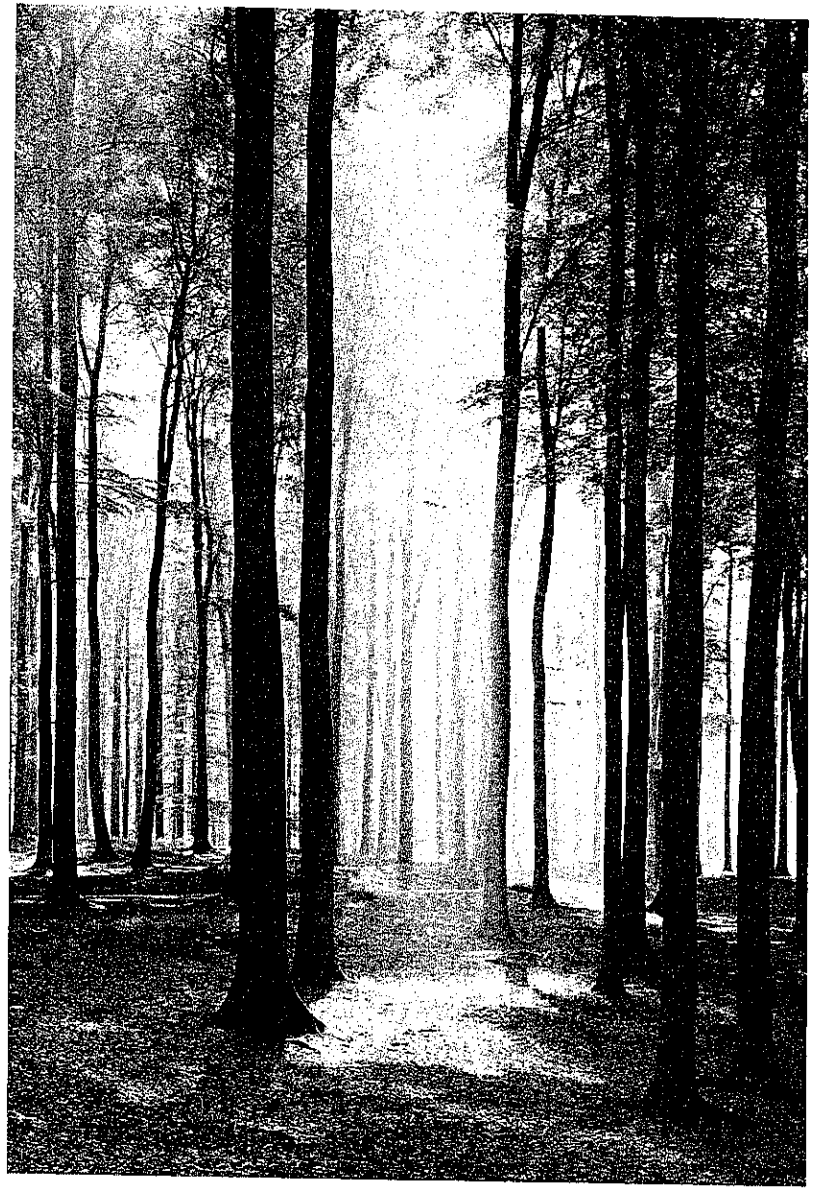
This depressing picture need not be the case. The human organism has a reflex mechanism that effortlessly supports the body against gravity. The Alexander directions set out to 'energize' this mechanism, with which our misuse has interfered. In a word, direction becomes a matter of thinking: 'up'.

Let us consider this 'energizing' quality of thought a little more. Walter Carrington described in a lecture a scene familiar to most Alexander teachers:

> You are taking a pupil and you say, 'I want you to think of your head going forward and up'; that obviously being a direction. You then try and explain to them and show them. After a while they will turn round and say, 'Oh, I see, you only want me to think of it, you don't want me to try and do it.' They say it in such tones as indicate that from their point of view there is a world of difference between doing and thinking... that to do something is practical, tangible, concrete, really down to earth; doing something is what we all understand; but thinking something, this is pretty nebulous, non-effective, vague, all the rest of it. In other words, there is not the same quality of reality between thinking something and doing something.

Carrington made these observations when introducing a discus-





The Alexander Technique encourages a natural, effortless sense of 'up'.

sion of a piece of research presented in an article in *New Scientist* by Professor John Basmajian entitled 'Conscious Control of Single Nerve Cells'. This suggested a much closer relationship between thinking and doing than had been supposed until then. In order to understand Basmajian's work, it is necessary to describe, if only in a simple manner, the way muscles operate.

Every muscle is made up of a vast number of muscle fibres and motor nerves. Each individual nerve cell, or motoneurone, originates in the spinal cord. The axone, or nerve connection, extends from the cord to a bundle of muscle fibres where it splits to make a connection with a part of each fibre called the motor end plate. The nerve cell, axone and fibre bundle (complete with end plates) together comprise a single motor unit. The motor unit is stimulated by an electrical impulse that originates in the brain, travels down the spinal cord along the axone, and results in the contraction of its particular fibre bundle. The action of muscles is the result of the concerted firing of a particular pattern of individual motor units.

Basmajian attached extremely fine electrodes to individual motor units and wired the electrodes to an oscilloscope and an audio-amplifier. In this way he was able to record the electro-contractile pattern of each motor unit. (This process is known as electromyography.) He found that each unit displayed its own characteristic pattern and that this pattern could always be distinguished from that of other units by its shape and by the distribution of 'spikes' on the oscilloscope and the corresponding 'popping' sound recorded on the audio-amplifier. With this information, Basmajian discovered that 'just by thinking about it' the pattern of individual motor units could be changed. The electrical discharge of single motoneurones could be inhibited or increased at will. He reported: 'Most persons became so skilled that they could produce a variety of rhythms such as doublets, triplets, galloping rhythms and even complicated drum roll and drum beats.'[34] A few subjects, including Basmajian himself, were able to recall specific units into activity without the help of the feedback equipment. He added, 'To this day I cannot put into words how I was able to call three different motoneurones unerringly into activity in the total absence of the artificial aids.'

Alexander's belief in the 'energizing' power of conscious direction takes on new substance in the context of this research. In his lecture Walter Carrington asked, 'What is the basic difference between choosing to play a rhythm and thinking I'll let my head go forward and up?' We do not really understand how either of these processes works, but, as Carrington added, 'What is clear is that the response you get is a response to wishing, a response to volition.'

To bring the experience of direction on to the conscious level it is almost essential to work with an Alexander teacher, but the reader can obtain a more specific and practical impression of the process by carrying out the following procedure. Direct your attention to your right hand *without moving it at all* in space. Focus on the index finger of the right hand as if you were *intending* to point the finger still further in the direction in which it is already pointing, but remember *not to move it at all*. Look at whatever your finger is pointing towards and sharpen the thought of your finger pointing towards it. This act of attention alone may have produced a change in the muscle tone of the finger. If you keep attending to your *intention* to point your finger while you continue to read you will probably notice that the same subtle yet heightened degree of muscle tone can be maintained. When your attention is drawn away from your finger, the heightened tone decreases, although it is possible to bring it back at will at any given moment. With practice the altered state of tone can be maintained in the background of awareness while continuing to read or to do any other activity. Although this demonstration affects only an isolated part of the musculature, it does help to illustrate the nature of the relationship between attention and muscle tone which is the key to direction.

Attention is very different from what is usually called concentration. Concentration is often associated with a state of overtension manifested by a furrowed brow and interference with breathing, almost as though one were trying to hold everything in place so as to be able to focus totally on a certain aspect of one's surroundings. Attention in the Alexandrian sense involves a balanced awareness of oneself and one's surroundings with an easy emphasis on whatever is particularly relevant at the moment.

The qualities of openness, expansion and aliveness displayed by this Nuba girl lie dormant in most Westerners.

Frank Jones has compared the process with spotlights on a lighted stage: the general surroundings are visible, while different parts receive greater emphasis according to their particular relevance. Alexander found that most people were unable to direct their attention and as a result suffered from 'mind wandering' or over-fixated concentration. Learning to apply the Alexander directions provides an invaluable experience in controlling one's powers of attention. Attention can become something we give rather than something we have to pay.

In order to help students who have difficulty directing their attention, some Alexander teachers employ creative visualization and imagination procedures. A pupil might be asked, for example, to visualize his head floating like a helium balloon or to think of his back smiling. These images are just tools to be used in a specific moment or situation. Creative visualization is not a substitute for direction, but it can be a valuable supplement.

A fascinating study by the psychologist Alan Richardson illustrates the power of the visualization process. Richardson chose three groups of people at random and measured their performance at basketball free-throw shooting. For twenty days, the first group spent twenty minutes a day practising free throws; the second group did not practise at all; the third group did not practise either, but they did spend twenty minutes a day visualizing themselves scoring free throws. At the end of the twenty days, Richardson measured their performance again. The first group had improved by 24 per cent, the second group did not improve at all, and the third group, the visualizers, had improved by 23 per cent. Experiments with dart throwing, figure skating, karate and other activities have shown similar results.

Since every visualization or thought has immediate physiological effects, choosing what one thinks becomes increasingly important. Sorting out what one thinks and wants is an incredibly complex process. The Alexander Technique does not magically clear our thoughts and integrate our desires, but it does focus attention on the importance of the problem while giving us a way of working on it.

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Checkpoints

What is the difference between concentration and attention?

Does your mind wander? What happens to your body when your mind wanders?

Describe the role that gravity plays in your life.

What is the difference between relaxation and collapse?

Ends and means

When you've got it, be prepared to throw it away... throw it away and get it again.

Alexander's aim was to discover a method of dealing w problem of habit and change. He first tried to change his l directly by putting his head forward and up because he assu that he could do what he thought he was doing. When he fc that he could not, he realized that this assumption was a delu and that a fundamental change of habit could only be achieve considering the organism as a whole. He knew that the bala relationship of his head, neck and torso would organize the of the system and that this balanced relationship could onl achieved by indirect means. Instead of going directly for his (speaking the sentence), Alexander first had to stop and inhib habitual response. In order to ensure that the habitual resp remained inhibited he had to practise the projection of consc direction.

In the process of refining this method, Alexander discov that it was necessary to 'keep his options open' right thrc the critical moment. In other words, he found it necessary to again and consciously reconsider the aim to be achieved could then choose:

(1) not to respond to the stimulus at all

(2) to do something else, such as lifting his arm, or

(3) to go on to fulfil his original aim and speak the sente Whatever course he chose he would *continue to project the direc for the maintenance of the new Use.* Alexander found that the e rience he had gained in maintaining the conditions necessar