

The Last Word On STRESS

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Meditation is a technique that can certainly provide immediate some relief from day-to-day stresses, but, far beyond that, it is also an experience that can change one's philosophical perspective so that life's adversities can be faced courageously with personal assurance of something Permanent.

by Michael Smith

Stress is Fear. People don't like to use the word "fear," so they say "stress." But if they took the time to examine their feelings, they would see that stress is fear. Books speak about stress being caused by noise, caffeine, not enough exercise, toxic jobs, bad relationships, poor organizational skills, life-changes, a Type-A personality and so forth, but the bottom line is fear.

People fear that they will not be able to cope with something in the future, and that they'll be overwhelmed and that'll be it, "It'll all be over," "I'll be finished."

Stress consultants offer a host of remedies: talk to a friend, get a dog, take Prozac or St. John's wort, take hot baths, lie on a pillow, breathe deeply, get into nature, stop looking at TV and reading newspapers, give up coffee etc. and people accept these remedies and diversions because they don't have to change much or incorporate them. They think they can stay pretty much the way they are and at the same time have peace of mind. This is not possible, however, because none of these solutions get at the root of the matter, which is identification with a self-image that is in jeopardy. To live in the world we have had to adopt certain roles and personalities." They are useful insofar as carrying out our social duties, but because they are limited, they always have

fear as their shadow. A wealthy man is afraid the stock market will crash. An attractive woman is afraid of losing her good looks. A clever lawyer fears he will lose a case. A zealous mother is fearful that her children will embarrass her. Until these "little selves" are transcended, there will always be stress. Our "social personalities" do not help us much either, especially as we grow older. Our bodies lose their vitality, we suffer from illness, we lose our friends and relations, and we ourselves eventually die. There is only one way to conquer these things, and that is by identifying with a "Self" that is larger than situational conditions. To face these things fearlessly requires the personal assurance of the Perennial -- a Consciousness that is eternal and all-pervading. When we can operate out of that Consciousness, there is a major shift in our understanding, and there is no possibility of fear.

The action step to bringing it all together, as all the great saints and sages of the world have been saying for centuries, is to learn the science and art of meditation. Meditation is a technique that can certainly provide immediate some relief from day-to-day stresses, but, far beyond that, it is also an experience that can change one's philosophical perspective so that life's adversities can be faced courageously with personal assurance of something Permanent.



What would be the practical steps to incorporating this "ease of mind and peace of heart"?

- 1) First of all, to carry on the tasks of the day in a healthy, balanced way, loving way;
- 2) Next, to find a quiet place and sit in a comfortable, steady, relaxed posture;
- 3) Then, to breathe smoothly and evenly;
- 4) And finally, to bring the mind to stillness and concentration until it opens into the awareness of your own essential nature.

It is difficult to learn this from a book. Each of these steps is a science unto itself. The best way to proceed, therefore, is to find a competent teacher and practice regularly, often with a group of people who share your spiritual interests, until the skill of meditation is firmly established.

Of all of the studies on stress, there is only one remedy that is definitive: John White and James Fadiman in *Relax*, speak of it in relation persons like Mother Teresa and Gandhi, who exhibited "equanimity and tranquility in the face of circumstances that for most others would be extremely stressful, if not overwhelming." They ask, "What has been their secret? Each of them has discovered that when a sense of the infinite or the transpersonal replaces our usual narrow self-centeredness, there is no longer a mental basis for fear, anger, tension. Instead, the perfectly harmonious functioning of the cosmos operates through us." This stable and serene state of being is the gift of meditation. ☸

SOME WORTHWHILE THOUGHTS ON THE NATURE OF STRESS:

The principle idea behind most techniques designed to elicit the relaxation response, is **eliminate** stress and tension from Your life. A method can help you control these health-wreckers, but to eliminate them you need something more: character development and value refinement. This matter is uniformly **not** in the literature on relaxation.

Stress, tension, anxiety and nervousness originate in the ego. But, the ego is an illusion, only a false image in your mind. It is this mental state of egotism that produces most discomfort, pain, and suffering. If you want to root these out at the source, remember that the origin of most techniques of relaxation are modern adaptations of the beginning steps in some of the world's great spiritual systems. They recognize clearly the nature of ego and have developed procedures for going far beyond mere tension reduction. It is no accident that society's models of the fully-developed human, the self-actualized person, include many saints and holy people. They have been revered for many reasons; their compassion, devotion, inspirational words of wisdom, and service to the world. But, what is of particular importance for us here is their equanimity, their tranquility, their ease of mind and peace of heart in the face of circumstances that for most others would be extremely stressful, if not overwhelming.

What has been their secret? Each of them, in his own way arising from his particular tradition, has discovered the truth of the saying "Let go and let God". When a sense of infinite or the transpersonal replaces our usual narrow self-centeredness, there is no longer a mental basis for fear, anger, or tension. Instead, the perfectly harmonious functioning of the cosmos operates through us.

Relax and the cosmos is always balanced, at peace with itself. We therefore suggest -in closing this book on how to feel better, reduce stress and overcome tension-that you begin to investigate the deeper roots of religious and spiritual traditions. The essence of those traditions is not a moralizing exhortation to be a better person, but rather a method by which you can personally experience a deepening of wisdom and a growth of character through the elimination of ego. In the process you can gain all benefits described here, while reducing your person contribution to the disharmony in society.

Happiness Is a Choice

I BELIEVE THAT in the same way physical exercise can change your body, regular mental exercises can change how you see and engage with the world and the people you love.

Last September, I attended a meditation workshop. The meditation was this: Sit for 11 minutes with your hands in front of your heart, palms facing each other a few inches apart. We were to see the person we loved inside the space between our hands. We were to think of them happy, to see them bathed in light, to see them as their best selves. We were given a little song to sing during the meditation, but the song wasn't the point. The point was to see the person you loved as happy for 11 minutes every day.

It was a 40-day meditation, and if you missed a day, you had to start over at day one. So every day I sat down and thought about my husband as happy. I pictured him on a boat or sleeping with our dog or laughing on the phone with his mother. We had a good marriage to start with, and now the small traces of impatience or judgment I had brought

to our relationship fell away. I no longer cared if he neglected to unroll his socks before dropping them in the wash. I felt a heightened sense of joy when he came home from work. Again and again I pictured him at his best, and I responded

to that best self accordingly. I remembered how grateful I was to be married to him, and then I remembered how grateful I was to even know him. The more goodness I saw in him, the more goodness he showed me. He even started going to the gym, feeling better about work, doing more to help other people. He asked me often about the meditation, and thanked me for it.

At the end of 40 days, I asked the teacher if people ever decided to push on. She told me that 40 days requested a

change, 80 days formed a new pattern, and 120 days sealed your intention. I pressed ahead. It's easy enough to find fault with people, but it's equally easy to see their radiance if that's what you decide to do. I didn't change my husband, I changed myself, and in doing that I opened my eyes to what had been there all along. ■



It's easy to see the good in others if that's what you decide to do

—Ann Patchett

Award-winning author ANN PATCHETT's latest novel is *Run*, available in paperback.

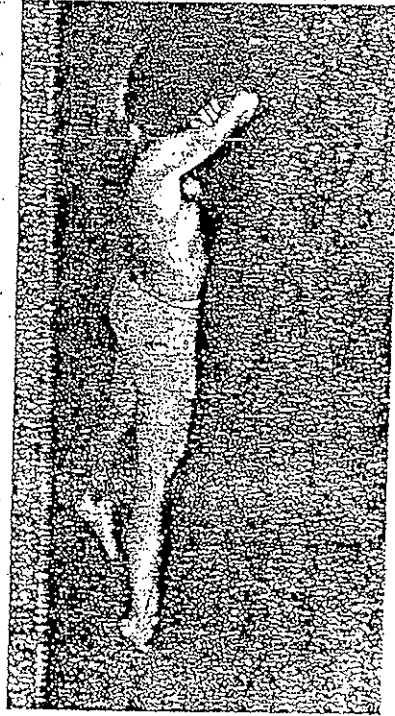
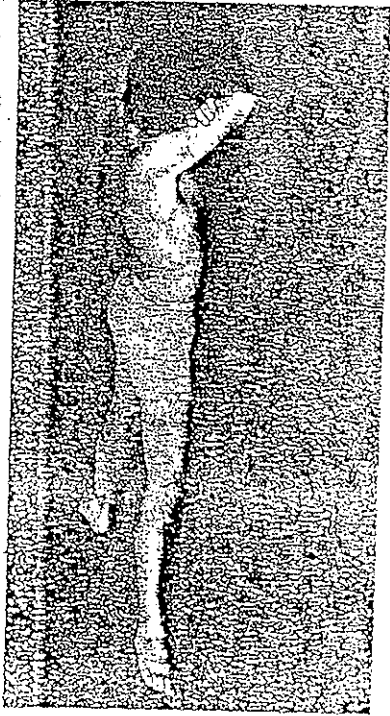
ONE Crocodile Relaxation

Lie on the stomach, placing the legs a comfortable distance apart and pointing the toes in or out, whichever is more comfortable. Fold the arms in front of the body, resting the hands on the biceps. Position the arms so that the chest does not touch the floor, as pictured. Then place the forehead on the forearms.

This posture enables you to establish diaphragmatic breathing (see Appendix II). You may use a cloth beneath the nostrils to keep from inhaling dust. As you lie in the posture observe your breathing. Let the breath become deep and smooth. While inhaling, feel the abdominal muscles gently press against the floor; while exhaling, feel the abdomen contract. Let the body relax completely.

4. AFTER 3 TO 4 MIN OF MENTALLY COUNTING IN THIS 2 TO 1 RATIO, LET GO OF THE COUNT AND JUST ALLOW EXHAIRATION TO BE APPROXIMATELY 2X AS LONG.

5. FINALLY, START TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE TRANSITION POINT - WHERE INHALATION MERGES INTO EXHAIRATION AND EXHAIRATION TRANSITIONS TO INHAIRATION. DON'T TRY OR FORCE, JUST ALLOW.



The crocodile pose

LONGER SEQUENCE FOR BREATHING EXPERIMENT IN CROCODILE (REAL STRESS BUSTER)

1. BRING MIND TO THE MOVEMENT OF BREATH - DON'T TRY TO ALTER BREATH - RELAX AND OBSERVE.
2. AFTER 3 TO 4 MIN. CALCULATE AVERAGE LEN OF YOUR INHAIRATION - MATCH EXHAIRATION IN THE 1 RATIO.
3. AFTER 3 TO 4 MIN. OF MENTALLY COUNTING BEGIN TO SLOWLY EXTEND EXHAIRATION UNTIL IT IS 2X AS LONG.

THE WITNESS

Within the deep silence of the great unborn, Spirit whispers a sublime secret, an otherwise hidden truth of one's very essence: You, in this and every moment, abide as Spirit itself, an immutable radiance beyond the mortal suffering of time and experience. Spirit itself is the very heart of one's own awareness, and it has always been so. Do you not remember this Self of yours, this great Witness? Is it not always your constant realization?

Notice first of all the broad, distinguishing marks of the transcendent self: it is a center and expanse of awareness which is creatively detached from one's personal mind, body, emotions, thoughts, and feelings. . . . [If] you would like to . . . [intuit] this transcendent self within you that goes beyond you, the you that is not you, then . . .

Slowly begin to silently. . . [contemplate . . . and] realize as vividly as possible the import of . . . [this]:

I have a body, but I am *not* my body. I can see and feel my body, and what can be seen and felt is not the true Seer. My body may be tired or excited, sick or healthy, heavy or light, but that has nothing to do with my inward I. I *have* a body, but I am *not* my body.

I have desires, but I am *not* my desires. I can know my desires, and what can be known is not the true Knower. Desires come and go, floating through my awareness. but they do not affect my inward I. I *have* desires but I am *not* desires.

I *have* emotions, but I am *not* my emotions. I can feel and sense my emotions, and what can be felt and sensed is not the true Feeler. Emotions pass through me, but they do not affect my inward I. I *have* emotions I but I am *not* emotions.

I *have* thoughts, but I am *not* my thoughts. I can know and intuit my thoughts, and what can be known is not the true Knower. Thoughts come to me and thoughts leave me, but they do not affect my inward I. I *have* thoughts but I am *not* my thoughts. . . . I am what remains, a pure center of awareness, an unmoved witness of all these thoughts, emotions, feelings, and desires.

. . . [You] might begin to notice fundamental changes in your sense of "self." For example, you might begin intuiting a deep inward sense of freedom, lightness, release, stability. This source, this "center of the cyclone," will retain its lucid stillness even amid the raging winds of anxiety and suffering that might swirl around its center. The discovery of this witnessing center is very much like diving from the calamitous waves on the surface of a stormy ocean to the quiet and secure depths of the bottom. At first you might not get more than a few feet beneath the agitated waves of emotion, but with persistence you may gain the ability to dive fathoms into the quiet depths of your soul and, lying outstretched at the bottom, gaze up in alert but detached fashion at the turmoil that once held you transfixed.

Here we are talking about the transpersonal self or witness – we are not yet discussing pure unity consciousness. In unity consciousness, the transpersonal witness itself collapses into everything witnessed. Before that can occur, however, one must first discover that transpersonal witness, which then acts as an easier "jumping-off point" for unity consciousness. And we find this transpersonal witness by dis-identifying with all particular objects, mental, emotional, or physical, thereby transcending them.

From *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Methods to Spiritual Growth* (1979), found in *The Collected Works of Ken Wilber, Volume I*, Shambhala Publications (1999), pp. 546-547.

"The unhappiness and suffering that we experience arise through our inability to control our own minds, and the happiness that we wish to achieve will only be achieved by learning to control our own minds . . . You can use Inner Science to educate each individual to understand himself or herself, to control his or her negative emotions and disturbed notion, and to cultivate his or her highest potentials of love and wisdom."

--Dalai Lama

"The faculty of voluntary bringing back a wandering attention is the very root of judgement, character and will. No one is really in control of themselves if they do not have this. An education which would improve this faculty would be the education par excellence."

--William James