

THE ROUNDER WE GO, THE STUCKER WE GET

THE NATURE OF CIRCULAR HABITS AND HOW TO ESCAPE THEM

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This is about the nature of habit — unconstructive habits, particularly that kind of habit known as a *vicious circle*. That is, a reactive cycle, each step of which brings up something that forces me to react by taking the next step, which in turn forces me to take the next step, and so on, inevitably binding me into repeating the cycle, thereby reinforcing it and making it into a habit.

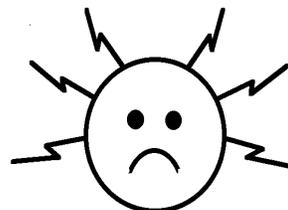
No one wants to be caught in vicious circles and certainly no one wittingly sets out to trap themselves in such destructive habits. Nonetheless, we do find ourselves caught in them and unless we understand how they work we cannot step outside the cycle that reinforces our existing habits, nor can we become free from creating new ones. If you (or someone you know) are stuck in a habitual and chronic 'problem', which you cannot eradicate in spite of your best efforts, and the most you have managed is to find better and better ways of dealing with it, then you have your own concrete experience to refer to as we go through this.

The key to understanding how we unwittingly create and sustain these kind of habituated cycles is to see how they are built at every step upon an integrated series of delusions which both drive us and seduce us into taking the next step. What we think we are doing to *solve the problem* seems to make sense within the context of the habit, but from a larger perspective is, in fact, the very way we *create the problem* and sustain it. These habits are brilliantly constructed in the way they trick us into repeating them in the face of our resolution to change. Even more cleverly, the way out is hidden in the very last place we would ever think of looking for it. Not only that, but in understanding the structure of circular habits, we can begin to make sense of why the habit of 'trying to solve the problem', of trying to be 'right', or 'perfect', or 'ideal', or even to become 'different' has such a powerful hold on us, for we are deeply caught in trying to be in control.

Let us explore how all this works, using, for ease of understanding, the very common example of chronic, uncomfortable 'tension'. Tension is a symptom that shows up in a mostly physiological way (that is, in body feelings as opposed to in an emotional or psychological way), but it will become apparent that these kinds of circular habits manifest in every aspect and territory of our lives. I will start with the nature and mechanics of the habit and how we get caught in it, then show the unexpected and hidden doorway out of it, and finish up with some of the implications of bringing about fundamental change.

1 — THE NATURE OF THE BEAST —

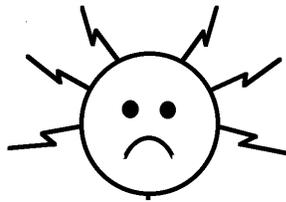
I go about my life, doing this and that and not thinking much about *how* I go about what I am doing — I just do it. Then, in one particular present moment in the middle of whatever I am in the middle of, I am brought to consciousness by a



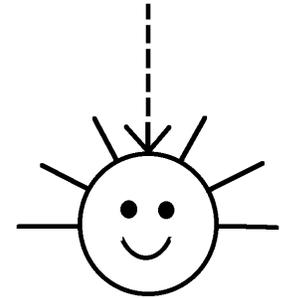
In this present moment the symptom (pain or tension) feels **WRONG** and I react to the feeling by immediately wanting to do (or undo) something to change it.

'symptom' — some feeling of discomfort, of pain, tension or the like. This symptom appears, grabs my attention and I naturally feel it as something wrong, something I do not like, a 'bad thing'. It is also natural for me to feel that this symptom *is* the problem and, equally obviously, to want to do something about it to make it go away — to make everything better — preferably as quickly as possible. Success, of course, would be to get rid of the symptom and go back to what I was doing, *minus the problem*.

1. in the moment of awareness the symptom (pain or tension) feels WRONG and I am forced to react by...



2. ...immediately doing something to release it, change it, get rid of it, so that...



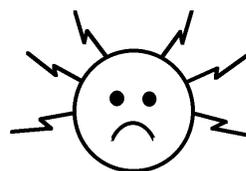
3. ...in the next moment I will feel RIGHT and OK again and I can get back to my life...

So, I go about some process or some act to change the moment from an 'it's-not-OK-I'm-feeling-bad' kind of moment to a 'now-it's-OK-I-feel-better' kind of moment. Let us take the example of me drawing a picture. After some indefinite period of working away with great concentration, I am brought to awareness in that present moment by a feeling of soreness and tension around my shoulders which (of course) feels bad to me, so I want to do something to relieve the symptoms. Maybe I tighten up my shoulders, pull and scrunch and mulch them about hoping to break up the tension and ease the pain. I might try to release the tension or relax my shoulders. I might massage the sore spots or get someone else to do it for me, or whatever...

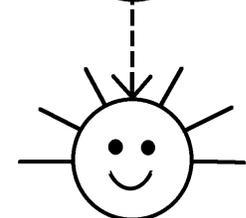
It is important to recognize that in terms of the habit it does not really matter what particular process I use — whether I do or undo something. The point is that the unpleasant feelings of the symptom force me to react by trying to get out of this present moment and into the next moment when (hopefully) everything will be better. When I succeed in making the *wrong feeling* (the tension and pain) into the *right feeling* (no tension or pain), the *not-OK* moment into the *OK* moment, I can merrily get back to my life without having to pay attention to all this stuff any more because at this moment it seems to me that there is no longer a problem.

All of this appears to make perfect sense and would be of little consequence if this was the first and only time these symptoms occurred. I probably would not even think twice about it. However, that is *not* what happens to most of us. What *does* happen is that after making everything better I just launch back into my life again, but it does not take long — a few hours, a few days or weeks — before the symptoms are back. I, of course, immediately react to the *wrong feeling* of the symptom by doing what I have always done before which is to *do something* to get rid of it. Which works most of the time to get me back to where I feel OK again. And all would be fine if I stayed there, but, sure enough, the symptom is soon back. Not only that, but over time it's getting worse and what I used to do to change things for the better does not work as well any more.

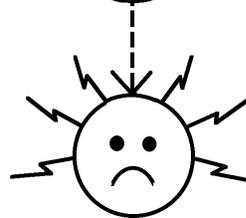
Naturally enough, I never question the possibility that there may be something funny about my whole approach, I just try to find another 'better' way to make everything OK. So I try this or that method and it works for a while or I try this or that exercise and maybe it 'works' and maybe it does not. But I keep on trying, and the symptom keeps on recurring until I get so familiar with it that I begin to regard it as "my problem". I find myself starting



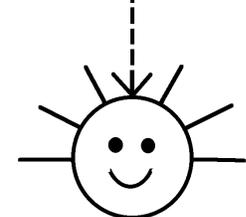
1. I come to awareness of the symptom (pain and tension) which feels WRONG and/or BAD, so...



2. ...I do something to change things so that in the next moment...



3. ...I'll feel GOOD and everything will be all RIGHT again...



4. ...but it doesn't seem to last long because soon...

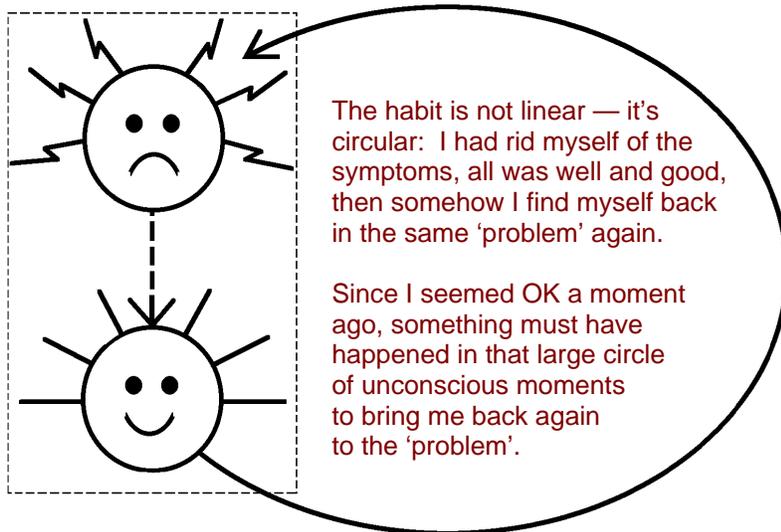
5. ...there is the symptom back again, once more feeling BAD and/or WRONG...

6. ...so maybe I try something different to change things so that the next moment...

7. ...I will feel RIGHT and OK again and can get back to my life...

to think of it as an "it". Me and *my problem*. There *it* is again. *It* hurts me. I *have* tension. I *have* a back problem. I would be fine if I didn't have this #%@#! problem...

In fact, what is really going on is that "it" *has* me. There is an inevitable sequence of events that becomes established: feel wrong → react in order to → feel right so I can → go back to 'normal' life → until I feel wrong again → and react again to → feel right → to go back to 'normal' life... and so on, over and over, until this sequence itself becomes 'normal life'. Gradually the symptoms get worse and more persistent and I am forced to try different ways to 'solve' the problem, but to no avail. I am well and truly stuck and no matter what I do I cannot seem to change anything more than temporarily. This, of course, is the situation many people find themselves in.



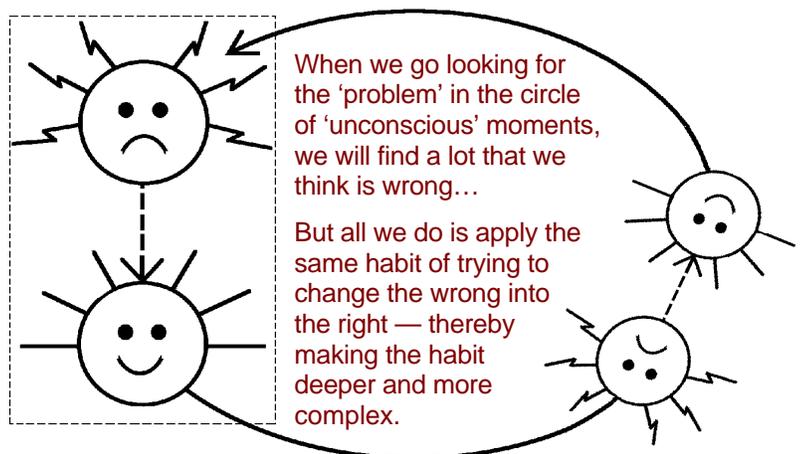
By this time it has begun to dawn on me that this sequence of events is not a linear sequence but a circular one — I had the tension, I did something to get rid of it and everything was OK, then I find myself back here in the symptoms *once again*. I am caught in a vicious circle, which is like a noose gradually tightening around me the more I try to escape it.

At this point I might just resign myself to 'having' this problem. "It is my tough luck, I have a weak back" or "we are not evolutionarily designed to do this kind of activity." However, I am still stuck with the recurring symptoms, so I am forced to go on searching for better and better

ways to get rid of them.

Sooner or later, like F.M. Alexander did with his hoarse throat, I may ask myself why my problem keeps coming back. If I was OK a while ago but now the symptom is back again, perhaps it is because of something I am doing in that large circle of time between the moment I was OK and when the symptom reappeared (the part of the circle below outside the dotted rectangle). That circle is the period when I went back into my 'unconscious' way of being; when I am not really aware of how I do what I do, I just do it. Somewhere in that period of time (which can be anywhere from a few minutes to several weeks) *something* must have happened to drag me back around into this mess again.

So I proceed to look into those 'unconscious moments' to see if I can find something I am doing to cause the problem. There is a lot for me to find because those 'unconscious' moments encompass just about everything that is going on when I am not busy reacting to the symptom. There are a million interesting and involving details to discover. Maybe I am sitting badly; I am pulling down and compressing my spine; I have a poorly designed keyboard; a bad chair; I am interfering with my breathing, etc. I already have the habitual tendency to see whatever it is as *wrong* and therefore in need of correcting, so whenever I find something that I think might be causing the problem — perhaps sitting slumped over my drawing with my head forward and my neck tense — I immediately begin



to look for the right thing to do to correct it. It does not matter what I find or what I do about it, it's always the same habit — that is, there is something wrong and I need to go through some process to make it OK again. In other words all I have done is to take the same *means whereby* or process I used on the original 'wrong' symptom and moved it over to use on this new 'wrong problem' to change the next moment into a better one.

Nothing has really changed. I am still end-gaining for a better moment. The vicious circle is still unbroken and *the habit has just become one level deeper and more complex than it was a moment ago*. When I look into these 'unconscious' moments there is no end to the number of things I can find on which to practise this *fix-it-up-and-make-it-better* means. It will probably even seem like I am making progress by finding all these factors which are part of my habit (because they are all undoubtedly part of the circle and all do fit together). It's also easy to see that there certainly is some or other local effect when I fiddle about with them. However, I am kept so busy that it may take me quite a while (if indeed I ever do) to realize that, in spite of all this fixing up, I still have a problem. Granted, with all my fiddling the problem may have shifted somewhat to a different symptom, but, sure enough, there is still something to deal with on a regular basis. The words may change, but the song remains the same.

Is this situation familiar to you? Are you intimately acquainted with the little beast? Of course, all the above would be wonderful if you had actually managed to rid yourself once and for all of the problem and its symptoms. If you have, well, you are one of the lucky ones. For 15 years I have been working with people caught in just these kinds of habits and for most of them nothing they have done and no method they have tried has actually freed them. They may be getting better at 'dealing' with their symptoms and habitual patterns, in the sense of having better tools to make the change from the moment of the symptoms to the moments of relative freedom, but always they find themselves back in some similar sort of problem that needs dealing with.¹

2 — STEPPING OUT OF THE CIRCLE —

A number of years ago, as the nature of these circular habits was becoming more clear to me, both from my own experience and that of my pupils, it began to dawn on me that something was missing. Surely it must be possible to truly rid oneself of a habit rather than just get better at managing it? Alexander certainly stated that he had become free of the symptoms which had plagued him from childhood. So I determined to find that elusive way out of the circle. It struck me (in that obvious way that seems so obvious once it is obvious) that I get caught in circular habits because I keep going around the circle. At each moment I somehow manage to take the next step even though I do not want to end up where it leads me. The odd thing is I do not feel as though I am are taking another step around the circle each time. Rather, I am desperately trying to take steps *out of the circle!* I thought, "Somewhere in there must be the clue to the trap. Somehow I am taking the next step in the habit while being seduced into thinking that I am taking a step out of it. But how could this happen? How could I be so fooled?"

I went back and re-examined each step from this new point of view and, sure enough, there it was. My habitual way of perceiving things had completely hidden it from me! Go back to the diagram above. There is one time in that circle that I am 'naturally' brought to present-moment consciousness — the moment of the symptom. In fact, *I am brought to consciousness by the symptom*, by the feeling of tension or discomfort. And what do I do each time? I do exactly the same thing I have always done before — I try to get out of that moment which I regard as *wrong* and *bad* as fast as I can into the next moment when things will be *OK* and *good* again. Every single time! No matter what else I change, that part stays constant and I never question it. That one precious moment when I am conscious enough to make a really different choice, I do not change a thing!

At that moment I believe I am taking a step toward the 'solution'. But there it is, plain as day: those steps from the 'problem' to the 'solution' are the same preconceived habitual steps I always try to take and are just as much part of that circle as any other part. For all that I think of it as the 'solution', it is,

¹ Or as another Alexander teacher, Barbara Conable, once said, "*Releasing tensions is like swatting flies, there's always more.*"

and has always been, an inextricable part of the habit. It is the warm and lovely seduction which I cannot resist. At that moment, the *not-so-nice* feelings are driving me from behind and the *oh-so-nice* future is beckoning me from in front and I simply cannot conceive of any other possibility than getting away from the one and to the other (and I would not be attracted to any other possibility anyway). It is all so beautifully constructed and so cleverly hidden from me!

The habit is laughing (if I personify it for a moment), "What a sucker, he fell for it again! No matter how many times he has been through it before, up comes that wrong feeling and *WHAM!* before he knows it, he reacts in exactly the same way he always does and then he wonders why he is caught in a repeating cycle. Har-dee-har-har!"

The whole habit is set up so that, whatever I have been up to previously, the moment of coming to consciousness of the symptom is presented to me as NOT GOOD, as WRONG. I *feel* it that way. And I fall for it every time and react as if it *actually is* wrong and therefore immediately try to change things. I am totally and utterly convinced that those feelings ARE wrong and I MUST do something about them, thereby inevitably taking the next step in the cycle. In fact, without realizing what I am doing, I positively and desperately *want* to take that step back into the habit each time. I am *begging* to take the next step. I am *searching for better ways* to take that step! What I also do not realize is that, in effect, I am being *forced* to take that next step because no other alternative is imaginable. That is to say, I am forced to *react* to my feelings. This is what reaction is: because of this, therefore that. No other possibilities. No choice.

Notice how integratedly the habit works and how much '*of a piece*' it is. Reacting to the moment of the symptom and quickly stepping out toward my ideal 'end' of feeling OK puts an 'end' to my presentness and choice, for now I automatically begin to go back to being involved in my 'normal' life. Which, of course, means that I now go back into that narrowed state where I am only conscious of *what* I am doing, not *how* I am doing it. That narrowed 'unconsciousness' is as built into the cycle as everything else.

Not only that, but when I look into these narrowed 'unconscious' moments for the cause of how I get bound back to the symptom, what I do with whatever I find is the same as I do when I am naturally brought to consciousness by the symptoms — I immediately try to fix it all up in the preconceived way I think it should be fixed. (And I must stress here again, that it does not matter what my idea is of what should be happening, it is always the same *fix-it-up* reaction in general and is always as much part of the habit as is the so-called 'problem'.) Each part of the cycle validates and leads to the others and they all fit together like well-oiled gears in a machine — an assembly line for problems.

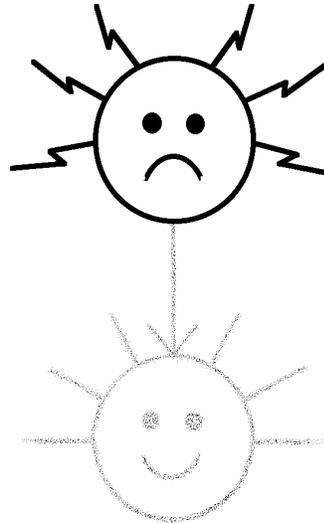
Because I have been in that narrowed state through much of the time as the habit cycles, I am not able to see how the whole pattern works. At each step I can only see as far as the next step. The consequences of what I am doing are always just over the horizon and therefore invisible to me. As Isaac Dineson (Karin Blixen) wrote in *Out of Africa*, "*The earth was made round so that we would not see too far down the road.*"

When I recognized that I had been deluded into buying into the whole scenario as presented to me by the habit, I did not quite know where to go. Everything seemed to be 'lies'. To paraphrase Alexander, "If anyone was in a rut, it was I". I had gone far enough to know that trying to make things OK was what drove the habit and that searching into those 'unconscious' moments was like examining all the wonderfully involving details of the walls of the rut — fascinating, but I am still in the rut. The real trick would be to simply step out of the rut. But how? That is what I had been trying to do all the time and it did not seem to work.

I had no choice but to go back to examine the whole thing again in the light of my knowledge that nothing was as it seems. I kept being drawn back to the moment of the symptom. After all, it is the occurrence of the symptom that first lets us know we have a 'problem'. It is only because of the symptom that we are looking for the *now-I'm-OK-again-all-is-good* 'solution'. We never seem to question its reality because it is an actual sensory experience. A moment's thought, however, will show that I feel the way I do at this moment because of what has been going on during all the accumulated moments before. And that what has been going on in all those moments before is that I have been cycling and recycling this habit. And that here I am about to give it another go round. Here I am about

to crank it around one more notch. What do I expect to happen when I do the same thing I have always done? Something different this time? How deluded can you get?²

It was then that I realized with a shock that the answer was right in front of me. The way out of the circle was simply to meet the moment of the symptom which I habitually feel as wrong and not take the next step of reacting to it. To accept that what is going on at this moment *is actually going on* — whether I like it or not. In other words, to freely and willingly live in that moment no matter how I feel about it, *simply because it is there*. I saw that this moment is just as valid a moment of reality as any other. What makes me think any particular moment is wrong and should be fixed up? Only my feelings. Very strong feelings, admittedly, but nevertheless feelings which have themselves been created by the cycling of the habit and so are automatically suspect. And who am I, the person who is so thoroughly caught in this habit, to know what is the 'right' thing to do? Such unwitting arrogance... And so trapped and manipulated in the slavery of feelings that only the moment before this simple choice of acceptance had been totally unthinkable.

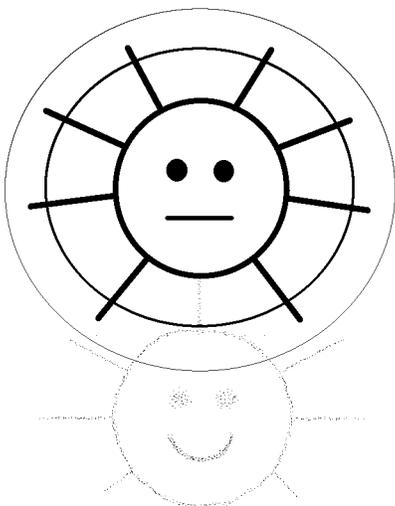


1. The way out of the circle was simply to meet the full force of the moment of the symptom which I feel as wrong...

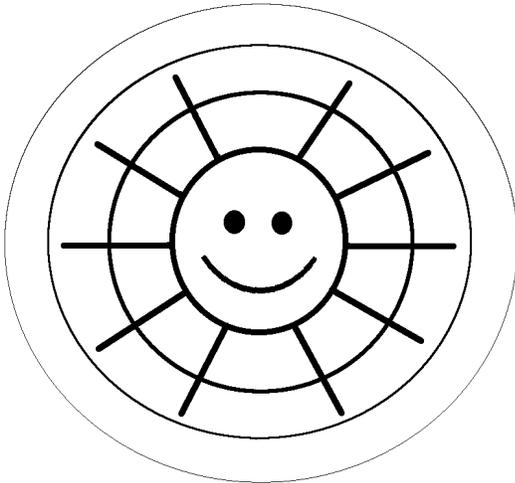
2. ...and NOT to take the usual next step of reacting to it by trying to get somewhere that seems better...

As this startling realization came to me and at the very moment of recognizing this acceptance as a possible option, up rose the total and utter conviction that it would be pointless to try it because to decide to stay in that moment would be to stay in the symptoms (probably forever). No way! But, if I could just get to that next moment when everything is OK again, I would be happy to live there forever, but not here in this mess, thank you very much. This was the habit, of course, like a little devil on my shoulder, trying to convince me that my plan of acceptance could not possibly work — *that it was unacceptable*. And I almost bought it until I remembered the profound shock I had experienced when the insight had first come to me. There was something so unexpected about it that I knew it was truly new and that I had never carried this out before. So I did.

What did actually happen when I *inhibited* my monstrously powerful habitual urge to react to the feelings of the 'symptom' was very, very different than I expected — after a moment of intense awareness of narrowness and restriction (during which I had to choose again not to react), an expansion filled me up and the strain and the tension disappeared! I was in a state of wholeness and oneness with myself and very sharply and vibrantly *present* in the world around me. I felt good — in fact, better than good — for along with the expansion came a rising delight and intense aliveness. All by doing absolutely nothing but meeting that moment I had always taken to be wrong and refusing to react to it the way I always had before. And lo and behold, it seemed the moment was not wrong after all — it was wonderful!



² "The true relation of 'cause and effect' on a general basis in connexion with the working of these mechanisms will not be given due consideration and, as we shall see, the majority of effects (symptoms of some 'cause' or 'causes') that they chance to recognize will not be treated by them as such, but as 'causes,' and dealt with in accordance with the 'end-gaining' principle." (F.M. Alexander, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*, page 186, Gollancz 1987)



Which makes sense when you think about it... The moment I truly accept what is going on for itself and its own sake is the moment I truly give up to it. I am no longer struggling and straining to get to a 'better' moment. There is no longer a split in me with one part of me that feels another part of me as wrong and therefore not OK to be in the moment. There is no longer that one part of me trying to change that other part to what I think it should be (as if that were possible). Thus, I am no longer in a fight with myself at that moment. And, as we all tend to forget, *you can never win a fight with yourself — one of you is going to lose and it is always going to be you!* It is going to be you *simply because you engaged in the fight.*

To make the *choice* to be in the actual moment I am in is also the moment that I give up imposing my deluded version of what *should* be happening and leave myself open for something new. And that is exactly what happens —

something new. Ironically, what happens when I do not try to reach my wonderful goal is that I actually do end up with what I wanted. All the elements I was after are there — wholeness, freedom, openness, alert presentness, no strain or tension — but they are all there in a very different way than I had imagined or experienced before and, of course, I have arrived in this new 'place' by a very different path, or rather, by no path at all.

One experience, of course, does not prove anything. But after many times in many varied situations, when I had managed to meet the force of whatever 'symptoms' or feelings came up without reacting by trying to make things right and instead willingly and freely chose to live just in the moment, no matter what it was; and after roughly the same sort of experiences had resulted each time, I was beginning to believe it. Now, years later, I have helped hundreds of others learn how to make this choice too and their experiences are always similar — at the moment of truly giving up the *reaction* and *end-gaining*, a wonderful peaceful easing quickly spreads and expands throughout them and they open up as whole, breathing, supported beings to the world around them, present and ready to respond, all over, all at once.

In my own experience and in that of working with pupils, the biggest challenge for everyone is to meet that moment of feeling and not react by trying to change things. In fact, this is the biggest change it is possible to make — no change at all — since habitually we always meet that moment and try to change things. Though it sounds like a very simple choice to make, if you have not done it you cannot imagine just what a huge challenge it is to actually carry out in the face of the immediate and overwhelmingly 'real' feelings, thoughts and emotions of that existential moment. It takes every bit of courage and clarity to stick with this *means whereby* when your entire experience is screaming at you, "WRONG! WRONG! GET THE HELL OUT OF THERE AS FAST AS POSSIBLE!" The fact that such all-encompassing changes take place almost immediately when we do manage to inhibit reacting shows how big a change it is to willingly accept what we feel is wrong and to freely live in the given 'here and now'.

3 — WHAT IS NEW IS NOT WHAT IS OLD —

These experiences showed me that it is indeed possible to step out of the vicious circle. But to do so *does not mean* finding a better thing to do; it *does not mean* changing the symptoms; it *does not mean* end-gaining for the right solution; and it *does not mean* that anything is wrong. All is as it should be simply because it is as it is.

To step out of the habit *does mean* actually accepting the moment as it is (which means having faith that reality is not broken and does not need fixing); it also means giving up my fixed ideas of what *should* be happening (which means discovering what is *really* going on in the present); and it means allowing myself to experience the feelings I really have instead of trying to get to the ones I want to have (which means realizing in actual experience that if I do not react, *there is nothing wrong with me!*)

What then were the symptoms all about and why had they come to feel so wrong? Was the negative feeling just my habitual perception of the moment or was something truly unconstructive happening but I was just misinterpreting it. This seemed the next big question to tackle — mostly because it was there and would not go away — a situation that I was starting to realize meant that something important was going on.

I began to recognize how much I was learning by being able to see with fresh eyes the simple and simultaneous *facts* of what is, rather than the *acts* of what I could do about it. So I went back to my experience to look again at the facts. Go back to the diagram of the circular habit (*on page 1*). In this cycle I spend the majority of my time in a state of narrowed awareness. I am not conscious of how I do what I do, I just do it until I become aware that I feel very tense and tight which, of course, physiologically is a state of muscular constriction and contraction. If indeed I am a complete unity then how can my attentional contraction be in any way separable from my muscular contraction? I become a completely integrated whole-system narrowedness.³ If, every time I am awakened from these substantial periods of being so narrowed, I discover that I have become cramped and tight then how can I interpret it otherwise? I narrow, I get narrowed. What I am feeling is not muscles contracting, not some bad sitting, nor any of a million little details. All of these details are undoubtedly happening, but they are not causes, they are effects. What I am feeling is what it feels like to have been so narrowed for so long.

Conversely, experience also shows that when I allow myself to exist in any moment as it is without reaction — in other words, to open more fully to the experience and events of the present no matter whether I like it or not — these tensions and contractions disappear and I become free and whole. How can I interpret that except that as I open, I open — in every way? More than that, I become more open and expanded all the way into that fresh alert awareness of the world around me than I was before I made my choice to accept the narrowed 'symptoms'.

The implications flooded in on me. If the only thing that I changed was to NOT allow myself to react *as if the feelings were wrong* and consequently the symptoms disappeared, how could I interpret that except that I am OK and always have been OK — I just did not know it. I was deluded into thinking that something was *wrong in the present* and needed to be changed so that all would be OK *in the future!* It is important to recognize that the delusion is not the feelings of wrongness. There really is something 'unconstructive' going on, but it is not the feelings of tension or pain, it is my narrowed, reactive, end-gaining state. There is NOTHING whatsoever wrong with the feelings. They are very real and valid feelings giving me very important information, namely, that it is a very constricting and painful thing to narrow off for so long into my drawing.

That I come to wholeness when I stop reacting shows me that I *am* already intrinsically whole and integrated since that is what I am when I am just being me in the present — I am and always have been a 'psycho-physical unity'. As I stop being divided by making one part of me wrong and trying to change it, I become whole. I do not *have* a mind. I do not *have* a body. I am me — the sum-total of my memory and my moment-to-moment experience — one indivisible whole. I was just too deluded to know it and hence was constantly engaged in precisely the kind of habitual reaction that was

³ By the way, narrowing into activity with such effort as to end up squeezing the life out of ourselves is not the only pattern, though it is one of the most common. There are many others, often with overlapping elements. For instance, some people find themselves split from themselves, usually their 'mind' (the perceiver) from their 'body' (the perceived). The perceiver doesn't like or can't accept the sensory and emotional feelings they get from the perceived 'body', and backs away from identifying with and being themselves. This reaction, of course, is an emotional one, physically perceived as mostly negative, which increases the person's unwillingness to accept and identify with such feelings thereby reinforcing the split. What the person does not realize is that what they are feeling is not their body, it is what it feels like to be so split.

You cannot feel your 'body'. You do not 'have' a body. You *are* your body. You are yourself all the way from bottom to top and out into the world. What you are feeling is what it feels like to be doing what you are doing, in this case what it feels like to be that split and that reacting; that much making yourself wrong and that much trying to manipulate yourself. And when this is a repetitive, consistent habit, the feelings will be consistent and repeated, therefore it is 'natural' that you will become regularized to them and come to think of them as 'you', as your 'body'. This is to say, in spite of whatever differences there may be in the content and details of the habit, its circular nature remains the same.

guaranteed to make me feel *as if* I was made up of a number of parts which needed some coordinating on my part in order to become whole in the future.

The experience of all-over release and ease is simply that it is easy to be myself as I am in the present, since that is what I actually am when I am not straining to be what I am not. For what is on-going tension but an on-going conflict, a continual trying that cannot achieve its goal. It not only takes effort and energy to try to get into the next moment ahead of myself, it is downright impossible (though, habitually, this did not stop me from trying). How many of us have not yet learned or are quite unwilling to accept that we CANNOT be any different than we are, *and there is no more frustrated trying than trying to be*. I feel free *because* I have freed myself from the slavery of *having* to react to my feelings and the tyranny of my idea of what I *should* be.

By the same token, the expansion and openness that accompany my choice to allow myself into this moment shows me how narrowed I had been to what I was concentrating on in those moments before and how closed off I was to everything else that was happening. The profound sense of aliveness and presence in and of the space around me is the experience (beyond any theory) that I am not only *not separate in any way from myself, I am in no way separate from the universe around me!*

This brings me to an important point implicit in the above but perhaps worth making explicit. The circular habit is so all-pervasive that it even colours our deepest metaphysical and spiritual 'precepts' (and what is a precept but a 'pre-conception'). We all love the idea that we could escape from our split and conflicted prisons and become whole, integrated and part of the larger universe, but we still project that goal into the future. "I am not there yet, I am still in this mess, but I want to be there and with some exploration and learning maybe one day I will be free and where I want to be". On a larger scale we tend to see our human lives and cultures as caught in destructive patterns of behaviour and less than desirable moral and ethical interactions. We project a better state or a more perfect plane to aspire to and then devote our energies to trying to achieve them. Do you see the parallels? All these parallel tracks — these *let's-aim-to-get-better-for-the-next-moment/life/after-life* tracks — are heading in the same direction, and the express train of our lives has wheels on all of them simultaneously. In other words, our fundamental mode of operating in this habit is 'end-gaining' and every thought, feeling, emotion, and connection to the world around us will be interpreted and subsumed into this habitual pattern of reaction.

We conveniently 'forget' what we all kind of, sort of, really know and that is that there is only the present moment. All past moments are already gone and no changes can be made to anything that has already happened (much as I would like to). Any future moment has yet to come and will be whatever it is because of events and forces far beyond me and my control. The only ability I have to affect my future depends solely on what I do at each present moment. But in our sophistry and our fear we also forget that, in the most real and practical sense, the future does not exist. We actually are alive and able to make choices only in a endless succession of present moments. Each of these 'presents' is what it is because of all the simultaneous events and forces (including my own choices, perceptions and actions) in that moment and in the previous moments. Since we cannot affect the past moments, the only thing left is to make a different choice in the present.

Thus, to be able to make a different choice in any present moment (indeed any choice at all) means that you must be conscious enough to remember to do so.

However, once you realize that in most of your present moments you are not actually 'present' — that is, there is no 'you' there conscious enough to make any kind of choice (you are simply immersed like a baby in the womb in the content of what you are doing); once you understand that when you are brought to awareness by a symptom (which is in effect a messenger telling you that the way you have been going about things is unconstructive and that your present experience is what it feels like to be operating that way) you tend to react against the messenger that woke you up rather than get the message; once you admit that the way you react is to shoot the messenger as soon as it shows up so you can get right back to your narrowed and 'unconscious' involvement in the details of your life; once you really get a sense of the totality of this pattern and its relentless mechanical cycling and recycling of your life, you will see that *the first step must be to have command of what will allow you to be more conscious in these on-going present moments so that you can have the possibility of making a choice.*

Without this we are as bound and trapped as ever and will forever rebound from one manifestation of the habit to another, never being any the wiser.

So, what allows us to become more conscious? Let us sneak up on how consciousness works from its blind side, from how habitual ways of operating restrict and narrow consciousness.

It is my habit to feel that I cannot accomplish the job at hand unless I 'concentrate', which for most of us means that we narrow our attention to cut out 'distractions'. Distractions are, of course, just other parts of this simultaneous moment. I do not realize that the reason I am distracted by what is actually happening around me is already because of my habit, but it does not take much to see how I collude with the habit in eliminating these 'outside' aspects of my awareness. In fact, I *am* the habit.⁴ Daily, I am practicing and improving my ability to maintain a narrowed form of consciousness, and as Barbara Conable is fond of saying, "*practice does not make perfect — practice makes permanent*".

Because of this relative unconsciousness, when the habit cycles to the moment of the symptoms, I tend to respond as if there were no moments before, only moments ahead in which I can do something about them. The negative aspect of the feeling so dominates me that I am aware of almost nothing but the symptom and what I can do to get rid of it. These feelings then form another level of distraction, especially when they become chronic, which I work hard to ignore by further trying to narrow my awareness.

The same is true in the last part of the circle — that 'end' I try to gain so all will be OK. As I flee from the symptom I am happy to aim all my attention to that projected future moment. As a consequence of that habitual striving and trying for the pre-conceived 'good' solution (which has never really worked for me before), I am oblivious to all else that is in the moment — all the other unknown opportunities, all the possibilities inherent in my system just clamouring to express themselves. In other words, every part of the circle fosters narrowedness and favours the known. This is why I end up being so 'unconscious'. But I am not really 'unconscious'. Rather, I am severely restricted in the extent of my awareness, which is to say, the extent of my being. This is what I feel as the symptom — my restricted narrowness of being.

Notice all the effort it takes to be so narrowed and unaware. Each step demands a massive input of energy to maintain. I *try hard to concentrate* on my job. There is a huge amount of *muscular work* we call tension that goes on while I am that narrowed. I expend an immense amount of *physical and emotional energy* trying to escape from the feeling of my narrowedness and I *strain mightily* to try to reach my ideal but impossible goal of being other than I am. I am deluded into thinking I am spending that energy to get somewhere, not realizing that it takes this much energy just to keep me out of the present, to keep me constricted, and to keep me in the tightly wound spiral of the habit. Day after day I am feeling the difficulty, the strain, the work and the cost, unaware that it is me supplying the energy that keeps it all running. I am supplying that energy sometimes willingly and sometimes unwittingly. One thing is for sure, there is no one else doing it for me and there is no one else doing it to me.

When we return to our question of what allows us to be more conscious, you can see that it is not a matter of how we can expand our consciousness, it is how can we stop constantly restricting and narrowing it. We are creatures that already have a wide-open and infinitely interconnected consciousness built into us. That is why your awareness and presentness expands to its innate openness in an instant when you stop the end-gaining interference. In this circle when is the only moment you are 'naturally' brought to awareness? The moment of the very symptoms you love to hate. This is the moment when your wonderful highly-evolved-over-millions-of-years system has sent you a message to wake you up from your narrowedness. There is no possibility of changing anything or making any choices when we are 'unconscious' in narrowedness. You may as well forget about that. The job is not to *try* to get consciousness into the areas where you are 'unconscious', the job is to use constructively the moment when you already *have* consciousness and, fortunately for us, there will be plenty of times your system will wake you up if you are operating unconstructively. If you can then meet the full force and reality of those moments and make the different choice to allow yourself to fully live these moments without reaction or judgement, you will find yourself more open and more

⁴ To paraphrase the comic-strip character Pogo, "*We have looked the habit in the whites of the eyes and it is us*"

conscious and present and hence more able to make these choices. Over time and with practice this will become your way of being — in other words, *a constructive circle* that reinforces itself.

When I can manage this simplest of simple choices, there is really no other choice needed from me. As I come more and more consistently into living in the present there are less and less 'problems' that need any choices made about them. Most of what needs to happen in the moment is already occurring as a natural *response* when I am no longer *reacting*. These *responses* are not pre-determined or pre-conceived by me, or my habit, or my culture. As I allow myself to open up I come into direct interaction with the events, situations and people around me. I am no longer working against the universe, I am inseparably part of everything that is. There is nowhere to get to any more.

I am home. ☺

About the Author



David Gorman developed the LearningMethods work out of over 30 years of research and teaching experiences. His background is in science and art and a fascination with exploring human structure and function. In the mid-1970s he spent many nights dissecting in the lab and drawing furiously. In 1980 he published a heavily illustrated 600-page work on our human musculo-skeletal system called [The Body Moveable](#) (now in its 5th edition) and in 1966, a collection of articles, [Looking at Ourselves](#).

He happened upon the Alexander Technique in 1972 and was immediately intrigued by its power for change; and has been teaching that work since 1980, becoming well-known worldwide for his innovations to the work and notorious for challenging the orthodoxy of the profession. He has been invited to teach all over the world in universities, conservatories and training colleges, at conferences and symposia, and with performance groups and health

professionals.

In 1982, his teaching was revolutionized by his discovery of a new model of human organization — [Anatomy of Wholeness](#) — with its profound implications about our in-built natural tendency toward balance, ease and wholeness. He extended these insights into a new way of training teachers of the Alexander Technique and from 1988 to 1997 in London, England he trained 45 teachers.

His experiences with his own students and in other training groups made it clear that a huge part of our chronic problems lay not in the 'body' but in our consciousness and habitual way of seeing things and how we misinterpret our daily experiences and then become caught in reaction to these misunderstandings. At this point it also became apparent that his discoveries revealed new premises which in turn implied new teaching methods, so David developed the LearningMethods work to teach people how to apply their in-built intelligence and clarity of perception to their daily experience in order to understand their problems, solve them and successfully navigate their lives.

Since the beginning of this new work in 1997, David has trained a growing number of LearningMethods Teachers, many of whom are now teaching the LM work in universities and conservatories, and he is now planning a new Toronto-based [modular training program](#) for LearningMethods, Anatomy of Wholeness and the Alexander Technique. He continues to [write more about the work](#), and give workshops to performers, teachers and the public in North America, Europe, and Asia ([see his teaching schedule](#)), as well as raising another young son.

About the LearningMethods work and how to find out more...

This is one of many articles and essays on various topics of the LearningMethods work. Some are written by David Gorman and some by other LearningMethods Teachers, LearningMethods Apprentice-Teachers, or students.

In these articles, you will find out more about the LearningMethods work and how extraordinarily effective it is at helping people learn for themselves how to be liberated from problems, how to better understand themselves and others, and how to navigate their lives more successfully.

The articles in the LearningMethods Library are available in multiple formats: some as PDF files formatted for printing like this one; all of them are also on the LearningMethods web site at www.learningmethods.com/lmarticle.htm as web pages; and most of them are also available at www.learningmethods.com/ebooks.htm as downloadable e-books.

