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Yoga as an Antidote to Stress

By Ashley Cleveland, MA, DC

*“The secret of the magic of life consists in using action
in order to attain non-action.”*

~ THE SECRET OF THE GOLDEN FLOWER

We live in a culture that values *doing*. Everyone is busy. Time, it seems, is meant to be filled with activity. When people have unscheduled time, they often call a friend and initiate the conversation by saying, “I have some *time to kill* before my next _____.” We are so busy that we cannot (or do not) take the time to feed ourselves and our children, racing through the drive-through at McDonalds or some other fast food restaurant, eating in the car as we drive from one evening commitment to another.

In a recent commentary for the news program *60 Minutes*, Andy Rooney detailed his theory that sleep is a waste of time. Imagine, he said, all the time we are wasting if we sleep eight hours a night. Why, he wondered, didn’t human beings come with a gauge that would inform them when their bodies have had enough sleep so they wouldn’t *waste* any extra time with this unproductive activity?

Mind, Breath and an Answer to Busy-ness

What is the result of all this busy-ness, all this going and doing? A population that is overweight, over-tired and stressed out. We use caffeine and sugar to raise our energy levels, only to crash later. We desperately need to rest, but cannot find the time – and when we do, our revved up minds make sleep elusive.

The yogic path includes body, mind and breath practices (*asana*, *dhyana*, and *pranayama*) that offer more than just a respite from our hectic lives; they offer a completely new way of *being* in the midst of our busy world. A regular *asana* (posture) practice not only benefits us on a gross physical level, increasing strength, flexibility, and endurance. It also quiets the constant chatter in the mind by requiring disciplined focus.

The body becomes the meditative tool, and the yoga practitioner consciously directs her attention to long-neglected spaces on and within it, feeling its position in space, inviting openness and release. Multi-tasking during *asana* practice simply isn’t possible, so those who practice yoga regularly increase their ability to focus and to tune out distractions.

Undisturbed Presence, Inner Cheer

Combining this one-pointed focus (*dharana*) with conscious breathing produces a change in the activity of the nervous system. An experienced yogini in a challenging posture is still able to breathe calmly and fully; her mind remains undisturbed. The beauty of *asana* is contained within this wholeness – the balance of effort (*sthira*) and ease (*sukkha*). Unfortunately, what attracts most of us to a yoga practice is the desire to bend ourselves into a difficult shape or stand on our hands. We do not see the inner skill that a long-time yoga practitioner has cultivated, so we fail to appreciate that the true essence of the practice is the spacious, quiet mind, our undisturbed presence while embodying a challenging physical position.

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The quiet mind and the steady breath that are cultivated through regular yoga practice are an antidote to the pressure cooker of our lives. The more frequently we take the time to practice these ancient disciplines, the more readily we can return to our inner sanctuary when life comes calling with its inevitable stresses and frustrations. Shantiveda describes the yogic mind this way: “Whatever happens to me it shall not disturb my inner cheer.” Take some time to follow the breath deep into the body and discover the well of calm within. The more frequently you dip into that well, the more capable you are of bringing up its cool, clear waters when the fires of life are burning hot.

Ashley Cleveland, MA, DC, is Provost and Professor at Cleveland Chiropractic College–Kansas City and teaches yoga in Kansas City.