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Relaxation And The Body

Meditation, despite its spiritual connotations, is solidly based on the relaxation of the body. If your body doesn't relax, your meditation remains a head-trip and nothing much happens. Some meditation practices, such as visualisation and mantra and positive thinking, virtually ignore the body or take it for granted, but they are a bit weak and ungrounded as a result. In fact, you relax best if you're highly attuned to your body.

Paradoxically, the fastest way to relax is to notice how tense you are. Once you realise that you're holding your breath and that your shoulders are high, you don't even have to think what to do next: you automatically breathe out and drop your shoulders. This is how awareness acts as biofeedback, telling you where and when you're tense and what to do about it.

Awareness reminds you that it's your choice whether to hold on (to be tense) or to let go (to relax). You don't actually have to 'do' anything other than let go the unnecessary tension, but you do have to be aware of it in the first place. It stands to reason that the more you can read your body, the more skilfully you can let go.

For example, if you check your breathing, you'll soon know how tense or relaxed you are. Tense breathing is tight and arrhythmic, and comes from the chest. Relaxed breathing on the other hand is loose, deep and flowing. Similarly, when you're tense, your muscles feel hard and jumpy. When you relax, they feel soft and warm.

As you develop more rapport with your body, the payoff can be enormous. You can easily relax your breathing with a few conscious sighs, and soften your face and shoulders within seconds. If you're not

conscious of these tensions, or are ignoring them, they can remain tight all your life (I'm not exaggerating).

THE BIOLOGY OF RELAXATION

We usually think of tension and relaxation as states of mind, but in fact they are embedded in the body. They are the sympathetic and parasympathetic responses of the central nervous system. Tension is the 'fight or flight' response that turns on adrenalin and cortisone, giving us the energy we need to face the demands of the day. Relaxation is the reverse process that turns off the stress hormones, letting us return to balance and eventually taking us to sleep. Meditation, therefore, turns off the 'stress response' and turns on the 'relaxation response'.

In fact, your adrenalin levels govern both responses. High adrenalin levels stimulate you and as the adrenalin fades, you automatically relax. It's like using the accelerator pedal in a car to go faster or slower. You press it down when you want to burn more fuel, and you ease up when you want to go slower or stop.



In other words, we use adrenalin to tense up or relax during the day according to how much energy we feel we need at any time. This is just the way our nervous system works: it naturally oscillates between arousal and relaxation all day long. At any time, you're either speeding up or slowing down – you're either burning energy or conserving it.

When you're stressed, you're 'speedy' and you burn energy fast: you push the pedal flat to the floor. That's when you race around, go nowhere fast and often crash. When you relax, on the other hand, you slow down and conserve energy. You can still be active and efficient, but you're in cruise mode. We are all good at speeding up – we can raise

our stress levels in a flash. But hardly any of us are good at relaxing. That is a different matter altogether.

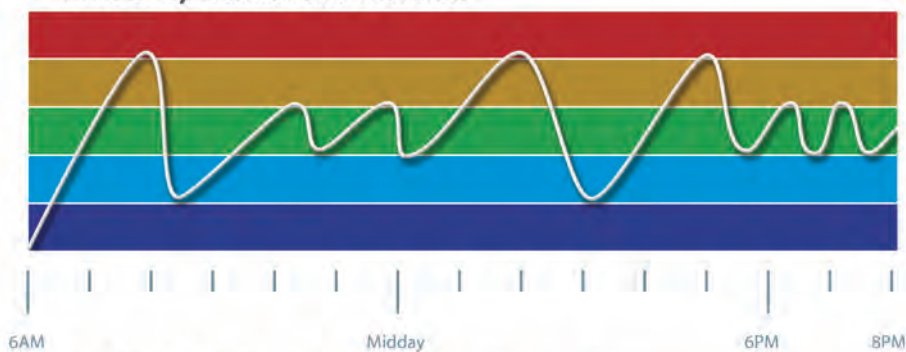
BEING IN BALANCE: THE IDEAL OPERATING ZONE

Some activities – sleeping, sitting and listening, for example – require little energy, while other activities need much more. However, there is a ‘right’ amount of energy expenditure for any particular activity – not too much and not too little. If your energy levels are in tune with what you are doing, you can say you’re ‘in balance’.

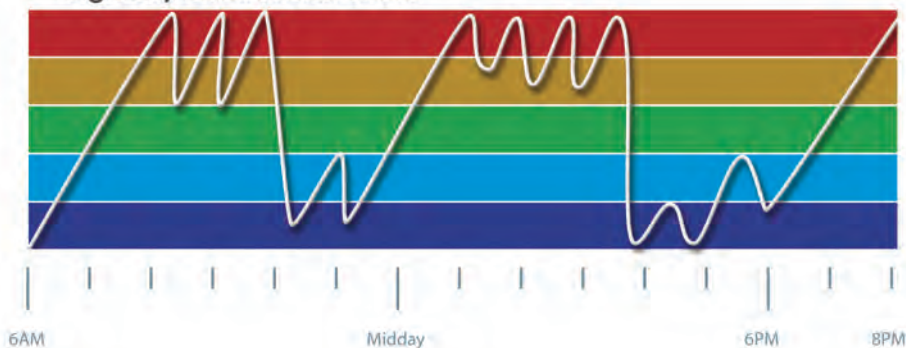
It is possible to be reasonably balanced all day long. Your energy expenditure will vary according to what you do, but it can always be ‘right’ for that particular task.

100%	Panic
AROUSAL	Stress
	Balance
	Relaxation
0%	Sleep

Mild Daily Oscillations: Balance



Big Daily Oscillations: Stress



Ideally, your nervous system should oscillate between mild arousal and mild relaxation all day long, and avoid the extremes of panic and exhaustion. It's all a matter of pacing yourself well, relaxing when you can and being attuned to what you are doing.

This idea is encapsulated in the Buddhist saying 'When walking, just walk'. If you *worry* while you walk, however, you'll burn more energy than 'just walking' requires. The stress hormones will make everything pump and squeeze and race harder in the body – far more than you need for 'just walking'. If you overreact to every problem, and fret about them for too long, you could be way out of balance. You could be burning 50% more energy than necessary for every activity all day long.

If you burn energy fast, you eventually burn out. The body will compensate by throwing you into a state of exhaustion, which forces you to rest whether you like it or not. This is the familiar stress–fatigue cycle. We push too hard when we've got some energy (or coffee) inside us, and then struggle with fatigue the rest of the time.

If you imagine this pattern stretched over a lifetime you can see why years of anxiety (the high energy state) are often followed by years of depression (the low energy state). A common pattern is to be bright and bubbly in your twenties, perpetually anxious in your thirties, and sick and depressed in your forties. Trying to live on adrenalin can destroy you.

Key Words

Be aware of stress
Let go the breath
Soften the body
When walking, just walk
Be in balance
Relax a little and often



*The sad end of an
adrenalin junky*

RELAX A LITTLE AND OFTEN

By spot-meditating, you can consciously return to balance whenever you need to. Since prolonged stress is physically painful, the body has a strong instinct to escape it. All it needs is a little encouragement. If you stop what you're doing, take a few deep breaths and sigh, you can relax markedly in less than a minute. You'll also stay relaxed and burn less energy in the minutes that follow.

You don't have to relax deeply for a meditation to be worthwhile. To relax just 20% many times a day is enormously valuable. It can rescue you from the horrors of a panic attack. If you're running about frantically, you can cool down in a minute or two. If you're overreacting to something, you can stop immediately. If you need to rest, you can quickly sink into a catnap, sitting in your car in the car park. If you're jumping out of your skin with boredom at a meeting, you can zone out while still appearing to be there.

Alternatively, you may find that you're a persistent worrier for no good reason, and it stops you enjoying life. Even if prolonged stress in the past has trained you to be hyper-vigilant, a spot-meditation can still work its magic. It can easily disarm your worry, and take you into a world of momentary stillness and beauty. You can find that within your adult body you still have the eyes of a child (a happy one!)

Few of us can do long meditations as often as we would like. Half an hour a day would be a great achievement and sacrifice for most people. If you learn to spot-meditate, however, you could easily be relaxed and calm for several hours a day, without disturbing your usual activities. In fact it is likely to enhance them.

In time you can retrain your body's responses. You don't have to habitually gulp your food or walk stiffly or talk as if your life depended on it. It's much more pleasant to actually taste your food, and to breathe while you walk. Being present immediately increases the sensual pleasure of living. By repeatedly switching off the stress response with spot-meditations, you can train yourself to be in a healthy, balanced state for most of the day. The secret is to keep listening to your body.