



Spatial Thinking and Awareness

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The ideas of Spatial Thinking and Awareness is a large topic and can go in many different directions. I have come to understand space as one of the main universal elements in which we can find connectivity to our entire unified field of awareness. I think the Alexander Technique is our process of guiding ourselves and our students to allow these universal forces to emerge and become consciously available to us in an ever increasingly refined and nuanced way. The dynamism that comes from this *allowing* provides adaptability to our environment and the stimulus that we receive. It allows us to have more reliable sensory perception, flow, and the ability to balance the elements of our field (including our bodies) of awareness.

The first thing to remember is that our thinking and attention make a difference. Our underlying structural paradigm, the language and vocabulary we use with ourselves and our students is critical in our ability to make new choices and refine our use.

Before we get into theory let's do an experiment with your own thinking and attitude toward space. Sit, stand, or walk as you think of entertaining the following spatial paradigms for your system. Stay with each idea for a few moments so you can fully experience the effects of your thinking.

Think of yourself as having the properties of:

- a paper doll
- a stack of blocks
- a pancake
- a structure dangling from a string from the ceiling
- three-dimensionality
- fully dimensionality
- a closed system
- a permeable system allowing there to be movement and an exchange of forces through your skin out into the space, through your body

This activity shows how much our thinking makes a difference to our balance and sensory experience. Check in to see if any of those experiences were more or less familiar to you and revealed how you might be considering yourself in space.

This is the baseline, your constant, from which you will interface with the standard Alexander Technique directions. They will be layered on your existing structural paradigm. This paradigm will subtly come through our teaching with both our voice and teaching hands communication.

Recently I said to a student “sense your depth here” as I put my hands on the front and back of her chest. On her own, without any prompting, she said, “You know, I think of myself as a piece of cardboard, like a cut out cardboard, has a little bit of depth to it, but when I expand that, I have a completely different sense of my breathing and all my other senses.” She was able to astutely recognize the difference between her own image and the way she was functioning in relation to what she was being invited to do with the hands-on and discussion.

There are many spatial elements to consider. Here are some of the main components:

- Directions: front, back, up, down, diagonals, etc
- Planes
- Volume
- Kinesphere
- Shape
- Distance
- Counter direction
- Relationships of the body parts to each other
- Relationships to objects outside our body

Take a moment again to consider how you think about all of the spatial elements above. How are you working with them as you move through your day and if you are a teacher, in your teaching?

Do you use the standard classical directions? Do you use forward and up? How are you inviting the student to experience their own full dimensionality? Do you relate gravity and the ground reaction force to your explanation of directions?

Before we examine a few of the classical standard directions let’s look at where our basic up and down directions emerge from. Down is the universal gravitational force going toward the center of the earth. This is obvious to us all, however, it is not always an embodied sensory experience. There is a universal oppositional direction to gravity

called the Ground Reaction Force¹ which we can also experience. These two oppositional forces exist simultaneously and when we take away any interference from allowing those forces to move through us (notice the concept of throughness has emerged), we have a sensory experience of freedom, ease, suspension, a rebound, and an upward flowing direction. So our goal is to *allow* for (not *do*) and to catch these oppositional forces in a dynamic manner. This allows our structure to be naturally suspended and supported. (This understanding might trigger a contemplation of the widely used concept of the body hanging from a string)

We can understand from this concept of oppositional forces that all spatial directions have a complimentary and opposing direction. Here are some examples.

Up has a down.

Out has an in.

Right has a left.

Forward has a back.

Forward and up has a back and down.

Following on from the oppositional forces which, in all directions and dimensions, is the paradigm of bio-tensegrity. As we consider this model for our body, we can consider ourselves as being like full suspension systems where the support is coming from the muscles, tendons, and ligaments: “guy wires” toned to provide stability to an otherwise free-form structure. Your bones act as struts offering outward pressure while the muscle, tendons and ligaments give inward pressure.

These forces do not emanate from a central location but rather move through us (each cell, in fact) in an oppositional way.

Emergent Embodied Properties come from *allowing* and *getting out of our own way* so that we can balance and suspend. These Emergent Embodied Properties include:

- Lightness
- Ease
- Throughness
- Spaciousness
- Down and Up
- Expanded sense of external space and focus
- Clearer eyesight, hearing, and other sensory experiences

¹ <https://www.kistler.com/en/glossary/term/ground-reaction-force-grf/>

Now let's examine a few of the classical standard AT directions - forward and up, and knees forward and away, for instance. There are assumptions in these directions that can be investigated and lead us to a fuller understanding of what we are working with.

In general the directions are all outward oriented, knees forward and away, torso up out and over the knees, and head forward and up. These directions imply and have a bias toward everyone being too tight and needing to expand. They don't consider or entertain the inward counter direction leading to throughness that is inherently present and may be more useful for students.

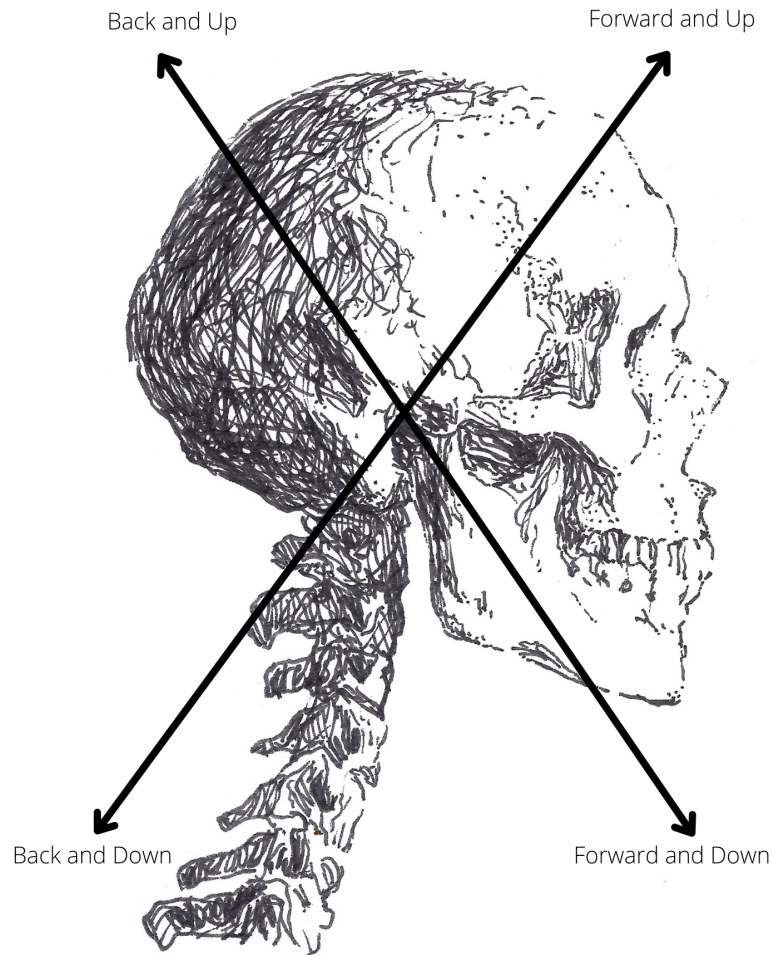
I see in other teachers and often experience in myself when having hands-on work, the idea of going out and expanding manifests as a slight traction and pulling on my body. As a hypermobile person, I experience that thought process and way of working as being *pulled apart* and *disconnecting*. My experience is completely different when the teacher is aware of all the spatial directions and provides consistent hands-on feedback where my own thinking and body can sort itself out, finding a balance between the inward and outward oppositional forces while being given supporting and stable feedback.

The concept of *balance*, the balance of oppositional directions, balance of weight (body parts in relation to each other), and the balance of the various elements of our sensory field with each other, can lead us to refining our understanding and language as we guide ourselves and our students.

Applying this concept to the standard classical direction, let's start with *forward and up of the head*. The first question with spatial thinking is: *forward and up* from *where*? Are you considering what that is balancing with? As you are teaching, are you maintaining an awareness of the counter directions? Are you considering the people who are going so forward and up they are tucking their chin in and compromising their breathing as they constrict their windpipe?

Again, as a hypermobile person, I have experienced a senior teacher taking my head so *forward and up* that I could no longer see out of my glasses. To look straight ahead I had to look over the rim of my frames. The teacher was thrilled at *how far I could go* and made no comment when I mentioned that I couldn't see where I was going. This experience let me know that particular teacher was more interested in range of motion rather than *balance, poise, and counter direction*.

The counter direction of forward/up is back/down. Those two directions form an axis. And there is also an oppositional axis to the forward/up-back/down axis of up/back-forward/down axis.



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When these two axes intersect at the point where the head connects with the spine and they are opposing in a balanced manner, the head is poised on the spine releasing downward pressure of the head on the whole structure, allowing for the GRF to move up through the entire body. This takes into account that the center of gravity of the head is in front of the Atlanto Occipital joint.

² *Head on Spine* Drawing by Morgan Van Gele

As we move we are in constant interaction with these axes leading us to a dynamic balance of the head on the spine and allowing our muscular tone to be in constant flux and adaptable to whatever activity we are engaged in.

Let's continue with the forward and up of the head as a whole - in relation to what? To the other end of the head, neck, and back; the pelvis all the way to the sit bones giving us our length. As we find gravity and the GRF in this context, we can now allow opposing forces to move *through* our body and out into the larger sphere of space around our body.

Do this experiment:

- Begin sitting.
- Come to standing with the directions you normally employ.
- Note your experience.
- Return to sitting.
- Now, incorporate the idea of capturing the oppositional flow from gravity *through* your sit bones, *through* your chair, into the floor. Also add the GRF rebound up from the floor *through* your chair, through your head, neck, and back, out the top of your head and into the space above your head.
- Stand and sit again.
- Note your experience.
- Now, as you sit, include a larger space by extending one arm and pointing toward the ceiling while at the same time extending the other arm directly down and pointing to the floor. This is amplifying the length of your head to tail axis.
- Stand and sit again.
- Note your experience.
- Bring your hands to your lap and think of that head to tail axis extending past your body limits into the space where your arms were and even think farther away.
- Stand to sit again.
- Note what happened.

To take another standard classical AT direction let's look at legs *forward and away*. The counter direction of *forward* for the legs is from the knees back into the hip joints.

Do another experiment:

- Start sitting.
- Come to standing thinking of your legs going *forward and away*.
- Return to sitting thinking the same thing.

- Now stand thinking of the counter direction of your legs coming into the hip sockets.
- Sit and stand, pendulating your focus back and forth between these two ideas.
- Eventually arrive at embodying them both at the same time.
- Note what happens.

Now add that to the head, neck, back directions from above. Use your arm again if you'd like and see what sensory experiences emerge.

The concept of oppositional forces applies to our senses as well. Our sensory experiences help define the space around us. When we allow for the counter direction of the senses this helps us refrain from *leaning* on the world and thus our students.

Consider allowing the light to come toward your eyes. Let it move toward the back of your skull to your visual cortex. Notice what that does to the balance of your head on your spine.

Let the vibrations of sound around you arrive at your ears. Wait for it to come to you. Notice if that refines your balance.

In conclusion, when we allow for the natural universal forces to move through us we can sense both downward (gravity) and upward (GRF) flow throughout our structure. These are the directions we are *releasing into* and why we want to *free our neck* for instance. As we understand the spatial landscape more clearly, directing ourselves will be more effective. Releasing into the counter direction will lead us to poise and balance so that we allow for the flow to support and suspend us. This will also lead us to a more reliable sensory appreciation and allow our system to function more optimally.

Our understanding of these spatial forces and how they work on us and our students comes through our teaching hands contact and the language we use.

That is what we are after when we're teaching, to guide the students and to set up the conditions so they can most easily embody and utilize this dynamism. As we understand our AT directions in a larger spatial context and embody them ourselves, our teaching will be more effective and powerful.

Space is a large topic and this is just scratching the surface of how we can utilize our spatial thinking to enhance our understanding of the AT principles. Space goes through us when we allow. And then the concept of responsivity to the movements we are doing

leads us to the dynamism of the head on the spine so that our muscular tone is in constant flux and is adaptable to whatever activity we are engaged in.