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External and Internal Focusing

by Shulamit Sendowski

External and Internal Focusing:

Personal Thoughts and Observations, Part II



In my first article on external and internal focusing,¹ I discussed Glenna Batson's paper from AmSAT News² and gave some observations from my own experience. Batson described recent studies on attention showing that too much body-based instruction interferes with learning a motor skill. She speculated that Alexander Technique instruction would benefit from a balance between internal (IF) and external focus (EF). In particular, Batson advised incorporating more external focus into the teaching situation, and she suggested looking for the links between our habitual use and the way we use space, as well as seeking ways to be aware of our environment while thinking in activity.

Space

My childhood experience of learning to ride a bicycle, described in my first article,³ is a good example of the power of external focus. While I pedaled, a friend would hold the back of the bike and remind me not to look at the wheel but at the road. Looking down at the wheel caused me to fall, but looking forward at the road changed my balance right away and kept me from falling off the bike. At that time, I didn't know anything about the head-neck-back relationship; I didn't make any self-observations; I didn't consciously inhibit any habits. The only thing I did was to change my focus from internal to external—to the road in front of me. Focusing on the road stopped me from worrying that the wheel might stop rolling and eliminated my end-gaining attempts to stay stable on the moving bike. I simply looked at the road ahead, and that focus made me feel secure,

since I knew where I was and where I was going. I was able to put aside my unproductive fear of falling by following a simple verbal cue, with no hands-on guidance.

There is no doubt that the Alexander Technique includes attention to space and environment. I looked at the Alexander Technique literature to find examples to demonstrate this, particularly in the writing of Patrick Macdonald, Walter Carrington, and F.M. Alexander himself.

Patrick Macdonald wrote, "...the Alexander Technique ... seeks to give its students a new ...orientation. ...Modern man, when in activity, has very little awareness of such simple directions in space as backwards and forwards, and up and down, in relation to his own body...."⁴ Direction, he says, "has the two meanings of 'to order' and 'to point.' Alexander's use of the word includes both meanings."⁵

In *The Act of Living*, Walter Carrington gives "pointing" instructions: "Here you are lying on the table with your knees bent and you are going to bring up a foot...and you have got to be thinking of the knee going up to the ceiling. So that as you lie there it is as though your hands were otherwise occupied and somebody was saying to you 'where is the ceiling?' And with your knee you said 'It's up there.' That is the direction that you give with the knee to allow the foot to work freely."⁶ This is a vivid description of how to work with space and the surrounding environment while lying on the table, thinking up, and moving the leg.

In *Conscious Constructive Control of the Individual*, F.M. Alexander gives detailed information about the "directive and guiding orders" when putting hands on the back of the chair. His instructions specify what goes "inwards," "outwards," "to the left," "to the right," and "downwards" as part of the whole procedure, after making sure there is no interference involved. Like both Macdonald and Carrington as quoted above, Alexander describes "pointing" into space with the wrists and elbows, rather than focusing inward on feelings:

The following are the new directive orders: The pupil is asked:

- *to continue to hold the top of the chair by keeping the fingers quite straight from the first joints of the fingers to their tips, with the thumbs and fingers kept flat against the top rail of the chair as previously indicated.*
- *to allow the wrist of the left arm to be curved inwards toward the right, and the wrist of the right arm to be curved inwards from the left.*
- *to allow the elbow of the left arm to be curved outward to the left, and the elbow of the right arm to be curved outwards toward the right.*⁷

From these quotes, we see that the mind can focus on space and environment while moving a body part. This type of direction is different than directing the flow along the body or directing a shoulder to release, in which case the attention is on the body itself or on part of it. We use all these valuable types of direction in our work.

External focus adds another dimension to inhibition. The simple act of pointing with my knee to the ceiling as described by Carrington prevents me from thinking of moving my leg prematurely and over-using my muscles. All I have to do is to point my knee. My mind becomes involved in a mini-exploration in space to find out where to point. This little search expands my awareness as I realize not only where my head, neck, and back are in relationship to each other, but also where I am in relation to my surroundings.

Experimenting with different types of focus and comparing them to each other is quite an adventure! Here are three experiments for you to try:

- First, think of an area in the middle of your upper back. Locate it; find it between the shoulder blades. Let this area expand to let your shoulders widen. Next, think about the space on your right and the space on your left. Think of your right shoulder pointing and going to the right, and your left shoulder pointing and going to the left. What was the effect of each type of focusing?
- First, think of balancing the head on top of the spine. Next, direct the head forward and up. How is the thought of balancing the head on the top of the spine different than the thought of directing the head forward and up? What do you notice when you observe the shape of your lower back when lying on the table? What do you notice when you observe the shape of the space between your lower back and the table?

External focus can be a powerful tool. Some years ago, when Frank Ottiwell visited the new teachers at the Alexander Technique Institute of Los Angeles, he told us about a moment of weakness in his life while he was recovering from surgery. At that moment he found himself unable to direct. “But then,” he said, “I remembered the sky above my head.” That single, externally focused thought of the sky renewed his sense of “up” direction.

Ottiwell told us that spatial awareness is much more restricted today than it was in the past, when life did not take place between so many walls and other modern structures blocking an open view of the surrounding environment. Nevertheless, we live suspended in space all around us, and how we think about space affects how we function. For example, when I think of down in space, as distinct from up in space, my immediate attention goes to the few square inches of floor under my feet. My

concept of down affects the way I balance my feet on the ground and the way I coordinate my whole body as I stand, walk, or bend.

Vision

Though not all types of external focus are visual, all the examples quoted by Batson from Wulf's research involve vision:⁹ the batter watching the pathway of the ball as it approaches, the pitcher looking at where he wants to throw the ball, the person on the ski-simulator machine looking at visual markers. And we know that F.M always paid attention to a student's face and noticed what he/she was looking at during a lesson.

Frank Ottiwell reminded us that before we move in space, we want to see where we are going. Our body follows our head, but our head follows our eyes. In the ancient world, according to Ottiwell, it was essential to be visually alert if you wanted to stay alive. Today, we often do not look alertly at what is around us, and thus we are often relatively unaware of our surroundings. But looking can trigger an important inhibitory function. If I look before I go, I prevent immediate muscular reaction: I take my time to see where I am heading, I notice colors and objects in space, I estimate the sizes and shapes of objects in my projected path, how far or near they are, how high or low they are from each other and from myself, creating a better perception of the whole area.

As in all directed activities, *how* we look is at least as important as *what* we look at. The act of looking itself can be interfered with through misdirected or excess effort. Since I am near-sighted I know how easy it is to end-gain by "trying" to see something—with muscular tension in my whole body. At one point, I worked with a very tall performer whose way of looking made him slump and contract; he always looked down when walking to make sure he would not trip over small objects on the ground.

In *The Act of Living* Carrington describes working for a few minutes with a woman who had no previous knowledge of the Technique, incorporating vision in the mini-turn he gave her: "I got her standing there and I got her looking out of the window and just seeing what there was to be seen. She left herself alone and I was able to correct her balance."¹⁰ By getting this person to look out the window and "just see what there was to be seen," Carrington eliminated the possibility of end-gaining effort and, because she was externally focused, she did not interfere with his hands-on correction.

Teaching Possibilities

When focusing externally on space and environment, when “remembering the sky above our head,” when “looking to see where we’re going,” we add another dimension to our work. In addition to noticing what is happening inside us, we notice what is happening with us in relation to our surroundings. We can see where this foot, or arm, or any body-part (including the head, of course) is going, and we can decide where to point that part.

Musicians can perceive how they use themselves with the feedback of the sound produced by their instruments. How do we receive feedback from all the non-musical instruments and tools we constantly use? We can pay attention to how we relate to the chair we sit on, the floor we stand on, the keyboard we type on, the tools we work with.

I teach a student with Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI). She can notice her fingers, her hands, her arms, her shoulders, her primary control while opening a jar. She can also open the jar when lying down on the table, noticing how her back and the table are making contact with each other, changing with each pressure she creates with her fingers on the jar, with and without my hands on her head and neck. The interplay among her body, the jar, and the environment gives her endless opportunities and possibilities to experiment with.

Every day we are exposed to a wide range and variety of situations that can expand our motor-learning experience. We can learn from: how we focus, what we focus on, what kind of feedback we receive from our body and our environment, our different ways of directing, and how all of these interact with each other. What a wonderful opportunity for over-all growth is provided by daily life when we include awareness of external and internal focus in our Alexander Technique explorations!

Endnotes:

1. S. Sendowski, “External and Internal Focusing,” *AmSAT News*, Summer 2010, no. 83, 12–13.
2. G. Batson, “Neuroplasticity: The Art of Instructions,” *AmSAT News*, Winter 2009, no. 81, 21–23.
3. *AmSAT News*, Summer 2010, no. 83, 12.
4. P. Macdonald, *The Alexander Technique As I See It* (Brighton: Rahula Books, 1989), 32.
5. *Ibid.*, 4

6. W. Carrington, *The Act of Living*, ed. J. Sontag (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press, 1999), 25.

7. F.M. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (Long Beach: Centerline Press, 1985), 75–76.

8. If you enjoyed these experiments, Missy Vineyard's book *How You Stand, How You Move, How You Live* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 2007) has a chapter on space with space-experiments to try.

9. *AmSAT News*, Winter 2009, no. 81, 22.

10. Carrington, *The Act of Living*, 130.

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