# External and Internal Focusing: Personal Thoughts and Observations

*by Shulamit Sendowski*

Glenna Batson's three articles on neuroplasticity in *AmSAT News* (Issues #79, #80, and #81) stimulated many thoughts, motor learning memories, questions, and challenges in my mind, especially regarding external versus internal focus (EF versus IF). As Batson points out, numerous studies show that when learning a motor skill, EF results in better speed, accuracy, coordination, and retention. According to Batson, EF involves drawing the attention of the performer to the effects of the movement and to the environment in which the movement is occurring.[1]

I have been thinking about my childhood motor learning experiences to see whether they support what Batson describes. I remember learning to ride a bicycle as an EF experience. The children in the neighborhood, or sometimes an adult, held the bike from the back as I rode and reminded me: "Don't look at the wheel, look forward at the road." This advice was extremely helpful. Looking at the front wheel of the bike to make sure it was rolling caused me to fall down. Looking at the road kept me riding.

Vision seems to me an amazing tool for EF motor learning, but my own experience learning to ride a bicycle taught me that EF involves more than focusing on something in the environment. Focusing on the bike's front wheel got me in trouble, while focusing on the road was immediately effective and successful. In Alexander language, checking how the front wheel was rolling was an end-gaining activity, while focusing on the road helped me inhibit that unnecessary "doing."

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An additional example of unreliable external focus happens when I approach my aquarium: My fish follows me as soon as he sees me approaching, expecting his food to come, rather than paying attention to the crumbs I throw into the water for him. His focus is external, but he is going for the wrong object. His narrow external focus is as limiting as internal focus on a single body part. To me, this means that in either EF or IF, we might be misled by narrowly focusing on small details, forgetting to open ourselves up to seeing the whole picture.

Internal focus can be very valuable. As a child I never knew I had a body. Focusing on specific body parts during constructive rest gives me proprioceptive (internal) knowledge that my different body parts indeed belong to me and satisfaction that I can change my "feelings" and concepts of them. I enjoy observing them as parts of the whole, corresponding to my entire head-neck-back relationship. In times of physical pain, I feel more secure knowing I can locate more accurately the painful area, analyze what's going on, and decide what to avoid or inhibit.

Batson wonders if, as Alexander Technique teachers, we are offering our students too much body-based instruction (IF) that might interfere with autonomy and empowerment, and asks at what point we need to switch from IF to EF[2] in order to make our verbal instructions more effective.

I think that most of the time both types of instructions are needed. The basic direction "head forward and up," or "head leading," is for me a basic EF instruction, focusing on the environment above me and in front of me. What do I do when swallowing a pill? The external object, the pill, is going into an internal environment. I let my neck be free and direct my head forward and up, paying specific attention to releasing the tongue and the throat. Next I direct the pill with my tongue to go lengthwise, and then I swallow. I combine internal focus on the free neck, tongue, and throat with external focus on forward and up.

Since becoming more aware of the two types of focus, I find it easier to shift attention from one to another. When breathing, I now shift more easily from focusing on movement and sensation in my ribs and lungs to focusing on the air flowing in through my nostrils. My view of the process is now clearer. Focusing on the air outside me enhances my inhibition, and reduces my "doing."

Batson quotes Gabriel Wulf's well-regarded research: "It appears that paying attention to one's body parts interferes with more automatic parts of skill learning. Our attempts to highlight attention on one body part actually interfere with the automatic, synergistic organization of the whole."[3]

Walter Carrington says the same thing in his own way: "If you pay attention to what's happening in different parts of the body, the temptation to do something about it, particularly if you don't like what's happening…is pretty overwhelming. But if you simply content yourself on focusing on the nose and asking the question 'Is the air flowing or isn't it?' then at least you're not going to interfere with your breathing."[4]

My childhood experience of learning how to catch a ball (the size of a soccer ball) with my hands illustrates the importance of focus. Though I wanted to catch it when playing a certain game, my fear of being hit by the ball constantly made me miss it. I had a pre-conceived idea that it was hard to catch it. One day an older child explained to me that the actual catching was done by hugging the ball into the chest. I was attracted to the "hugging" idea. Instead of an "escaping" person, I could become a "hugging" or "embracing" person. Applying this thought immediately changed my self-image and brought about the desired result: I caught the ball thrown at me.

Alexander talks about unreliable guiding sensations associated with established ideas. "For instance," he says, "suppose that a pupil has a special desire to increase his chest capacity. This desire acts as a stimulus…and sets in motion all the unreliable guiding and directing sensations associated with his established idea of chest expansion. The only way, then, by which he can *prevent* the old subconscious habits…is for him to *refuse to act* upon this idea."[5] Though not consciously refusing to act upon my old, established idea that it was hard to catch the ball, I unconsciously put it aside, adopting the new idea.

Since it was an idea about my *being* rather then my *movement*, focusing on the ball while preparing to catch it became secondary. The object of focus remained the same—the ball—but my view of the activity, myself, and my purpose changed.

Alexander insists on the "unbalanced psycho-physical condition of the civilized human creature" adding that "the child of today is more predisposed to the factors which make for this condition...."[6] This statement reflects my childhood condition facing the motor learning challenges described above. Alexander goes on to say that "volition and inhibition are invaluable birthrights of the human creature."[7] I am thankful for unconsciously remembering my "birthright" then and consciously being able to use it now, applying it to my daily living, as well as to my teaching.

Batson invites us to increase our awareness of the environment in which our "unbalanced psycho-physical" being moves and to "incorporate the environment with the task while we think in activity."[8] My personal understanding of her words is that we should work more with *forward and up* as a way to include environment and space in our directing activities. Patrick Macdonald, for example, hypothesizes an expansionary force in our body that has an anti-gravitational direction.[9] The challenge for us as teachers is to find ways of describing our relationship with the space around us, staying with Alexander principles, and making sure that our ideas are guided by reliable means-whereby.

*Endnotes*

1. *AmSAT News* # 81, (Winter 2009): 22.
2. *Ibid.*, 23.
3. *Ibid.*, 22.
4. Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud* (Berkeley, California: Mornum Time Press, 1994), 65.
5. F.M. Alexander, *Conscious Constructive Control of the Individual*, Part II: "Sensory Appreciation in its Relation to Learning and Learning To Do" (Long Beach, California: Centerline Press, 1985; 1st ed., 1923), 84.
6. *Ibid.*, 85.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *AmSAT News* # 81, 23.
9. Patrick Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It* (Brighton, England: Rahula Books, 1989), 54.

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## *Reply to Shulamit Sendowski*

*from Glenna Batson*
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I was delighted to read Shulamit's response to my series on neuroplasticity. Teaching the Alexander Technique reminds me again and again how it is *practice* that informs theory and not the other way around. Shulamit provides some wonderful examples of her memories from childhood learning of motor skills. The biking experience is a great example of how external focus (focusing on the road) results in better coordination than internal focus (the bike's front wheel). External focus helps inhibit unnecessary "doing" because the bike (like a pen, hat, cell phone, or any object of our focus) readily becomes part of the body schema and thus is as subject to habit as any anatomical aspect of our use. I so enjoyed the way she linked the fish's focus in waiting to be fed to the larger scope of end-gaining behavior. End-gaining can interfere with coordination *regardless* of whether the focus is internal or external. Her quote from Carrington implies that not only the "locus" of the focus (internal or external) but also the degree of absorption in the task, is important in good use. We can either end-gain and lose our use by habitual "doing" in the task or maintain that "with-and-away" stance that is more optimal for coordination. This is a really important distinction that the brief look at this topic vis-à-vis Gabriel Wulf's research does not really touch. I am totally in agreement with Shulamit's conclusion: that our "challenge is to find ways of describing our relationship with the space around us, staying with our Alexander guidelines and principles...." Science can offer us a window of inquiry about pedagogy. Alexander Technique asks us to live this inquiry in an ongoing creation of poise.

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