Tips for Hips

Facilitating Hip Joint Freedom

by Nada Diachenko

This article is based on the workshop I presented at the 2021 annual AmSAT conference. I originally developed the workshop for partners and have adapted it for individuals to work by themselves.

In all honesty, experiencing the explorations and getting feedback from a teacher's hands is very illuminating, fun, and a means to facilitate a greater letting go of leg and hip tension. However, there is a great benefit and challenge in using hands on yourself and going deeply into the investigation of freeing your hips by incorporating Alexander Technique principles on your own.

I developed the material in the partner and solo work out of a huge need that I found in my students. I find that most of my students lack awareness of or have confusion surrounding where the hip joints are, a fact that is very apparent when teaching the position of mechanical advantage (POMA). People with tight hip flexors and gluteal muscles, especially dancers and athletes, often have difficulty releasing excess muscle tension. They benefit from improved use and reduced tension when their body map is clearer and more accurate. Understanding where the hip joints are and the distinction between legs, hips, and torso enables students to make changes more effectively.

The following experiments and explorations can be an adjunct to table work, demonstrations with the skeleton, and strategies that you have developed in your teaching. I find establishing some basic level of understanding of the location and function of the hip joints early on in the lesson process is tremendously helpful in sitting, standing, POMA, and walking. Also, if your student has had an injury to the hip joint or is recovering from a hip replacement, this awareness is essential.

Part I of the article is a body mapping and anatomy refresher with discussion of misconceptions or mismaps (inaccurate or erroneous body part locations). William Conable developed the mapping work, and he and his wife Barbara Conable, both Alexander teachers, use it to facilitate learning the Alexander Technique. In this section, you will also learn how to locate and palpate important bony landmarks on yourself.

Part II is spent in the Active Rest Position (ARP) with your legs over the seat of a chair or ottoman at a 90-degree angle. The written instructions, photos, and videos will guide you in your exploration to freeing the use of the legs at the hip joints. Various movement explorations will involve using your hands on yourself, incorporating inhibition and direction.

Part III involves going to all fours, sitting, moving from sitting to standing and standing to sitting, and a brief discussion on working in partners.

As you engage in these explorations, please be sure to take care of yourself by modifying appropriately if you have an injury or condition that may be aggravated by the activity. If the ARP is longer than you are used to, take some breaks if you become uncomfortable.

You will need a mat or blanket to place on the floor for active rest, books or other support for the head, and a chair or ottoman.

PART I Major areas of confusion and inaccurate body mapping

1. Thinking the hips are high on the pelvis at the level of the iliac crests
2. Thinking that the joints are on the side of the leg at the greater trochanters of the femur
3. Bending at the waist instead of flexing the torso at the hip joints
4. The femur is straight and ends in a ball that fits into a dome-shaped socket (yikes!)

Location experiment

This experiment is done individually (it can also be done with a student or a group).

Close your eyes and point to where you think your hip joints are. It can be illuminating to see some of the mapping errors in yourself or others.

What is the hip joint?

The hip joint, also called the iliofemoral joint, is a ball and socket joint located where the head of the femur (the ball) articulates with the acetabulum (the socket of the pelvis).

VIDEO 1
BALL & SOCKET
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

What is the torso?

In my teaching experience, I have found that many people think the torso ends at the waist just above the iliac crests and lack the understanding that the pelvis is part of the torso and not part of the leg. The full length of the torso begins at the top of the spine at the atlanto-occipital joint (AOJ) and includes the entire spinal column. The bottom of the torso ends at the sit bones, pelvic floor, and sockets in the pelvis where the head of the femur connects to make the hip joint. The torso, sometimes called the trunk, houses our organs and major systems of the body, such as the respiratory, circulatory, and digestive systems (figures 1 and 2).

What is the pelvis?

The pelvis is the lower half of the torso comprised of two pelvic halves or coxal bones (the coxal bone is the fusion of three bones: the ilium, ischium, and pubic bones). The two pelvic halves connect with the sacrum, which is part of the spine, to form the sacroiliac joints. The sacrum is part of the spine and the pelvis (figure 3).

Palpation and movement explorations to gain more clarity and improve how the joint functions

1. Stand and trace the iliac crest on both sides of the pelvis with your hands. This is an opportunity to confirm there isn't a joint on this bony ridge since a joint is where two bones connect.
2. While standing, find your greater trochanter (GT) by placing your fingers at the center of the curving iliac crest and press inward and downward along the side of the ilium to the outside of your upper thigh. You are pressing into soft muscle tissue for four to six inches, at which point you will then feel a hard bony mass that is the GT.
3. Rotate your leg inward and outward as you touch the GT and feel it move.
4. Place your thumbs on both greater trochanters and move your other fingers inward. They will be pointing toward the hip joints at the creases or folds at the top of the leg. Typically, people are surprised at how close together the two hip joints are and how narrow it feels. That new awareness may be hard to trust with many years of moving as though the hip joints were higher and farther out.
5. Another way to locate your hip joint is to sit and trace a line from the center of your knee up the middle of the thigh to the crease at the top of the leg. Place your fingers in the creases, which will be the center of the hips joints. You can also accomplish this by standing in POMA and tracing the same path from the center of the knee to the creases at the top of the leg.

Why are the hip joints so narrow?

The femur bone has a long shaft and a neck that ends in the ball that angles inward to the acetabulum or socket. The socket is a forward-facing cup that is placed laterally and slightly forward (figure 4).

1

2

3

4

Figure 1 The torso, posterior view **Figure 2** The torso, anterior view **Figure 3** The pelvis, posterior view **Figure 4** The acetabulum

Walking experiment

1. Begin by walking as you normally do around your space, then place your hands on the greater trochanter and think of walking as though your hip joints were there. You are leading with the GT. Now, shift your thumbs to the GT and aim your fingers toward the center of the hip joints and notice the shift to a more narrow awareness.
2. Explore walking as though the joints were on the top and front of your iliac crests. Make a mental note of what that mismap is like.
3. Now, do a small POMA and trace a line from the center of the knee up to the center of hip joints. Leave your fingers at the hip joints and begin to walk, thinking of leading the leg forward from the centers of the joints. Make a mental note of what you observe about your walking when the location of the hip joints is more accurate.

Movement exploration: Moving the torso on the legs and legs on the torso

1. Stand and give your directions. Then place one hand on the top of your head, thinking of freeing the atlanto-occipital

joint, and place the fingers of the other hand in the center of the hip joint. As you lead with your head, go into a small POMA, allowing the hip joints to flex, and sense the length of the entire spine.

2 Repeat, and this time with fingers touching the sit bones. Repeat several times, bringing awareness to the whole self. As you move the head forward and up, allow the lower end of the torso, the pelvis, to swing back, arriving in POMA. Think of the length of the entire torso.

3 To move your leg on the torso simply raise your right leg with a bent knee from the center of your right hip joint. Think of the knee going forward as you flex your hip.

4 Sit in a chair and take time to bring awareness to the pelvis, the bottom of your torso, by allowing weight to be present in the tuberosities of the ischium, your rocker-shaped sit bones. There should be no weight on the tailbone or sacrum.

5 Trace the line from the center of the knee to the center of the hip joint and begin folding forward and back, rocking on the sit bones and sensing the organization of the lengthened torso moving as a whole. If movement in the pelvis and hip joints is stopping, inhibit the cause of the holding and allow the front and back of the pelvis to move (the pubic bones in the front will swing back as the tail bone and sit bones move back). Your torso is following the head and lengthening from top to bottom.

VIDEO 2
TORSO & LEGS
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

VIDEO 3
SIT & STAND
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

PART II Movement explorations in active rest position

1 Lie down on your back in semi-supine with the appropriate amount of books to support your head. With knees bent, place your feet on the floor and have a chair, bench, or ottoman near your feet. Take a few minutes to allow your head, neck, and torso to be supported by the books and floor, and notice the ease of your coordinated breathing.

2 Think your directions.

3 Bring awareness to the balance and quality of effort in the legs. Where could you do less in the legs?

4 Lengthen the torso by slipping your hands palms down to the floor under your sacrum. Allow the weight of the pelvis to settle onto the backs of your hands and think of a spreading and widening of the pelvis.

5 After several seconds, slide the hands out to the side or slide down toward the sit bones as you direct your head and torso to lengthen. Take the hands away and see what you notice. The pelvis and lumbar area often feel expanded, with the back releasing toward the floor.

6 Fold your right leg at the right hip joint and place the leg on the chair.

7 Notice if there was a reaction to lifting the leg, such as adding extra muscular work or holding your breath or recruiting other body parts and muscles.

8 Fold the left leg and place it on the chair and observe the process. Ideally you want your hip joints flexed at a 90-degree angle so you may need to pull the chair closer to your sit bones.

9 While both legs are resting on the chair think about the whole torso. Place fingers at that mastoid processes behind the ears and think behind the nose and between the ears to renew the top of the torso, then palpate both sit bones. Renew in your awareness that the bottom of the torso also includes the pelvic floor.

10 Place a finger in the center of the right hip joint and at the same time touch your right sit bone. Notice how much lower the sit bone is than the hip joint. Do the same on the left side.

Folding legs into the front of the torso

1 Review tracing a line from the center of the knees to the center of the hip joints to renew the location of the iliofemoral joints. Allow the femur heads to soften in the sockets. Images of sinking and melting may be useful if there is a tendency to tighten and hold in the joints.

2 Slide your right heel along the seat of the chair and fold the right femur towards the front of the torso. Notice if there is a reaction in the torso to moving the leg at the hip joint. Then extend the leg away from the torso and place the foot on the chair. Repeat on the left.

3 Place your hands on your knees and alternate flexing and extending the legs at the hip joints while sliding the heels along the seat of the chair. Choose to do this activity with minimal effort—avoid pulling the leg back into the socket and think of the femur head falling into the socket.

4 Hold one leg and draw the femur into the socket, and with your hands, guide your femur to gently rotate inward and outward and explore making a circle with your leg while still supporting the femur with your hands. Repeat on the other leg with the intention to use only the amount of effort necessary to do the movement. If your habit is to overwork the hip flexors and gluteal muscles, you will need to inhibit the extra muscular work and let your hands and arms provide most of the support.

VIDEO 4
HEELS ON CHAIR
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

Figure 5 Opposition of torso and leg

Femur Walking

1 Place a hand on each knee and as you bring the right leg into small flexion with your right hand, move the left leg into a small extension and continue to alternate. Allow the femurs to swing forward and back while the heels slide on the chair.
2 Take the legs off the chair and alternate rocking your femurs inward and away at the hip joints Remember to not pull or use a lot of effort to move your legs. Allow the femur heads to fall in toward the socket.

Hint: If you notice excess tension in the deep rotators, the gluteus maximus, or the lateral quad, guide the femur head to rotate slightly inward to counter the lateral pull from the overworking muscles mentioned. Also, think of the pelvis widening in the front and back and the gluteus muscle doing nothing. Think of your whole torso going back in the direction of the floor and up toward the head while you direct the femur forward.

VIDEO 5
FEMUR WALKING AND ROCKING
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

Opposition of torso and legs

1 Lie in ARP with legs over the chair. Place your left hand on the right side of the front of the pelvis and your right hand on the front of your right thigh a few inches below the hip joint (figure 5).
2 Think of the femur and pelvis moving towards each other as you slide the hands together using very little effort. Then, think/direct the pelvis and the femur to move away from each other as you apply a very minimal and light touch with your hands. This typically creates a greater sense of space in the hip joint.
3 Also, direct the back of the torso to go back with the sacrum spreading and widening. Renew the direction of the head going forward and up. The whole torso and head are moving up at the same time the leg is lengthening away from the torso, creating an opening in the hip joint and an opposition of the torso to the leg.
4 Repeat this activity again by starting with the right hand on the left front pelvis and the left hand on the top of the left thigh. Think of the torso and femur moving away from each other.
5 As you explore directing the legs away from the torso and the torso back and up, add the idea that the shins are facing forward. Direct the knees and shins out and away in opposition to the torso lengthening back and up. You can think this opposition not only in ARP but in sitting, standing, and walking.

Spiral the femurs inward

If you are aware that there is greater tension on the outside of the thighs and that the tight muscles tend to pull the leg outward in weight-bearing, you may notice that the femur head is outwardly rotating. To rebalance the centering of the femur head, place both hands on the upper thigh with one hand in front and the other in the back and gently roll the femur bone inward toward the other leg. Try spiraling the leg inward as you move your hands toward the knee. Try this with both legs.

VIDEO 6
SPIRALING FEMURS
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

PART III Application of the information explored in parts I and II on all fours, POMA, walking, sitting, and standing; a brief introduction to working with a partner is included at the end

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1 While still in ARP with your legs over the chair, initiate moving your legs at the hip joints and flex the hip joints, bringing the legs towards your chest. Place your feet on the floor and think of allowing your femur heads to sink into the sockets, allowing the legs to rest in a balanced way.
2 Roll to your side and come to all fours. Renew your direction and awareness of the torso. Your back going back will be toward the ceiling. While directing your head away, think about the bottom of the torso at the sit bones and the tailbone lengthening as you rock forward and back on your knees.
3 Begin to fold into Child's Pose or a deep fetal curve. As the bottom of the torso continues to move back, allow your knees to aim forward as you deepen in the hip joints. Once you have completed the deep fold in the hips, knees, and spine, come to sitting on your heels or crawl to your chair and come to standing.

VIDEO 7
ALL FOURS
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

VIDEO 8
PARTNERS
(CLICK TO VIEW ON YOUTUBE)

1 Observe yourself in standing. See what you notice about your torso. Think about the opposition of the head forward and up and the torso lengthening back and up with the knees and shins directing forward.
2 Notice if the torso is more integrated and unified. Proceed to heighten your awareness of the hip joints by tracing the line from the center of your knee to the center of the hip joints. Place your hands on the greater trochanters and think of a softening, and allow your weight to come onto the femur heads.
3 Walk while thinking of the opposition of the torso to the legs. Allow the femur bones to swing forward and the knees and shins to float forward and away. Notice if there is more ease in the legs with a greater sense of wholeness in the torso when you are thinking of the opposition of the torso to the legs.
4 Explore moving in a variety of directions.
5 Renew your directions and placement of the hands explored in the opposition of torso and leg experiment in Part II. Continue to walk more with hands on the pelvis and leg.
6 POMA: Stand in front of the chair and place your fingers in the center of your hip joints. Direct your head allowing the bottom end of the torso to move back as the head goes forward and away. Immediately soften and crease the hip joints. Allow the pubic bones to swing back as the sit bones and sacrum swing back. Think knees and shins forward and continue to fold all the joints as you lower to gravity and end in the chair.
7 Have some fun improvising incorporating legs moving freely at the hip joints on an integrated and lengthened torso.

Working in partners

Table work is very valuable in helping students to improve the accuracy of the location of major joints and other structures. It also helps students to find freedom in the hips joints and develop more distinction between the torso and legs.

The other valuable tool that I find extremely helpful is inviting the student in ARP to place their legs over mine as I sit in the chair. In that position, I get feedback from the students from their legs on my legs as well as in my hands. With legs and torso supported, I find that they are better able to let go of extra tension and effort. Students with strongly contracted quads, gluteal muscles, and deep rotators benefit by discovering how to do less and find the distinction between torso and legs and legs moving on the torso.

There is a great amount of detail in the partner work when I break down what the individual roles are and what each partner is doing and thinking. I have included one procedure, femur walking in partners, to give you an example. I hope the future will bring a live workshop for partner Tips for Hips!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nada Diachenko (Alexander Technique Institute in Boulder, Colorado, 1999) is on the faculty of Alexander Technique Denver teacher training course. She certified in Jessica Wolf's Art of Breathing in January 2014 and is also a certified Muscular Therapist in the Benjamin System of Muscular Therapy. Nada teaches privately and conducts workshops nationally and internationally in the Alexander Technique, dance, and injury prevention. She has presented workshops at past Annual Conventions, the 11th International Congress in Chicago, the Freedom to Move Conferences in NYC, and for the American Conference of Orthopedic Medicine. She is Professor Emerita in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Colorado in Boulder where she taught and created courses and specialized programs for thirty-two years. As a full professor in dance, she developed and directed the Somatic Emphasis in the MFA graduate program where students can pursue an intensive study in the Alexander Technique. Her introductory article on *AT for Dancers* was published January 2017 online at www.4dancers.org and her book review of *The Alexander Technique and Dance: The Missing Link* was published in the *AmSAT Journal*. Nada has had a fifty-year career as a professional dancer, educator, choreographer, and somatic specialist.