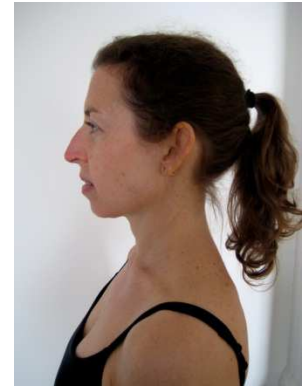
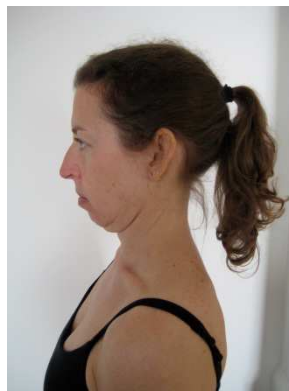
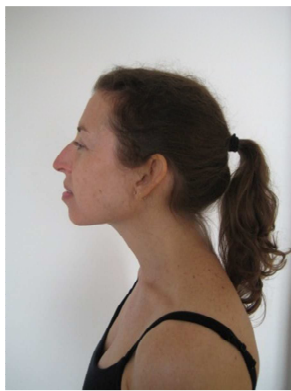


What Do I Do With My Head?

Yoga & the Alexander Technique

Joan Arnold

Yoga is a complex practice. That is its beauty and its benefit. For a creature as elaborate as a human being, yoga offers a movement vocabulary to challenge and ease our bodies and a philosophy to corral our wild minds. Yet for a discipline meant to knit mind and body—yoga means union—there is one zone where yoga instruction seems to be struggling: how to guide students to use the head and neck. That is, after all, where the brain meets the body.



Looking around in any yoga class, I see this question hanging in the air: What do I do with my head? Lift it? Drop it? Hold it in the right position, whatever that is? Let it lead or let it trail?

At the 2012 Yoga Journal Conference in New York City, I witnessed this conundrum in class, as master teachers noticed their students' necks straining and offered options. An Ashtanga vinyasa teacher suggested, as we rose from low lunge to high, that we let the head come up last, trailing the body. An Iyengar Yoga teacher suggested, in triangle pose, *Let your head move back and look up*. Responding to the tendency to strain your neck as you return to stand from extended side angle, a powerful muscle maven told us to put a hand under the head to cradle it as the body rises. Every other fiber and sinew may be working overtime, but the poor little neck (with 18 muscles of its own) needs a hand to get the head where it's going.



These teachers, and so many others, try valiantly to help their students move well. And in the weekly yoga classes I take in Brooklyn, I hear more creative cues: *Bring your throat back; Keep your eyes on the horizon as you twist; Imagine a luminous palate.* Or, simply: *Lengthen the back of your neck.* Each of these can be helpful, but there's a missing ingredient that is central to the Alexander Technique: the concept of the primary control.

The relationship between the head and the neck is primary in human movement. Actually, it is primary in all animal movement. Like a prairie dog poking out of its hole, each of us needs a free neck and lightly poised head to see, hear, respond and survive. Where's the food? What's that sound? Is the hawk up there after me? When we're scared, we clench and withdraw, like a turtle into its shell. Poke a paramecium and it will contract. Our body's instinctive response to real danger, honed over eons, is adaptive. But we don't need a charging lion or swooping predator to elicit our body's stress response. Non-lethal stimuli can get us just as nervous – a crowded subway, even an admonition or performance anxiety as we strive to do a yoga pose. These can develop into unconscious habits; without realizing it, our contracted response becomes a habit, a clench that won't quit.

Frederick Mathias Alexander came to understand how the habit of tensing the neck interferes with the body's ideal functioning. As a young Shakespearean orator at the turn of the 20th century, he lost his voice. When a physician couldn't help him restore it, Alexander studied his own movement in a full-length three-way mirror and saw that whenever he began to recite the Bard's immortal words, he pulled his head what he called "back and down." It's hard to imagine the stentorian style of the time, but in fact many contemporary actors throw their heads back for dramatic effect in just this way.



As he paid close attention to his customary way of vocalizing, Alexander saw that this habit had a litany of undesirable results.

The downward pressure of his head compressed his spine, constricted his breathing and constrained his voice. Even his feet contracted. Over years of self-observation and experiment, he taught himself to catch this habit, let that excess neck tension go and allow his body to work as a whole. When he did, he found that his spine naturally lengthened, his breathing deepened and his voice opened to its



full dynamic range. It wasn't exactly relaxation: he wasn't dropping his head. He trained himself to use his head dynamically: noticing his tendency, releasing that habitual overwork and envisioning a rotational direction, a slight internal forward movement of the head. This natural motion guides movement throughout the rest of the body. It's a kind of spooling action that enlivens and lengthens the spine.

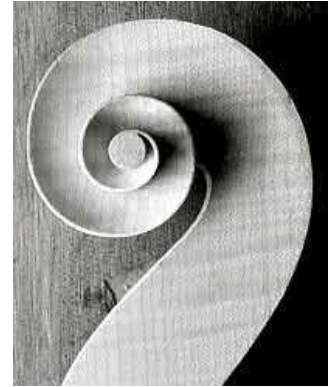
As a cellist tunes her instrument from the top down, she turns the pegs to achieve the appropriate degree of tautness and listens for the correct pitch as it vibrates through the body of the instrument. She aims to have each string harmonize with the others. Our tuning process is similar, though far more complex and internal. When we release the muscles at the base of the skull, the head tips slightly forward and elicits a lengthening in the spine, a postural reflex. This slight movement has a profound influence on our movement, breath, degree of tension and overall resiliency. Rather than compression, we get expansion and freedom, minimizing strain and encouraging the body's channels to open – breath, voice, limbs, thought.

Here's the beauty of marshaling the primary control: *the quality of the relationship between your head and your neck determines the quality and sensation of everything you do.* Your life of movement, even if it's sitting at a desk, can be influenced for the better by engaging the natural traction that results from that freedom. Alexander understood and clarified the distinction between freedom and laxity. Laxity is letting your head trail – a fine thing to do, and a skill among others. But when you need something stronger, a kind of power steering, the head can be both free and masterful, leading your spine into length as you move.

As we approach the rich variety of poses in yoga, rather than adjusting separate parts – *Where should my pelvis be? Are my shoulders in the right place?* – freeing the neck allows us to organize the whole. When we learn how to manage that slight rotation at the top of the spine as we move from one pose to another, the torso becomes springy and responsive. It's a bit different from the musician's motion as she adjusts the pegs. When we tune our own instrument, the body, we can employ the power of thought. Alexander discovered that visualizing the body's internal oppositional flows could be a more effective way to function than direct muscular action. When we envision rather than exert, our legs flow down into the earth and the torso expands toward the sky with more subtlety and ease. We can determine the appropriate tone by visualizing and letting the body take care of the details. Simple

thoughts can have complex results: shoulders, ribs and pelvis align naturally and freely shift in transitions. Then, like the cellist, we listen.

With all my affection for the many disciplines now sparkling in the bodywork firmament, when it comes to the crucial balance of the head on the spine, I believe that the Alexander Technique offers the most reliable guide. We can learn to free, not drop, the neck in activity. Using the primary control, we can direct energy through the natural upward thrust of the torso to support the neck, to let the head lead and fulfill each bodily gesture.



As I watch my students encounter yoga's many challenges, I see how their primary control influences their practice. It's a bit like their own window to integrated movement. For those at any level, whether in forward bend, one of the warriors, a twist or a cobra, the head's dynamic balance – or lack of it – can compress or release the spine. When I lightly guide a student to open that window right under the skull, there's a fresh breath of air, limbs flow away from the body's center and the pose finds its full flower.