

An Essay on Stress

True relaxation arises in simple acceptance of things as they are. True relaxation is not dependant on context. That is to say one you do not require a peaceful or tranquil environment in order to relax. This must be true, for even in the most relaxing environments people still manage to get stressed out (“the water is too green,” “my bathing suit looks bad,” it’s too hot,” “my vacation is almost over” etc...). In each of the above examples, the stress is not coming from the environment, but from the resistance to the environment.

The most relaxed times in our lives occur when everything is “just right”. When everything lines up with our perception of how things should be, we no longer put up a fight and as a result we feel a great deal of peacefulness and wellbeing. From this arises the mistaken notion that it was the “just rightness” that caused the relaxation. But the “just-rightness” is in the environment, not in us. The relaxation comes because when everything is just right we stop resisting things as they are. And therein lies the secret. True relaxation arises from within. Independent of context, true relaxation comes from not resisting and allowing everything to be as it is. So even with green water, questionable swimwear, hot weather, and a vacation nearing its end – you can still be perfectly relaxed.

Remember the last time you were stressed out? Somebody inevitably chimes in with that most sage piece of advice – “just relax.” Simple as that, right? When you are experiencing a great deal of stress there is no use repeating “just relax” like a mantra. In that moment of stress, you should observe your body-mind reaction to the stress, respect your body and it’s reactions, and integrate those reactions so that you are not repressing or denying any aspect of your living experience. You can think of acknowledging the stress as a 3-step process:

1. **Observe.** Something is causing the stressful reaction. Often it is extremely obvious and therefore this first step can seem redundant. If, however, the actual cause of the stress is unknown then this first step is crucial. For example, if you are being chased naked through the streets of Regina by a giant rabid porcupine then the cause of the stress known and the stress itself is a functional response that may help you to avoid one of those massive quills in the back. That is known as acute stress. Giant rabid porcupines are not common in these parts, though. Neither is any of the great variety of life-and-death situations in which stress is useful. For the most part stress is chronic, rather than acute. Chronic stress arises when a remembered or anticipated stressful event is played out over and over in the body and mind, resulting in your blood pressure increasing, heart pounding, and shortness of breath. You need to observe which kind of stress you are experiencing – chronic or acute. If it is acute – keep running. If it is chronic – on to step 2.
2. **Respect.** First let me clarify what I mean by respect. You often hear teachers of yoga talking about “respecting your limits” in postures. By that they generally mean approaching your limits as you would approach an elder – carefully and without aggressiveness. I mean something quite different. The word respect is derived from the Latin *respicere* which means to look back or to reconsider. That is precisely what I mean when I say respect your stress. After observing your stress and determining if it is acute or (more likely) chronic, you need to take a closer look. It

will not be helpful to start thinking “oh this is chronic stress so I should just relax” – that just doesn’t work. Think of your body like a puppy. If a puppy is under stress and is scared we can’t just explain to it that it has no reason to fear. We need first to respect (reconsider) the stress in order to better understand it such that we might be able to help. Reconsider the causes of your stress – is it something that happened in the past? Are you suffering from the after-effects of some trauma like an assault or otherwise violent encounter? It is possible you require a safe, nurturing, therapeutic environment in which to heal. It is also possible that you are neurotically clinging to a stressful moment from your past or anticipating a stressful moment that you imagine will take place in the future. In that instance, a nurturing environment is only going to nurture your neurotic behavior.

- 3. Integrate.** Do not deny or ignore your feelings. When you are stressed, you are stressed. Perhaps the worst thing you could do is get stressed out precisely because you feel you should not be stressed out. Acknowledging and accepting your feelings of stress does not mean allowing stress to become a permanent fact of daily life. It only means claiming the stress such that you can move forward in an intelligent way. It means seeing things as they are. Sometimes you get stressed out. You can be awake, mindful and aware, and still experience stress from time to time. Sometimes you allow the stress to act as fuel to burn through the obstacles that temporarily interfere with your freedom and happiness. That obstacle might be a deadline at work or a giant, rapid porcupine. Either way you can observe the stressful response, get some perspective on your body’s response, and integrate that response into meaningful and effective action. If, upon reflection, you find that the majority of your stress is chronic by nature then the actions you take should reflect that. For example, if you are constantly anticipating or recalling stressful encounters then the appropriate action should be focusing on living more in the present moment.

True relaxation doesn’t come from beaches, vacations, or even from yoga classes. True relaxation comes from deep within you, from the stillness within you that does not argue with or resist reality in any way. There are moments in every person’s life that are, by their nature, stressful. But one who is able to find true relaxation deep within oneself is not made a victim by these fleeting, stressful encounters. Such a person rises to meet the challenges that confront them only to soften back into the ever-present silence that serves as an anchor in the tumultuous waters of daily life.