

Reflecting On Relaxation

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It is quite amazing to consider that we human beings now need to attend classes to be taught such natural processes as relaxation and meditation. Unfortunately in the busy over-stressed lives that we lead no time or space has been allocated for these functions. But then if we look at another indispensable function, that of preparing, eating and digesting food, and see how we have also almost eliminated these processes with the advent of fast foods, take-aways, microwave cooking, half-hour lunch breaks and commercial breaks on television, we can better understand the un-natural, fast tempo that we are living at. And what does this dehumanizing existence do to our physiology? It creates stress, stress that manifests in the first instance as headaches, migraines, muscular disorders, insomnia, back aches, anxiety, repetition strain injuries, boredom, restlessness, addictions and dependencies on alcohol, tobacco and drugs. If the stress continues and undermines the body's natural defences and immune system without any permanent relief, then we are faced with ulcers, high blood pressure, heart problems, cancer and AIDS.

Although it is necessary that we experience certain tensions or pressures to exist it is equally important to know how to let go, to switch off, and simply be in the here and now. The practice of awareness will tell us when this is necessary, when it is time to change our state or attitude. When we relax totally, we let go of all tension in the mind and body. The regular daily practice of relaxation will improve health and vitality, and provide protection against stress and psychosomatic disorders. It will slow down our physiological processes and increase our brain's alpha waves. It will improve digestion, provide a natural state for healing processes to take place, improve efficiency in work and sport, and enhance our creativity and spontaneity. It will free us from unrealistic fears and anxieties and increase our courage and inner poise and sense of wellbeing. We will feel more alive, more stable and calm and our perceptions and awareness will be enhanced. It will help us get to sleep more quickly and induce a more refreshing and peaceful sleep. Daily relaxation will also improve our concentration powers, and our spiritual awareness and self-actualization. We will feel more in harmony with nature and negative emotions will be discarded in favour of positive ones.

Ideally we practice relaxation daily, before and after an exercise programme, in the middle of the day or before an evening meal. Wear loose comfortable clothing and ensure that you will not be disturbed. The ideal position is lying on a flat firm surface (a bed is out) with a rug or mat under your body and a rug to cover yourself if the weather is cold. Relaxation may also be practised sitting up, for five to ten minutes sitting behind the wheel of your stationary car, at the office desk, or even on a closed toilet seat if no other quiet places are available; even this is preferable

to no break in your work routine at all. When sitting, ensure that your spine is aligned correctly and relaxed, legs are slightly apart with feet resting flat on the floor, arms supported by the arms of the chair, palms up or hands cupped in your lap. Shoulders are rounded and neck and head bent gently forward. It is essential that your weight is evenly distributed throughout the whole body, eyes lightly closed. If you are lying down for your practice, make sure your sine is as straight and flat as possible, legs slightly apart, feet falling opening out naturally. If you have a back problem lie with legs slightly flexed using a cushion under the knees. This ensures that the lower spine is brought into the floor and totally supported. Arms are out from the sides, palms up. Extend the back of your neck, chin down, shoulders expanding to give a feeling of space. This position is known as Savasana, the corpse posture in yoga, and is one of total acceptance and openness, where physical tension is reduced to a minimum. A small cushion or a book may be placed under the back of the neck if necessary.

Probably the most well-known and widely used relaxation technique is progressive muscular relaxation, established by an American doctor, Edmund Jacobsen in 1910. This technique is highly favoured by doctors and psychiatrists and has been described as a physiological and clinical investigation of muscular states. Breathing rhythm is observed and then attention is rotated around different muscles groups of the body, tensing and then releasing them. The whole process takes about 20 minutes. The disadvantage that I see with this technique is that you are never totally switched off but constantly working with the tensing and releasing, and there may be negative consequences of repeatedly hearing "tense" in a relaxation session, with no positive thoughts or images introduced.

More recently Dr Herbert Benson introduced his relaxation response to combat stress. This technique is similar to mantra meditation and involves sitting in a quiet comfortable position, choosing a word or short phrase that is firmly rooted in our own belief system, closing your eyes, relaxing the muscles and then with a slow breath repeating the focus word or phrase on each exhalation. The attitude assumed is passive and the technique is practised once or twice daily for 20 minutes each time.

Yoga classes have always included relaxation or yoga nidra, either at the beginning or end of a sequence of postures. Students lie in Savasana, the corpse posture, and rotate their awareness through the sounds they hear around them to physical feelings and sensations, then to awareness of their thoughts and feelings, always without becoming attached or hooked into them but simply learning to observe or witness only. Sensations are then turned inwards or withdrawn and awareness is then rotated over the individual parts of the body. Full diaphragmatic breathing and the use of symbolic visualisation are practised to change

awareness and physical conditions and to increase self actualisation.

Autogenic training has been described as the Western answer to Eastern techniques such as yoga or zen meditation. It is a psycho-physiological self-training or hypnosis procedure (autogenic means self-originated or generated from within) that was developed experimentally in Germany in the 1920s by Dr Johannes Schultz. There are more than 3000 medical and scientific references and work on Schultz's autogenic training but barely ten percent have been translated into English and consequently autogenic training is not widely known in English-speaking countries. Dr Schultz based his method on observations made by Dr Oskar Vogt and his students from their work with patients in hypnosis and the physiological and psychological sensations they experienced (e.g. heaviness and warmth, changes in heartbeat and respiration, all induced by relaxation). Schultz also developed a series of mental exercises based on his study of hallucinations, and these formulas were introduced in an advanced stage of training for therapeutic purposes and are similar to the techniques proposed by Emile Coue in his book *Self-mastery Through Conscious Auto-suggestion*, first published in 1922. Schultz's autogenic training became widely known in Europe in the 1950's and was then introduced into North and South America, Canada and Japan, mainly through the influence of Dr Wolfgang Luthe, who has published books on the subject with Dr Schultz.

The purpose of autogenic training is to promote adequate and healthy responses of body and mind and to eliminate inadequate and unhealthy reactions. It also promotes greater personal and social effectiveness. Three postures are suggested for the practice: lying on your back, lying back in an easy chair or leaning forward while sitting in a hard chair. During the first two weeks students practise 2-3 times a day, 5 minutes at a time and for no more than 15 minutes a day. The six exercises that compose the standard formula are heaviness (e.g. my right arm is heavy), warmth (e.g. "my right arm is warm"), cardiac formula (e.g. "my heartbeat is calm and regular"), respiratory formula (e.g. "my breathing is calm and regular" or "my breathing breathes me"), abdominal formula (e.g. "my solar plexus is warm") and forehead formula (e.g. "my forehead is cool"). The more advanced stages include suggestions like, "my throat is cool" and meditative formula (the visualization of spontaneous or colours, selected colours, concrete or abstract objects, feeling states, other people, and dialoguing with the subconscious).

In my yoga and relaxation classes I teach a combination of autogenic training and yoga nidra, combining the wisdom of traditional practices and emphasis on awareness with the modern scientific and medical findings on the profound effects of the hypnotic trance states being currently taught with neuro-linguistic programming. We begin with an introduction to the concept and practice of the diaphragmatic breathing technique, becoming

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aware of the vital life force energy (prana, chi or ki) that we absorb with each inhalation, aware of the releasing or letting go of all negativity, stress, tiredness, worry, pain or disease with each exhalation, and consciously introduce the idea that with each inhalation from now on we will go deeper and deeper into the state of relaxation. Awareness then moves to the physical body lying on the mat and the clothes that cover us. We become aware of odours, taste sensations, images or coloured lights behind our closed eyes, then rotate our awareness to the sounds around us and then to our thoughts and feelings, simply witnessing or observing them and not allowing ourselves to get caught up by them. The senses are then withdrawn and turned inwards and students allow only the sound of my voice to reach them so that I can continue to guide them deeper and deeper into the relaxed state. Then we begin to practise rotating awareness through different parts of the body with students repeating instructions mentally to themselves while generating an image of the specific parts we are working on, and feelings of heaviness and warmth. They repeat instructions, emphasising the personal pronouns "I" or "My". It is important that a dependency on my voice is not built up but that in their daily practice, students are able to substitute their own inner voice while repeating the commands that I have taught them. We then become aware of our hearts beating, strong and steady, and of our breath, calm and comfortable, and feel deep

peace as we continue deeper and deeper in relaxation. We imagine we are lying in the shade and that our foreheads are cool, then we move down the body to discover the warmth of the solar plexus and the specific systems in the body and how well each functions during the relaxation process. Affirmations and positive thoughts are then introduced into the subconscious, which becomes accessible in the relaxed state, and I draw on my own inspirations and experiences and those from the teachings of Kahlil Gibran, Gerard Jampolsky, Louise Hay, Virginia Satir, the Bhagavad Gita, Leo Tzu, Buddha, Jung and Jesus. The final part of the relaxation, which lasts 20-25, minutes is given over to visualisations, either of single objects or images, or of a connected theme or a story. Students are given the opportunity to repeat their own affirmations or goals before they are gently and slowly brought out of the hypnotic and deeply relaxed state, by flexing and stretching the whole body, opening the eyes, breathing deeply, then gently massaging the lower part of the body. Because of the altered state of consciousness that is induced during such deep relaxation it is vital that there is a gentle readjustment and that students do not leap up and immediately begin another activity. In my yoga classes I employ relaxation right at the beginning of the class and by retaining this feeling of relaxation and working deeply with the breath we are able to achieve extremely good results with the postures that follow, without any artificial forcing or straining. ❁

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