

## Mind Body 40 Days

by Sandra Bain Cushman

This article is an excerpt from Sandra's book-in-progress *Mind Body 40 Days*, based on her blog: [mindbody40days.blogspot.com](http://mindbody40days.blogspot.com)

*Mind Body 40 Days* offers day-by-day support as we undertake or refresh our practices of the Alexander Technique and other Mind-Body disciplines. There are a total of 40 daily entries; this article features selections from the entries for the first three days.

### Day 1

A version of grumbling I remember from a not-so-distant past (I'm sure I could find an example from just this morning, if pressed to do so) goes something like this: "Oh, So and So did such and such, and this and that, and he's been that way (or "Such and Such did this to So and So, and this and that, and *it's* been that way") since Day One." This is a statement that suggests that the situation has always been a certain way—and not a happy way—with the implication that it cannot and will not change.

Most of us begin our practice—Mindfulness meditation, Alexander Technique, Centering—looking for change. As we come with open hearts and searching minds and (if we remember to invite that troublesome other bit of ourselves) with bodies ready to undo and reorganize, we look forward with Hope. "I *wish* to change!" is what brings us to the cushion or the chair, to the class or the teacher, in the first place.

Yet there is a pull backwards through a kind of reverse foreboding: "I've always been this way. *Can I change?*" We stand like Janus on our first day, on Day 1, looking ahead as the future pulls us forward—mindful that as we develop our practices, we will also be pulled back, not always, but sometimes, by equal force, by doubt and habit and that grumbling voice, that inner heckler, that announces to us in no uncertain terms that "*We cannot do this!*" We cannot really move beyond what has always been.

Maybe we can't move forward today, maybe we are stuck right here with the grumbling machine idling away. Maybe, though, we can stop for a minute, for five minutes, for ten, for fifteen, twenty perhaps, and consider the possibility of a little quiet. Not a crashing, life-changing, instant-cure kind of quiet—though if that arrives, we might not chase it away—but a bit of our attention given, for a bit of time, a modest rest.

In Jeanne de Salzmänn's *Being and Reality* she refers to "a certain struggle that is not directed *against* automatic functioning as much as it is *for* the positive aim of remaining present."<sup>1</sup> Remaining present has everything to do with being in contact with life within the body.

What does this mean, *contact with life within the body*? Could it be that in spite of outside experiences, in spite of the wanderings of our attention, in spite of how we may be feeling or thinking at any given moment, we can strive to simply maintain contact with ourselves?

Many practices help us develop the capacity to do this. The Alexander Technique offers us a way that is simple and at the same time complete. A student of this Technique is asked to stop reinforcing the thoughts-going- astray, as often and as much as possible, and to begin redirecting available attention to the functional design of the body: how the head balances freely upon the spine, how the spine releases into length, responsive and springy, as a result of the head-neck freedom, and so on.

It is my experience that personal practice of the Alexander Technique and/or other Mind-Body disciplines can take us a long way toward a wished-for stable presence, while gently leading us away from automatic functioning—that habitual approach to our lives that amounts to running around on auto pilot, plagued by our thoughts, stirred by our anxieties and our fears, and dragging our bodies along on a very bumpy ride, indeed.

### Day 2

The body is in present time. Our thoughts wander. On the subconscious level of things, they fly hither and thither in a fairly random, though kaleidoscopic and often mesmerizing, way. Bringing awareness into the body anchors us in the here and now; the body cannot wander like the mind into the past and future. (Although the body can and does record past experiences, which we might address and release when we bring ourselves, our minds, back into our physical selves.) One way to limit our escapades in the habitual world, to slow down the kaleidoscope, is to direct awareness into the physical body.

Another way—or a way that is auxiliary to this—is to give ourselves some say about what enters the thinking/feeling/moving apparatus in the first place, about what impressions we take into ourselves and store here. When we pass an accident on the road, do we look? Do we open ourselves to the endless stream of images and antics on television? Do we read newspapers, surf the net, listen distractedly to the car radio, gossip, engage in endless chatter? (The answer to these questions is: "*Of course we do!*" So the next questions are: "Can we do less of this?" "For a day?" "A week?" "For *forty* days?")

If we were to fast—a news fast or a TV fast or a gossip fast, for starters—we would begin to lessen the *oomph* that drives our habits. If there aren't as many stimuli coming in, there is not as much roiling about in our ongoing "random select" of thoughts and feelings. By fasting we can help the machine to slow down the vicious cycle of mind-wandering.

Then we may be able to bring some simple, objective awareness to the part of us that sits waiting patiently in present time; we may be able to invite the awareness we have made available—by foregoing this or that distraction—into the body



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in a quiet and a coherent way. When we are in the presence of someone who has cultivated this ability, someone who has found and walks around with a sense of quiet focus, we recognize it. There is a composure here that draws us, a calm and ease and elegance seldom seen or experienced.

Many years ago, I was exploring with a third grader a simple, fluid movement of her right arm. As her arm released out into length and ease, I asked her “What is the quality of this movement?” She fell silent for a long moment and answered with certainty: “Quality.” Period.

Quantity is the way of the world. Quality is what we are seeking. And what are the particular qualities we can ascribe to our physical bodies? First, we have length. From head to tail, from shoulder to finger tips, from hip joint to the tips of our toes, our bodies take up space in the vertical dimension. Second, we have width. Across our ribs, across our backs, upper and lower, between our elbows, between our knees, we take up space in the horizontal dimension. And we have depth, from the front to the back of our ribcage, from the front to the back of our abdomen, even through the front to back and side-to-side volume of our necks and heads; we exist in the space in front of our backs and in back of our fronts.

Simply put, the finer kaleidoscope, the one worthy of our attention and exploration, lives right here, in three palatial dimensions.

### Day 3

Once, years ago, an older gentleman came for an Alexander lesson and did just beautifully; he had an immediate grasp of the work—an affinity for directing attention and balancing and rebalancing himself—in the course of our hour together.

At the end of the session, he pierced me with his gaze—this is a very intelligent man I am dealing with, a man who is tops in his field—and asked The Question, the one that almost every student asks at the onset of the work: “Will I have to think about it?” In other words, will I have to spend time and direct my attention on my own in order to get the same, or similar, results? The answer to his question, to The Question, is, of course, “Yes. You have to think about it.”

The gentleman replied, emphatically (before leaving my office, never to return), “Well then, I can’t do it.” As a relatively young teacher I was astonished. How could someone take so naturally to something of great value and then reject it because he (or she, as there have been plenty of others since who have come to the same conclusion about the demands of this work) won’t consider giving it a moment’s attention?

We have to think about our practices because what we are learning to do *is* to think. About our bodies. *In* our bodies. And for many of us, the notion of our brains being linked to our bodies or being active within, our bodies is counter to our education, our conditioning, perhaps even to how we’ve achieved what we’ve achieved in our lives. Yet, how can we expect our waking up out of automatic functioning to become automatic? How can we expect to articulate and hone our relationships to our physical bodies, to coordinate ourselves moment to moment in our lives, without bringing our thoughts to bear upon the project?

The good news is that our thinking—our linking of mind and body—becomes more available to us as we gain facility with it. The awareness we are cultivating in relation to the body—the ability to bring the attention back to the physical self again and again, in increasingly articulate ways—does begin to accrue. It becomes more dependable. It is not as difficult to find. Yet, having access to this presence within ourselves always requires making an effort, always requires a remembering of ourselves in the midst—often in the midst of the chaos—of our daily lives and routines.

Yet, after we have developed our understanding and our practice of slowing down a bit, of staying in contact with our selves and our movements, our actions, our *lives*, moment to moment, day to day, we are able to stay on course more easily and more often.

As we gain skill and become more present, we no longer have to reinvent our selves constantly; we have some degree of connection up and running and we are more or less in contact with our selves—our balance, our orientation in space, the reflexive connections between the parts of the body—more of the time. But this means We Are Thinking About It.

To conclude this essay, I will call on Robert Fripp, founder and patron of Guitar Craft, a school for musicians that has flourished on three continents for more than 25 years. Frank Sheldon brought the Alexander Technique to Guitar Craft shortly after it was founded in March 1985, and the Technique has been part of the curriculum ever since. Let us end for now with Robert’s definition of success:

*The bottom line in professional motivation addresses the aim: How to succeed in life. For me, life is the framework, the context, within which the action takes place; and normal life activity a way of refining our personal practice. Success is not the aim; success is developing personal discipline....*

*So, acting in the world is a way of practicing our discipline; the aim is to acquire discipline. Discipline then becomes our framework for action, and any success in the world a by-product of that aim. A sufficiency of worldly success, in this sense, is that we may continue to refine our practice.<sup>2</sup>*

#### Endnotes:

1. Jeanne de Salzmann, *The Reality of Being* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala, 2010), xvii.
2. Robert Fripp, Excerpt from Robert Fripp’s *Diary*, dated August 31, 2007, [www.dgmlive.com](http://www.dgmlive.com) (accessed September 5, 2007).

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