

The Art of Relaxation

As far as the physical body is concerned, let us remember that relaxation concerns the external skeletal muscles. These muscles can be influenced by three factors: contraction, relaxation and stretching. To be appropriate, their development depends on these three factors and is based on physical exercise. This is why Hatha Yoga provides contraction, relaxation and stretching exercises.

A contraction occurs when a muscle is firm to touch after swelling and shortening. Such a contraction may or may not be accompanied by movements. Accompanied by movements, it is called phasic, or dynamic contraction. In the absence of any movement, it is called postural, or static contraction. However, the muscles can be in a phase of tonic contraction, which allows a more pronounced postural tone in keeping the body upright.

In the absence of contraction, the muscles at rest reach a maximum length; as soon as there is contraction, the muscle is shortened and a movement can result, which becomes a phasic contraction. When a muscle is stretched to its resting position with no lingering contraction there, the position of the muscle at rest will correspond to a state of relaxation. But, this relaxation may not be complete. There may for example be movement of the legs, which are not quite stretched. The muscles then have no possibility of reaching the state of relaxation, as long as they are not placed in their normal resting position.

But even so, there may remain some muscle tension. When the muscles have reached their resting position, any tension is supposed to disappear. However, there may still be another form of stress of nervous origin, e.g. the feeling of being under pressure, anxiety (whether justified or not), unexpressed anger, etc. Such elements can also affect the body, even if they are assigned a purely mental origin, or if they are ignored.

Such effects can be immediate and, if left unchecked, can accumulate over time. When we become aware of something, this new consciousness will exert an influence upon the motor nerves connected to the muscles.

This will result in keeping the nervous system under tension and constantly stimulate the muscles, holding them in a constant slight contraction. This results in a disturbed state of rest. As long as such a state remains, normal relaxation will be impossible, even in sleep. These essential factors, too often neglected, can cause nervous breakdown unless an opportunity for relaxation is created. So we have a great need to educate our character; in doing so we will gradually become more and more aware of the spiritual aspect of our existence. A mind in constant contact with all the negative factors of this world is a real hindrance to spiritual development.

From a more practical point of view, it should be noted that the muscular positioning of the human body is very different; it is not easy to find a position in which each muscle is at rest. We can, however, try to bring the body to zero level of action, i.e. a level where all muscular action is at a bare minimum and free from any voluntary action. As the activities of the organs are proportional to muscular action, there will be no movement at the zero level except for the internal organs (the heart, lungs, glands, etc.). This zero level usually occurs when the body demonstrates perfect immobility, like a corpse. In Hatha Yoga, this posture is called *shavâsana* (the term "*shava*" means "dead"), which is to say a state where the action is at its lowest level. The appearance of any tension in the muscular system will eliminate this zero level, at the level of the internal organs.

By taking this zero position, the immobility of the body also provides an ideal opportunity to induce the mind to escape in all directions through a stream of uncontrolled thoughts, instead of remaining focused on a particular mental scheme. This is one of the reasons that leads us to close our eyes to eliminate any visual impulse. In some cases, it is even desirable to control the intrusion of sounds, although this is more difficult to accomplish. And, despite these measures, our relaxation may not be complete, because of remaining tensions.

So how do you control the never-ending stream of thoughts? Thinking about relaxation? We can of course imagine our muscles in a state of relaxation, but often this will produce a contrary effect. If we attempt to relax the biceps by thinking about this muscle, it will engender a stimulation of this muscle. This is the case for any object subjected to the attention of the thought, at least until we completely control our desires and our will, which we are usually unable to do. In this case, we will not be able to achieve true muscle relaxation. It is only when the mind is

emptied of any object that it will be possible, since the mind that thinks of the muscle only stimulates it, thus preventing the elimination of tension.

Let it be clear then that any mental impulse directed towards the muscles will have the effect of causing their contraction. As a result, the blood circulation will be amplified, as well as the activity of the central nervous system.

It is only with a vacant mind, drained of all thoughts and therefore available, that this stimulation will fade and that we can hope for a real relaxation. We must train ourselves in this important exercise of relaxation, while strengthening our muscles, in parallel, with contraction exercises (*tchâranâ*). It may seem difficult to reach a state of mental emptiness, but the practice of relaxation must help us to adopt the correct mental attitude, which amounts to making no mental effort. This in no way means relaxation of the will, but rather of the mind, so as to create a state of loss of interest in efforts.

At the very beginning, we must strictly maintain this motionless "zero" posture, while preserving mental emptiness and freedom from concern to a certain extent. By regular training, we will gradually reach a minimum level of activity at the rate of our relaxation. For this, we can observe our breath as it progresses. This quiet observation will have a specific effect over time, and it is only after going through many steps that we will be able to place the mind in a state of emptiness, truly free of all concern.

As long as we remain aware of what we are doing, the mind will keep going from "minus" to "plus", thus provoking an element of activity, even if there is no physical movement. When you have acquired a certain degree of control, you can be aware of your breath without thereby activating your consciousness. Such awareness will then be devoid of any stimulation, being just the object of your observation, the mind being forgetful of all desire, will, thought or effort. Then, your respiratory rate will slow down and the mind will come to the point of no longer being conscious of anything. At this point, the entire nervous system will be relaxed.

It is also desirable to exercise our muscles in the direction of passivity. By way of comparison, one could say that relaxation is similar to homeopathy, and contraction to allopathy. For these two important issues, Hatha Yoga provides several exercises that take into consideration the individual's age, gender, temperament and ability.