

THERAPEUTIC RELAXATION

For a moment, consider the very word relaxation and what it means to you. I often ask, "What do you do to relax?" The answers are numerous. "I like to listen to music, Mariachi music." -- "I like to read the paper and drink a cup of coffee." -- "I like to read a good book." -- "I like to swim." -- "I like to work out with weights." -- "I like to play sports." The idea of relaxation is often confused with recreation. According to Dictionary.com, recreation is a pastime, diversion, exercise, or other resource affording relaxation and enjoyment. Relaxation is abatement or relief from bodily or mental work. And it is also an activity or recreation that provides such relief; diversion; entertainment. Pondering the meaning Western culture assigns to these words is proof positive that we have much to learn about what relaxation really can be!

Relaxation as a physiological phenomenon was studied by Dr. Herbert Benson at Harvard Medical School in the 1970s. He designed a study based on the popular technique of Transcendental Meditation. He learned that TM induced physiological changes in the body and called these changes the Relaxation Response (Benson, 1975). It is now widely accepted that certain meditative practices, such as therapeutic relaxation, produce physiological changes in the body that repair damage caused by stress and even certain illness. Therapeutic relaxation techniques are easily accessible to everyone, not only those who are experienced with meditation.

The Relaxation Response is mediated by the nervous system and is diametrically opposed to the Stress Response. The sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems comprise the autonomic nervous system. The autonomic nervous system acts as a control system for all of the organ systems of the body. It functions largely below the level of consciousness. However, yoga practices such as meditation and deep therapeutic relaxation can have positive effects on the whole person -- body, mind and spirit by bringing the autonomic nervous system into balance. (See tables below).

STRESS RESPONSE

Sympathetic Nervous System

- Increases heart rate
- Increases blood pressure
- Increases blood sugar
- Increases mental alertness
- Increases skeletal muscle tension
- Increases ventilation
- Respirations rapid & shallow
- Increases clotting of blood

RELAXATION RESPONSE

Parasympathetic Nervous System

- Decreases heart rate
- Decreases blood pressure
- Decreases blood sugar
- Attention & concentration improves
- Musculoskeletal flexibility & joint range of motion improves
- Respiratory efficiency improves
- Respiratory rate decreases
- Cardiovascular efficiency increases

The practice of Therapeutic Relaxation on the Audio CD which accompanies this instruction manual is a form of Yoga Nidra, a technique of conscious relaxation. According to Saraswati (1998), during Yoga Nidra, one appears to be asleep, but consciousness is functioning at a deeper level of awareness. It is a threshold state between sleep and wakefulness where contact with subconscious and unconscious dimensions occur. When consciousness is separated from external awareness and from sleep, it becomes very powerful and can be applied in many ways such as to develop the memory, increase knowledge and creativity, or to transform one's nature. When relaxation is complete, receptivity is greater than when consciousness is connected to all of the senses.

The specific technique used in the Foundations of Yoga Practice is based on an ancient mystical idea that human embodiment contains five selves or layers. This idea is referred to as the Five Self Theory and the Koshas (Kheper) and has been found in other philosophies of human existence throughout time and across cultures. The earliest written description is found in the Taittiriya Upanishad, one of the earliest of the Upanishads which dates back possibly to 800 BCE. According to Premananda (1955), human embodiment is systematically described as containing a physical body -- anamaya, a bioenergetic body -- pranamaya, and emotional body -- manomaya, a wisdom body -- vijñana-maya, and a bliss body -- ananda-maya (pp. 99--102). When we touch ananda-maya we connect with our true nature. It is in the experience of ananda, or bliss, that we become whole.

During the relaxation practice on the Audio CD, you will focus your awareness on what is most dense -- the physical body, and gradually move your awareness to what is most subtle -- the bliss body. I encourage you to use the CD every day. It may be used for relaxation after your asana practice. It may be utilized for a period of rest and renewal in the middle of the day. Or it may be used as a prelude to deep and restful sleep. You will find it useful during periods of sleeplessness. Do not ever listen to the CD when driving!