

Imagery and "Neck Free, Head Forward..." - John Appleton

The directions, "to let the neck be free, to allow the head go forward and up, so that the back can lengthen and widen," along with other similar verbal instructions, represents the most frequently quoted and used portion of the Alexander Technique's wisdom. However, for new students as well as for advanced students and teachers, the meaning of these instructions remains illusive. From most AT teachers, it is the hands-on direction that helps provide the kinesthetic experiences to students that clarify the direction's meaning.

But words as important as these can be stumbling blocks, as well as valuable tools, toward learning the technique. When these directions are thought, our right brain/ body creates images of these (and other) directions that are visual and/or tactile-kinesthetic. It is unavoidable. The images can be vague and unintentional but still have strong effects on our use. Whether vague or clear and specific, the images formed from contemplating Alexander's essentially valuable maxim can be incomplete, inefficient, or just plain wrong. The end result can easily be nothing... or misdirection.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a valuable maxim to give thought to. So is "to let the neck be free, to let the head go forward and up, so that the back can lengthen and widen." The first saying is rather easy to understand... if not carry out. I think the second, however, could use some help to more easily understand. In this paper, I visually illustrate and suggest mental imagery to go with the maxims I have developed, which are somewhat, but not entirely, different than Alexander's. I recommend that others put their mind and hand to creating visual cues (that can become tactile/kinesthetic) to bring more body to Alexander's words. For many of us, if not for all, a well developed image can settle into our bodies much better than a string of words, bringing us appropriate "pre-movement" postural "attitudes."

I have many image exercises that I promote for the purpose of replacing the hidden "self-images" that bring about our painful and energy depleting habitual use. I limit my comments here to just those that seem most applicable to Alexander's most known maxim concerning the head, neck, and back.

Neck free -

If the neck is to be "free," what does that mean and where should it be free? **What** the word "free" means in this context should be *free of any unnecessary tension*, I would think. What is unnecessary, of course, requires exploration to discover. To me, freedom of a particular part of the body should suggest extra flexibility or stretchability.

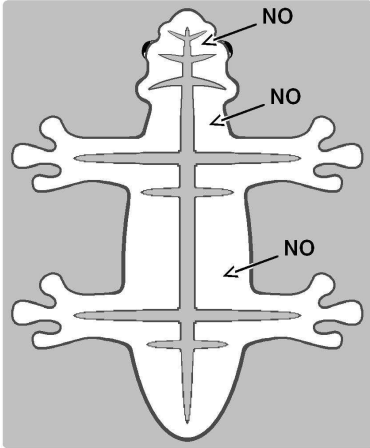


Fig. 1 - *Maximal freedom map*

Fig. 1 shows **where** I think that a sense of freedom is most important in the body. For the purposes of this paper, I will just refer to the neck area. When imagining "neck free" it is possible for the image that comes to mind to simultaneously suggest "neck *weak*." Imagined freedom in other parts of the body can also mistakenly promote weakness or floppiness. This is not desirable. The "NO" arrows point to particularly important areas to sense as sturdy, but never taxed or challenged. (Oddly enough, the areas that are split can take the sensation of lots of weight on them, for instance, the image of iron bars weighing down those parts of the body. Imagined weight in other areas like the "NO" areas, are *not* a good feeling.) I suggest that the following places on the neck should be sensed as "free" (meaning here to include extra-flexible and stretchable):

1. the top of the neck, which can be thought of as substantially above the ears,
2. the bottom of the neck, which is well into the shoulder line and in line with the mid-line of the arms,
3. a vertical line running through the whole body, and
4. a lateral line (*not shown in Fig. 1 but suggested in Fig. 6*) that runs along the border between the dorsal and ventral surfaces of the body.

Other parts of the neck should *not* be thought of as "free," especially those parts that I think produce a loss of the sense of sturdiness. Part of the value in imagining a sense of freedom in these unlikely places, like this map suggests, is positive because it promotes fluid whole-body movement and support rather than a skeletally-dominated concept, which we have even though we do not actually feel the skeleton. We should not frequently "feel" the skeleton. What we typically do feel is misuse adjacent to skeletal parts.

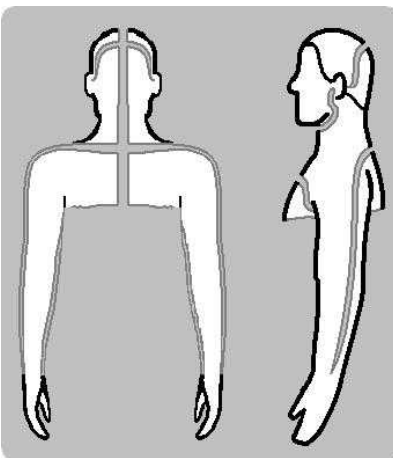


Fig. 2 - *Neck-related "splits" - locations for maximal "freedom"*

Fig. 2, part of a more human figure, shows again my proposed areas for an imagined sense of maximal freedom (down to the chest). (It excludes the complex-to-draw area along the dorsal-ventral border, which is somewhat illustrated in Fig. 6) The splits are to be perceived as going (harmlessly) through the body from dorsal to ventral surfaces. Image exercises derived from this perspective are difficult. They involve much more diligence than imagining being on a warm, sandy beach. But, with time, you can experience something much more valuable than warm-beach induced relaxation. This is not unlike hands-on experiences for teachers of the Alexander Technique but without a teacher present can be challenging to get "started," though not impossible.

Head forward and up -

I suspect that this part of the orders, "head forward and up," is frequently conceptualized with the head, as a fixed inflexible **block**, moving in some diagonal or wavy direction (forward and up). Or perhaps the thought is the head, as a block, tipping forward and then sailing up. None of these ways of visualizing the head should be the perspective used *since* portions of the neck, other than the "split" areas proposed above, are being imagined to be extra flexible. and should not be. They should be the solid parts in a flexible neck. The flexibility is where the splits are, and also where the greatest strength or ability to support is. The solid parts should be perceived less flexible... maybe even much less flexible. The areas of the neck in Fig. 2 that are shown as solid and not split are *not* the instigators of lengthening and widening in the body. Images of that sort, conscious or unconscious, will create strain. This may all seem strange, but I have definitely found it to be true.



Fig. 3 - Slug pre-movement "posturing"



Fig. 4 - Slug movement

[from <http://onthefreerange.net/?cat=19>]

Flexibility should be present and release can and should take place *throughout* the body. Perhaps, as with the slug in Fig. 3, the front portion or face, rather than being perceived as a block, should be the original instigator of release. We humans do have a more or less fixed head (or neck) shape due primarily to skeletal and dense muscle constraints. But neurologically and tonally, a world of kinesthetic shape is open to us. Around our basically fixed skulls there is a potential for a myriad of tonal qualities... taut here, flaccid there and lengthened here, widened there... just like the slug. Our various emotions and personalities attest to this. Most especially, attention to release and flexibility about the face and head should be thought as important as (and, perhaps, more important than) anywhere else. If this area has the job of directing, it had better be *alive*.

The directions to free the neck and other body parts are "preparation" directions, since what we are trying to teach and what we are learning in the AT is pre-movement. The slug depictions in Fig. 3 represent just three stages of those pre-movement changes. They represent movements into different "attitudes," or "stances," within the immediate body rather than locomotion. Actual locomotion (Fig. 4) takes place by means of a subtly undulating "foot" on the bottom of the slug. With the "foot," the slug can slither along without grossly changing shape. However, there is a shape that it must attain before commencing

locomotion. That shape is the shape it has when it is lengthened, widened, and "confident." If it is disturbed (with a stick, for instance) it hunkers down. Following such an experience, it first cautiously senses its surroundings with long sensors and a long "neck." Second, it "takes a chance" and presses forward, (without "stepping" forward) and makes its body more "bullish." Finally, it universally lengthens and begins its travels. The preparatory part, after being disturbed, is "posturing." This is essentially what happens with a turtle, as well. I know... I have spent considerable time with both creatures.

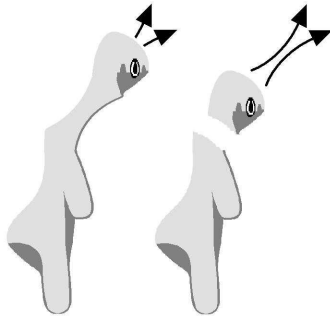


Fig. 5 shows two of many possible misconceptions of "allow the neck to be free for the head to move forward and up..." Both figures envision that the only "freedom" is in the neck. This, and undoubtedly many other similar misconceptions concerning Alexander's directions, yields no great assistance in bringing about proper function of primary control.

Fig. 5 - Problematic - neck free, head forward and up image attempts??

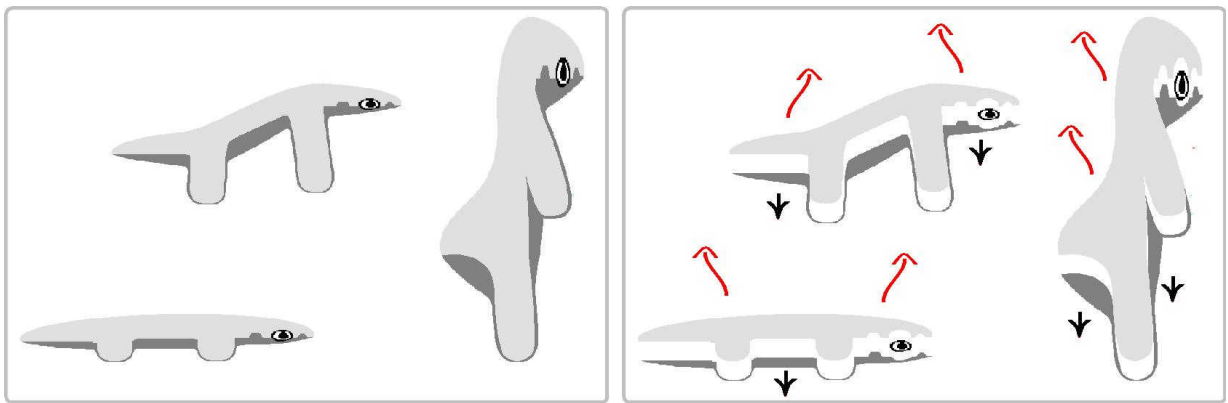


Fig. 6 a&b - Non-problematic - body free along the dorsal-ventral seam, with the dorsal surface floating up and the ventral surface weighted down

My conception of the appropriate orders is somewhat different, though has similarities in practice. First, I find the most important relationship to be attended to is *not* the head/neck/back relationship, but rather the "dorsal/ventral" relationship. My other writings describe this complimentary relationship considerably, but it is basically shown in Fig. 6a&b. The dorsal surface, which does not include the muscle or bones, is shown as light gray here. It should be thought of as light or even white, light in weight, expanded, and even fluffy (like dry cotton balls or fur). The ventral surface, the dark gray bottom half, should be thought of as dark or even flat black (not shiny), heavy, and gently contracted (perhaps like heavy wet rubber or leather). Fig. 6b, with arrows indicating separate directions for the two surfaces, also indicates an area of extra flexibility and stretchability by showing them split apart. (The vertical creature is the model most like ourselves and is of greatest assistance in imagining. The other horizontal creatures are simply to assist in understanding the dorsal-ventral distinction.)

Following the appropriate relationship between the dorsal and ventral surfaces, I find important what I call the relationship between the "director" and the rest of the body (comprised of two other segments of the body, which I call the "motor" and "rudder" segments) Most of this relationship, to my way of thinking, has strong similarities to the "head/neck/ back" relationship of the Alexander Technique. The director segment, as well as the rudder segment, maintains a horizontal orientation (see Fig. 7). Only the motor segment has become upright through evolution... and the director and rudder have become foreshortened (actually "squashed" and, to varying degrees, spiraled forward and inward). This observation has value in posture release imagery and conceptualizing the fundamentals of healthy posture.

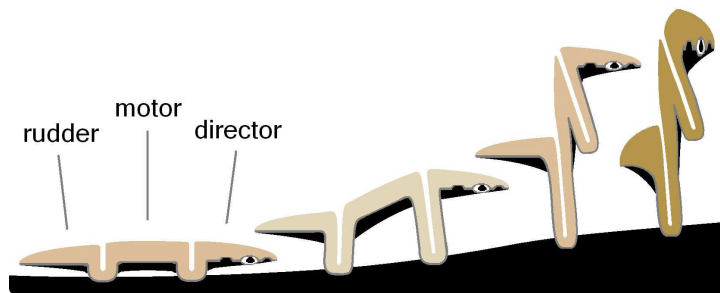


Fig. 7 - The three functional segments

People have habits, but all do not have quite the same habits of use that interfere with the head/neck/back relationship. As a result, in addition to imagery that can be beneficial for all interested people (universal imagery), I have developed "type-specific", or habit-specific imagery that addresses specific habits of a variety of people. My version of Alexander's "neck free, ..." orders is type-specific. That means that I have four versions of how to address the head/neck/back/etc. relationship that are shown below (Fig. 8).

The arrows that accompany these illustrations suggest the direction that the adjacent body surface should be thought to be tending to move. (A "moving" body surface might be compared to skin "crawling" or melting and shifting or even being pushed. Warm wind currents moving in these suggested directions may be a good way to think of it. You are not "doing" anything, and yet something is happening... an "un-doing" is happening.)

Notice that, in all the four illustrated versions of use (that reflect "inclination" or "attitude"), the arrows or directions start from or end at the base of the neck (C-7 to be exact). This is the base of the head and neck (which I call the "director" segment), and the top of the remainder of the body, which I divide into the "motor" and "rudder" segments.

Appropriate habit-changing directions for bringing about healthier posture and movement vary from individual to individual. There are ideal structural relationships between body parts, but the means to arrive at those ideals can vary, even within this imagery approach. Though many of us may wish to experience these ideal relationships, we will frequently be venturing toward those ideals from different directions (<http://posturereleaseimagery.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/07/dorsal-ventral-types-for-website2.JPG> , a link to human-like illustrations of some types of postural and tonal patterns).

The four versions of an image exercise shown in Fig. 8, promote type-specific psycho-physical responses which are, in fact, common forms of "pre-movement" responses, inclinations, and tonal patterns. The *upper left* version promotes the inclination to lean and move forward. The *upper right* version promotes the inclination to lean backwards toward a teetering uprightness and beginning of folding (sitting/squatting). The *lower right* version promotes deep squatting. And finally, the *lower left* version promotes rocking forward and the beginnings of rising/leaping/lunging. This completes a circular pattern of structural support and movement inclination that is best experienced by imagining the forms in a clockwise manner, starting with any one of the versions. The colors accompanying the versions in Fig. 8 correspond to other imagery on my "type-specific exercises" page of my website. By playing with these different versions here and those included in other type-specific exercises, our range of easy motion is improved upon and increased. We also discover those aspects of postural range that are difficult for us to allow, which allows us to work on our specific problem areas.

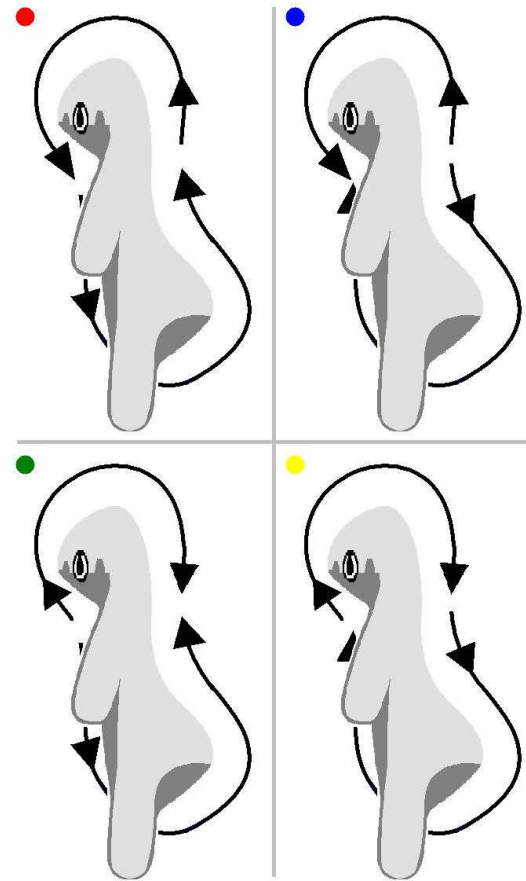


Fig. 8 - 4 directions and 4 types' directions

A note on imagining the various versions: While imagining, you are inviting change, allow that change to take place in your body, wherever it may take you. Allow yourself to play with one version for more than a few seconds, it will take more than a few, and likely more than ten. You may well find that with a little wait as well as curiously imagining, unexpected and often welcome postural changes, and muscular release can occur.

Back to lengthen and widen -

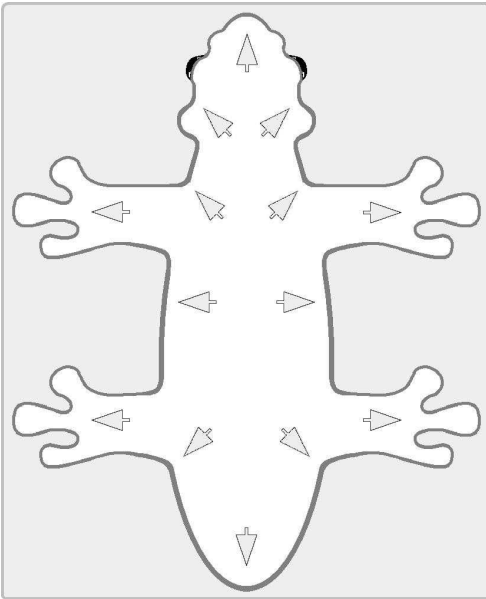


Fig. 9 - Dorsal lengthening and widening

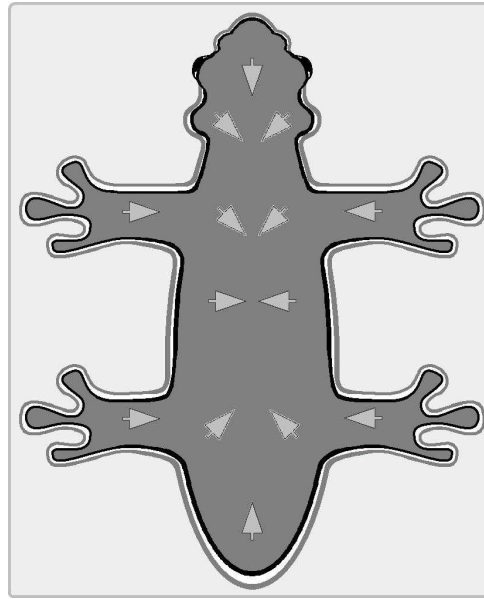


Fig. 10 - Ventral shortening and narrowing

"Back to lengthen and widen" is, in general, both a basic and an excellent mental directive to entertain, but it lacks completeness. Some versions add directions for the legs, knees, and feet, but none include the "tail", or show visually what awareness of the "back" should involve. The term "back," as used in the Alexander Technique, is only part of our dorsal side (Fig. 9) and I suggest that endeavoring to allow the *entire* dorsal surface of the body to lengthen and widen is where the greatest positive effects lie. When making up a bed, for instance, the sheets and blankets should be evenly extended in all directions. Too much lengthening, widening, or diagonal pulling at any point creates uneven "tensions" and destroys the "grace" of a well made bed. We recognize in the Alexander Technique that lengthening should not be generally fostered to the exclusion of widening or vice versa (except in some movement, of course). But do we recognize that a gentle amount of shortening and narrowing, or contracting over the entire *ventral* surface is also a healthy goal? (Fig. 10)

Putting the two above figures, the dorsal and the ventral surfaces, together may not be imaginarily easy at first, but I have developed additional imagery to aid in combining the two "bear rugs," and in promoting this ideal relationship. Figure 11, the "lamb and egg" image, visually illustrates and kinesthetically demonstrates (if you attempt the image exercise) a lengthened and widened dorsal surface plus a shortened and narrowed ventral surface. The illustration on the left shows what the ventral shortens and narrows around, the "egg." The illustration on the right is to suggest how the ventral surface tightens around the egg while the dorsal surface expands even more to assist in "protection" of the egg... and hiding it. Full directions for this image can be found at:

<http://posturereleaseimagery.org/posture-exercises-universal-imagery>, exercise 2.

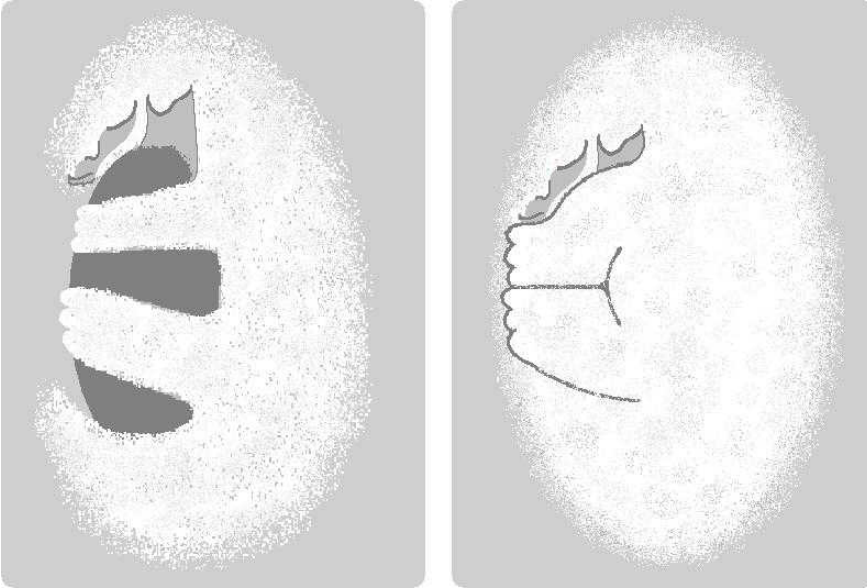


Figure 11 - *Imagining being a lamb holding an egg*

I teach and use for myself visual and tactile-kinesthetic cues with explanations, rather than teach or use a linear string of verbal orders. If I were to teach with verbal cues, however, I would replace the common "Allow the neck to be free, ..." with something like the following:

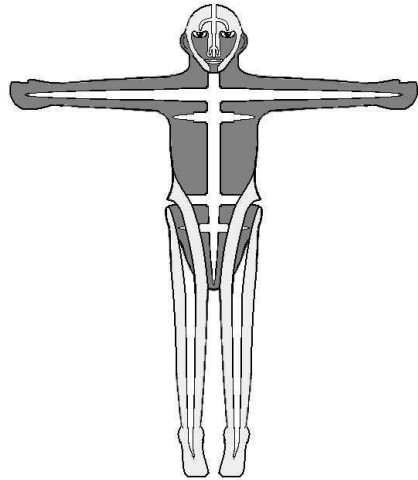
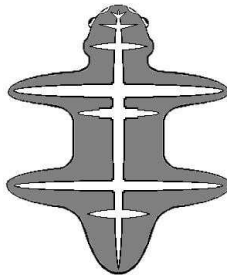
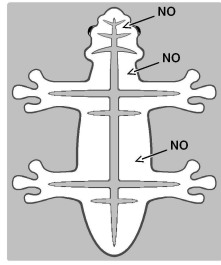
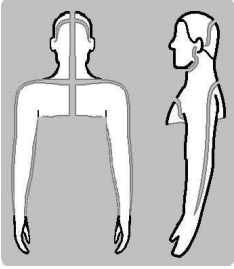
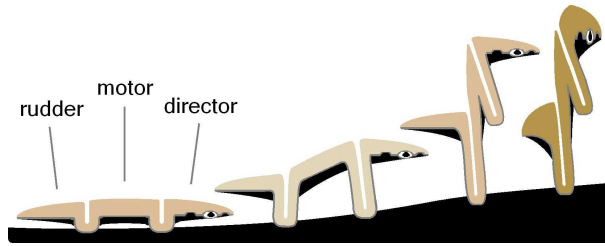
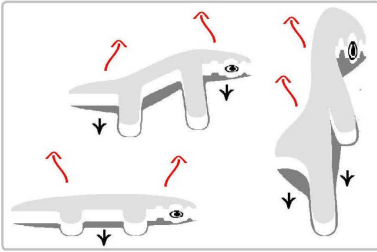
"Allow in thought the entire dorsal surface to gently expand while allowing the entire ventral surface to gently contract (see Fig. 6a or Fig. 11). Next allow extra freedom/elasticity along the following lines: the entire dorsal-ventral seam, which is from the tip of the upper lip on both sides to the tip of tail, the division between the director and motor segments, which is at the very base of the neck and runs from the middle finger to middle finger across the shoulder and C-7 vertebra, and the very top of the neck (plus some), which is from middle of one ear to the other over the top/back portion of the head and through the larynx below (see Fig. 2).

You can see why I prefer to use illustrated cues. And the orders are only half complete. There is also the extra freedom/elasticity that is valuable across the hips and down the legs, at the base of the tail, just below the arms and across the back, from eye to eye in an arched pattern, and from nostril to nostril (see Fig. 1).

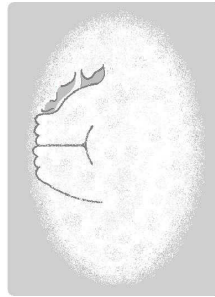
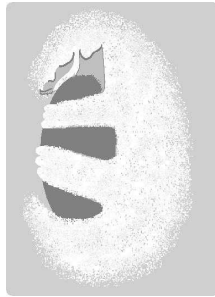
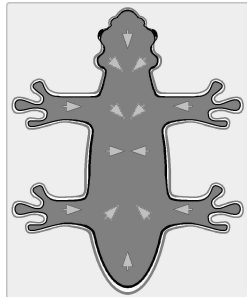
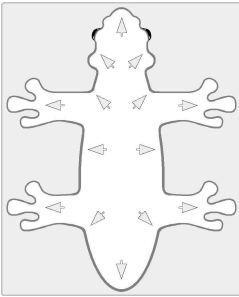
My recommendations are that since we create conscious or unconscious images from words automatically, we should develop accurate and appropriate images to go with the words we use to describe the change we want. Working with imagery of this nature requires patience, just as does developing with the Alexander Technique. However, I would be willing to encourage and support anyone interested, as time allows, with e-mail assistance. It has been proven to me that creating and illustrating visual images that contain tactile/kinesthetic cues can be extremely effective in guiding and, indeed, *forcing* one to appropriate/healthy use. In fact, I have turned it into my life work.

Here is a recap of most of the images presented (with one addition):

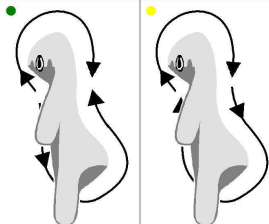
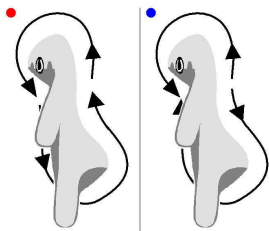
different views of the "splits"



dorsal-ventral relationship



types of "primary control"



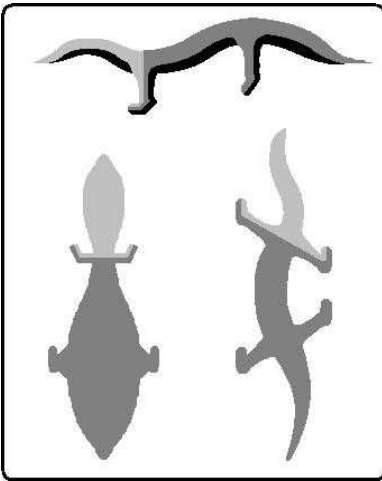
This is my fourth short paper that I have initially written for the AlexTech Mail List. There are more in the works.

I would like to thank Pete Green for his considerable involvement in and comments on this and my previous paper... and hopefully future ones.

Thanks for reading,

John Appleton

<http://posturereleaseimagery.org/>



As a postscript to this paper, I want to leave you with something to muse on. Looking at the various versions of wavy four-legged creature to the left, you can see that the wave to the head, neck, and first half of shoulder (at the C-7 split) is shown as repeating itself throughout the body. The tonal qualities of what I call the *director* segment repeat themselves. I consider it an undiscovered truth that we are made this way... and don't know it. It is not easily visible because we have many other features, familial, cultural, and so forth, that help mask the pattern. More about all this later.