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DYNAMIC BALANCE and the FIVE RELATIONS

by Sandra Bain Cushman

TOWARD THE END OF MY FIRST DECADE of teaching the Alexander Technique for Robert Fripp's Guitar Craft and Guitar Circles (GC), this system of pedagogy—the Five Relations—landed in my lap one Wednesday morning before a trip to Seattle to work with Tuning the Air, a seven-year collaboration of Seattle-based guitarists inspired by the leadership of Frank Sheldon. When I say, “landed in my lap,” I mean this literally. I was in my living room in the middle of my 30-minute sitting practice when all the Alexander Technique procedures that I had been taught and had practiced for 18 years organized themselves into five relationships that give rise to the Primary Control or anti-gravity coordination that is a hallmark of the Alexander Technique.

During the second decade of teaching on Robert's residential courses with groups of guitarists ranging in number from 15 to 115, the Five Relations became a pillar of the Guitar Craft approach to teaching the Technique. Today they remain central to the pedagogical approach of *Orchestral Maneuvers*, a unitive, collaborative approach to teaching the Technique to groups of all kinds, musicians and non-musicians alike, which continues to



take the GC work to a wider audience, including this year's ACGM (2019).

The Five Relations are components of our upright and moving coordination. Rather than a stacked-up-and-held or static system, ours is one that is active, anti-gravitational, and release-driven. We are less like a brick wall and more like a spring-loaded form in motion.

We can liken the human structure to a tensegrity structure in which the bones—or compression elements—are relatively rigid and unbendable, though mobile at the joints, while the muscles and connective tissues—the tensile elements—are active, elastic, and responsive. The tensile elements do not simply hold the bones together, but animate them in a sophisticated pattern, the characteristics of which are lightness, springiness, spaciousness, and continuity of motion. When we move, we do not so much lift weight as send this “bones-releasing-away-from-bones-into-suspension” shape into motion.

We can represent coordination of the major relationships in the body as a Pentagram, an architectural form composed of five evenly balanced elements (diagram A).

“The Five Relations are components of our upright and moving coordination.”

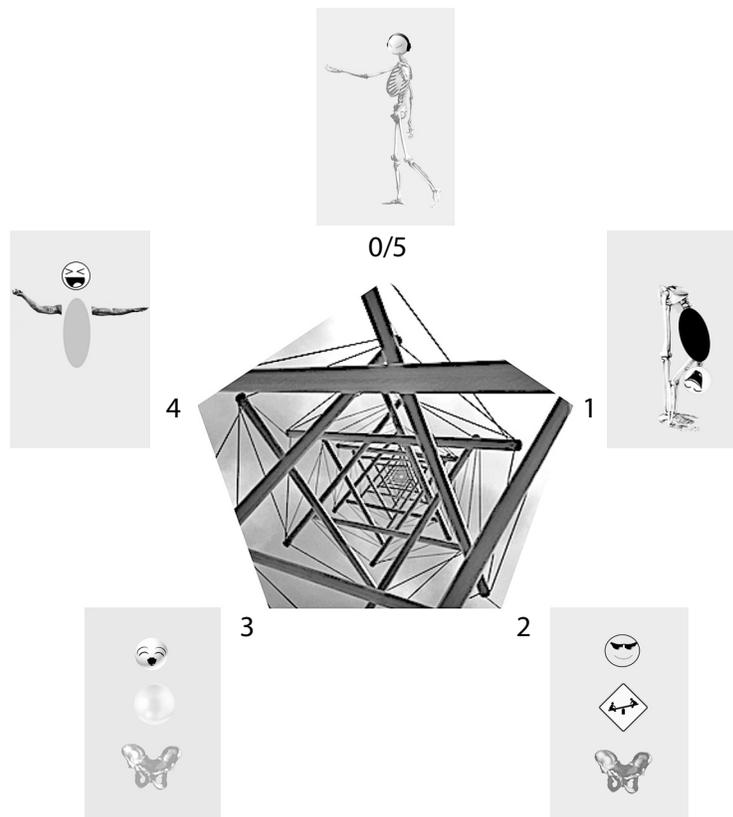


Diagram A

“Optimal coordination and locomotion depend upon the free balance of the head on the very top of the spine.”

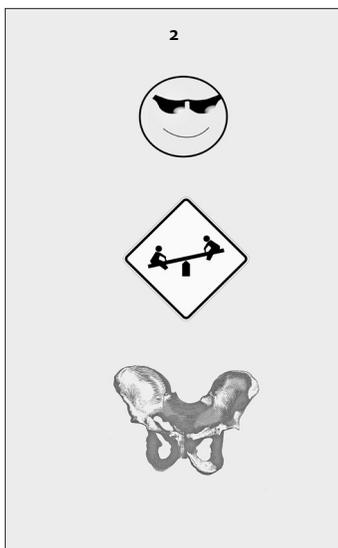
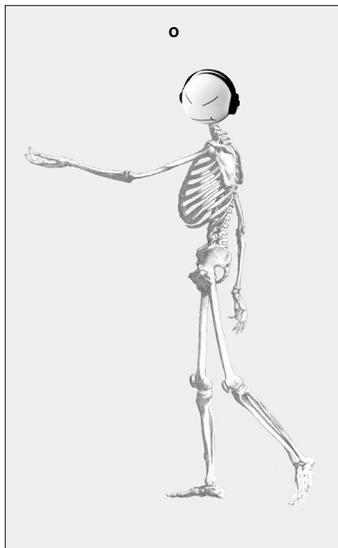
In our coordination the initial and chief characteristic of optimal head/spine behavior is “eyes free and moving.” THE ZERO RELATION defines the relationship at the top of the Five Relations scheme, the one that initiates good coordination.

The Fifth Relation, the one that organizes and animates the others, is the relation of the head to the entire body. The Zero and Fifth Relations share the spot at the top of the Pentagram; you could say that the Zero Relation locates and defines the balance of the head and eyes in their surroundings and that the Fifth Relation represents the head leading the body into upright balance and motion.

All mammals, including humans, have a head-leading, body-following coordination system. For this to function well, the balance of the head on top of the spine needs to be free and unencumbered. The head orients forward and up over the very top of the spine—behind the eyes and between the ears—not positioned, but mobile, nodding and turning naturally on the top two vertebrae of the neck, which are in contact with the lower portions of the skull and determine its free movement.

When the head is held back, fixed and stiff, or dropped forward of the spine too far off this small but elegantly wrought mechanism, undue strain and downward pressure are created. Most adults have poor head balance and take the strain and downward pressure as their due, as an inevitable result of aging, as something to be strengthened against so that they can feel less drag and interference in their movement. The proper balance of the head is a skillfully managed imbalance: the skull is balanced on top of the spine but is heavier forward of the spine. It is easy to see the characteristic nodding motion of free head balance in a toddler, where the size of the head relative to the body and the newness of managing the upright balance show the natural nodding motion to good advantage.

THE FIRST RELATION is that of the legs to the entire torso. It is easiest to see this relation in sitting, where the release of the legs forward and away from the torso sends the torso up into vertical release. To engage this counterbalance in sitting, the thighs ought to fall freely and directly forward of the hip joints, neither splayed nor with the knees pressed tightly together. Freedom and organization in the thighs and hip joints (released rather than gripped or stiffened) allow the knees to orient forward and away, while they remain unlocked. The openness in the knees allows the lower leg a clear and mobile connection back and up into the thigh and down, over, and into the foot. The arches



of the foot then meet the floor, open, responsive, and springy.

The leg-torso counterbalance is operative also in standing and walking. Contrary to the way things appear, we move the way other mammals move, except that our four-leggedness has been sent into the upright, and the head-leading-body-following that is apparent watching an animal move in the horizontal is less obvious as we orient ourselves—more or less, depending upon the acuity of our coordination—in the vertical dimension.

For the First Relation to engage properly, the legs need to be released away from the torso—forward and away in sitting and downward and away in standing—not gripped up under it by overactive thigh and hip and lower back muscles. This separation allows the cooperation necessary for light and fluid balance in sitting, standing, and moving. Picture a child on a swing. The pumping of the legs is a release of legs away from the torso. The upright balance of the spine on the swing moves slightly back as the legs move forward. This active release/ongoing counterbalance generates the energy that makes the swing move.

THE SECOND RELATION resides within the first, and it also depends upon a counterbalance that helps us achieve proper suspension and organization. We have already introduced the head balance, which is the first element of the Second Relation. Adding to what we already understand, the head moves on the top two vertebrae—the atlas and the axis. Two small condyles in the center of the bottom of the skull sit into two small declivities on the top of the atlas. The dens of the axis (the next vertebra down) also articulates with the skull, and its pegged shape allows the head to turn from side to side, a small articulate movement very different from that made when someone tries to move the head side to side from the base of the neck and the shoulder girdle. When we try to nod the head forward from the base of the neck and the shoulder girdle, where no joint exists to make this movement, the head falls forward of the spine and creates a great deal of force and compression. In other words, the head does not rest on the shoulders.

This proper use of the atlas/axis/skull relationship results in a natural nodding—or turning-to-look-down—motion from the very top of the spine. The center of gravity of the head is in the sella turcica (Turk’s saddle), forward of where the head moves on the atlas. The imbalance created by this seems to generate an activating force that helps to free the spine into movement. Picture a ball on a fountain, or a spring loaded continually by a weight balanced (and re-balanced, due to

its dynamic imbalance) on top. A pogo stick is a good example of a spring charged by a weight riding on top of it.

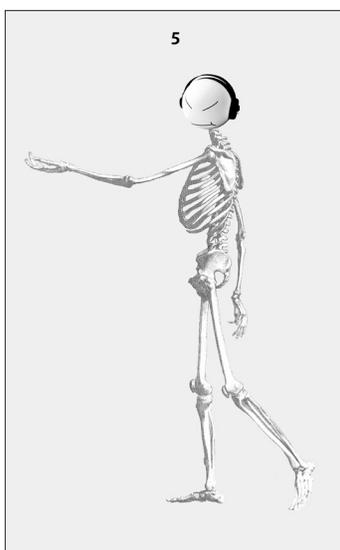
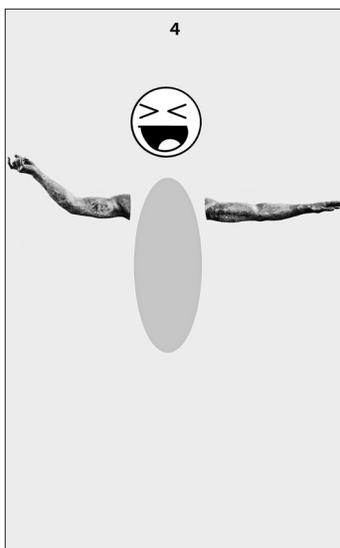
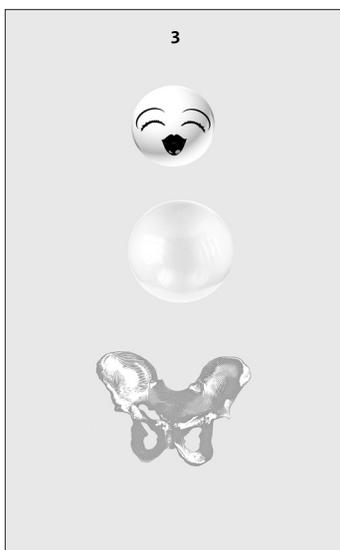
The other component of the Second Relation is the pelvis. Similar to the head, the pelvis has a dynamic balance built into it, one that also results in a nodding motion, but this time in reverse, opposite to the small, natural forward nod of the head. The pelvis has at its base two rockers, the ischial tuberosities, which move us easily forward and backward like a built-in rocking chair. As we shift balance over the sit bones, they act as our “feet” in sitting; we can walk them forward and backward in the chair, for instance, without relying on gripping or lifting with the arms, or tightening and pulling with the legs.

The contact of the sit bones with the chair provides our base for movement in sitting; the free hip joints, above and forward of the sit bones, provide the movement itself. And the third element in pelvic balance, the sacrum and coccyx, receives the weight of the entire spine. When the hips are free, the sit bones in contact with their support, and the weight of the spine released to the sacrum and coccyx, the pelvis tends toward a delicate and recurring backward nod. When coordinated this way, the pelvis rights itself continually, and with it (it being the center of gravity of the whole body) the entire torso.

This forward nod of the head and backward nod of the pelvis keep the spine lively and “sprung” at either end. The turning of the head (this centers from the second vertebra of the neck, the dens of the axis, directly below the atlas) and the turning and pivoting of the pelvis on the hips further loads the dynamism of the spine with circular movements and keeps sending it upward into our natural anti-gravity suspension.

A simple way to remember the dynamics of the Second Relation is to think of a teeter-totter: the head moves, the pelvis responds; the pelvis moves, the head responds like the up and down, back and forth counterbalance on the playground toy.

THE THIRD RELATION is Breathing Coordination. In general, we interfere with our breath by “taking” the inhale. In our eagerness to “take a deep breath,” we cheat the exhalation and do not allow the natural release of the diaphragm. This release gently pushes the air out of the lungs and drapes the expanded ribs back toward the vertical, so that they may recharge to spring open again with the next inhale. The Alexander Technique does not offer an approach to breath control or training, but rather a way of discovering and restoring natural breathing coordination and redeveloping



the strength and resilience of the diaphragm. This depends upon the organization and freedom of the Zero-First-Second Relation sequence and on the poise of the chest brought about by the natural release of the arms out and away from the torso... which brings us to the Fourth Relation.

THE FOURTH RELATION, the arms out and away from the torso, allows us to release up out of the hunkering down we do over computers and handheld devices (within the health industry, this is now called “the I-hunch”). Instead of the arms leading the coordination downward and inward, the arms are supported and dynamically charged by the interaction of the other Four Relations. This sounds simple, but all we have to do is look around any public (or private) place to see bodies hunched over keyboards and phones, heads dropped forward off the spine, breath squashed, backs hinging where there are no hinges. The next hinge joint below the atlanto-axial-occipital joint is the hip joint; there are no hinge joints anywhere in between.

To use the arms effectively, to type, to draw, to play an instrument, to lift and carry, the rest of the coordination needs to be organized. The reason the other Relations come before the Fourth in the basic sequence of coordination is that as they are brought into play, they offer the arms the energy, stability, freedom, and support they need to work effectively and skillfully, without undue strain.

THE FIFTH RELATION, back at the top of the Five Relations Pentagon, organizes and animates the other four. To no small degree, freeing our balance and organization begins with the eyes, allowing them to move, allowing the head to move freely at the now-familiar joints that are located at the top of the spine, and overall, overriding our tendencies to interfere with our suspension.

Optimal coordination and locomotion depend upon the free balance of the head on the very top of the spine. Intention in movement is all. The focus of the eyes and this conscious orientation of the balance of the skull support the anti-gravity system that is our birthright. To think of the body in static terms, as a compression structure stacked and held, is to risk putting ourselves seriously wrong. These five key relationships form a living, moving human architecture dependent upon connection, intention, and interaction.

In addition to giving up our notions of position and alignment and weight, we must—in order to inhabit this active release-driven system—learn to engage our awareness, clarify our intention (direct our actions), say “no” to moving from our habits

(characterized by compression, momentum, and pitched weight), and attend to the interaction of the Five Relations as we move. These skills develop gradually as we play with the principles and the particulars of the Alexander Technique.

Recently I found myself at a tax office during tax season working with a group of very stressed accountants. A few years before, I had visited the same office to present the Technique in the traditional way, without my emoji charts and Five Relations Pentagram. My second visit—powered by the use of this simplified 3-D approach to directing—explored the Technique through collaborative games where we put the directions into action (and into the context of non-doing, of course!) and it took off in a way that the first workshop had not. I realized at the end of the recent session, while everyone in the office was exclaiming about how useful and accessible the work was to them, that they didn't even remember the first workshop. It hadn't "landed" in the same way as this Five Relations method had.

In my experience, the Five Relations simplify and codify the procedures of Alexander Technique directing for newcomers to the work and experienced students alike. It is rewarding to see people discover a handy and fun three-dimensional way of understanding

« In my experience, the Five Relations simplify and codify the procedures of Alexander Technique directing for newcomers to the work and experienced students alike. »

and employing the directions for themselves. I teach the Five Relations in my Alexander Technique classes for the Contemplative Sciences Center and the Department of Music at the University of Virginia and in workshops for musicians and non-musicians in universities and the public sector. In group work, we teachers rely less on our hands and more on

conveying the concepts of the Technique in clear and easily applicable ways. The Five Relations prove themselves again and again as an effective way of keeping the work moving.

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Eyes free and moving
head leads/body follows

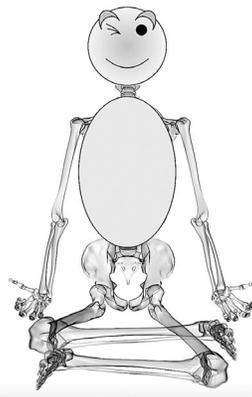
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Arms out and away
from torso

4

1

Leg/torso
counterbalance



Breathing coordination

3

2

Head/pelvis
counterbalance

Diagram B

SANDRA BAIN CUSHMAN'S (the Virginia School for the Alexander Technique, 1990) passion for unlocking creative potential began with her theater studies at Cornell University in 1977. She certified in the Alexander Technique with Frank Sheldon. Sandra is the founder of Orchestral Maneuvers for groups of non-musicians who want to experience the creativity and cohesiveness enjoyed by orchestral musicians.

Sandra is an Art of Breathing teacher and author of *Mind Body 40 Days*, a guide to the practice and practicalities of applying the Alexander Technique to playing music and in the course of daily life. Sandra teaches for the McIntire Department of Music and the Contemplative Sciences Center at the University of Virginia and maintains a private practice in Charlottesville, Virginia.

PHOTOGRAPH of Sandra Bain Cushman by Laura Dillon Rogers.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS are collages that were made collaboratively by Sandra Bain Cushman and Laura Silberberg.