

True Relaxation

Untying the Knots That Bind

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN



Exhale. It's summer and everything is in full bloom: the earth is rich with color, the garden abundant, the days long and light. Finally we can break out that stack of books, fire up the grill, and enjoy a delightful dip in the ocean. Finally we can slow down and relax. . . . Oh, if only it were so easy.

As much as we all want to unwind, most of us don't always know how—or if we do, we rarely take the time. Spinning in a cyclone of busyness, even relaxing can seem like another item on our lengthy to-do list. In order to take in a bit of peace and quiet, we have to rip ourselves away from the iPads, iPods, and iProblems that rule our perpetually plugged-in existence. Lost in a maelstrom of techno-madness and fake news, we have severed ourselves from the earth as we stare at our devices, hoping they will fill our deepest need.

Perhaps the problem is that we have made a god out of illusion, and we regularly bow down to it. As the wise Indian philosopher Krishnamurti once said: "It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society." And what is a sick society? One that defines happiness by the number of likes we get on Facebook or how we look in filtered photos. These misperceptions breed a culture of comparison and competition where the drive to be better than others—and to be "right"—creates a subtle tension that follows us through our

days. We want to relax, but it always feels like there is somewhere else to go, something else to do, and someone else to become.

These days, the word *relax* is so overused that it's hard to know what it even means. Etymologically, the term comes from the Latin *relaxare*, often translated as "loosen" or "open." Of course, we want to curl up on the couch and take a hiatus from the hamster wheel of life, but is that it? Perhaps more than anything we want to untie the knots of closure that keep us tense and shut down.

In this world of duality, to speak about relaxation is to speak about tension. After all, without closure we would not know openness, and vice versa. Tension has many causes—namely stress, a word closely related to the Old French *estrece*, meaning "narrowness" or "oppression." How appropriate, since when we feel stressed, our bodies constrict, our breath shallows, our muscles tighten, and we feel overwhelmed by life.

According to the American Institute of Stress, 75%–90% of all doctor visits are stress related. But stress itself is tricky to define because how we perceive and respond to potential stressors is very subjective. As the Greek philosopher Epictetus said: "It's not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters." While one person may respond peacefully to a traffic jam, another may burst into a blasphemous rage.

Stress activates the fight-or-flight response, the body's mechanism for dealing with perceived threats. If we are in the jungle and a furry, fanged creature wants us for dinner, it's the fight-or-flight response that helps us brawl or bolt. Though today most of us don't live in the bush, carnivorous thoughts follow us around and threaten our energy. Resentments, worries, and negative self-talk create a constant backdrop of tension, keeping us in a heightened state of alarm. As our bodies try to adapt, we habitually—and quite skillfully—build armor to protect ourselves. While such self-protection serves a purpose, it can also keep us from experiencing the full depth and beauty of our humanity. When we're tense, we're more apt to act without awareness. We're also more likely to bark at coworkers and offer rude salutations to innocent telemarketers.

True relaxation brings a quality of softness. Such softness is often frowned upon in our culture, and many of us are taught that we need to be rigid and defended to get ahead in life. But if we look deeply, we may discover that softness is what we truly want. How many personal ads say: "Seeking lover who is closed, resistant, shut down, tense, and disconnected?" That's not exactly appealing. While such

states are natural and necessary, don't we long to connect with someone who is vulnerable, open, and sincere? That idea is attractive, albeit intimidating. And that is what makes our intimate relationships so unique: in them we drop at least a little bit of our armor and meet our partner—or parent, pet, child, teacher—in a space of increased openness, shadow and all.

How then can we experience true relaxation? To begin, we can create space in our day to simply *be*. Often as soon as we have time to "be" we feel the need to "do." All of the "shoulds" come rushing in, and the more we *try* to relax, the more stressed-out we feel! The Taoist teaching known as *wu wei* offers an antidote for this. *Wu wei* is about letting things arise spontaneously, without force—it is the path of "non-doing." As the poet Rilke wrote, "Trees do not force their sap, nor does the flower push its bloom." In the same way, our wounds heal and our hearts beat whether we "do" anything or not—so why not be at ease and trust the power that knows the way?

If that approach doesn't work, we can breathe—mindfully and deeply. This practice stimulates the vagus nerve, which activates the parasympathetic nervous system and helps the body to relax. Spending time in nature works wonders as well. Instead of being so uptight and ungrounded, we can let the natural world lure us back into our body. When we feel the sand between our toes, smell the salty air, listen to the rain, or feel the warmth of a fire, we rediscover our place in the web of life. For a few moments we may even forget about the clenched fist of our egoistic existence and remember our interconnection with the vast and radiant cosmos.

If none of the above ideas resonate, try writing the word "control" on a piece of paper and putting a big "X" through it. Set that image in a visible place and look at it, often.

Ultimately we must gather our scattered mind and untie the tight knot of self. What is this "knot of self"? It is the notion that we are separate and isolated individuals, distinct from the rest of creation. The more we hold fast to this view, the more we push life away and exhaust ourselves in the process. When we relax both body and mind, we also relax this sense of separation and reclaim the totality of our being. How does this happen? By letting go of harsh striving and instead surrendering to each new moment. As we let go of tension, we release our rigid thoughts and yield to reality. We accept life just as it is and rest in the soft, shining, unbound openness that we are. 🐾

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