

The Mind-Body Road to Stress-Free Living

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It is a widely accepted commonplace today that mind and body are mutually interdependent. Certainly, we all know that our thoughts can make us ill, or that they can play a vital role in helping us heal from chronic illness. But what does it really mean to say that mind and body are one? And what does this mind-body unity imply for the way we should live our lives?

The answer to these questions is, I think, deep, beautiful and life transforming. Let me show you what I mean by describing a recent experience.

This past weekend, I was teaching a class on the use of breathing techniques for reducing chronic pain. The class was a mind-body workshop because it involved consciously using the mind to influence a part of the body, in other words, the breath. A few weeks before this particular class, I had given participants a simple exercise in breath awareness and relaxation. I had asked them to use this exercise on a daily basis, and to notice how it affected them. The results of this exploration were quite astonishing. One woman with severe fibromyalgia (a form of chronic tissue pain) announced that the breathing work had dramatically reduced her pain levels. Another class member told us that she had used the breathing techniques during a dental treatment that ordinarily left her in major pain for a number of days. This time, she was pain free both during and after the dental work!

The reason for the pain reduction these two people experienced is simple: deep, relaxed breathing automatically reduces muscle tension throughout the body. It is that

tension that often lays the groundwork for chronic pain. Here, then, is a simple example of how mind and body influence each other.

Comments from other class participants shed further light on the mystery and beauty of the mind-body connection. One participant said her entire emotional attitude changed when she focused on being aware of her breathing, and allowing it to be ever softer and deeper. She said she became more accepting of events and people around her, and more giving.

The truth is, that restricted breathing—which most of us suffer from—is synonymous with a guarded, slightly defensive or judgmental attitude toward the world. That attitude, which we may not even notice because it tends to be habitual and unconscious, nonetheless diminishes the quality of our lives. When we open up our breathing, we also open ourselves to emotional receptivity. The world becomes a more beautiful place.

Yet another participant realized that she had to struggle to relax her breathing at deeper levels, and that this very relaxation scared her because it involved her in giving up control. And it is true: the more relaxed our breathing, the more deeply we surrender any sense of control. Consequently, simple breathing techniques can challenge us to recognize and confront the control needs that are part of living through our egos instead of our higher selves.

Interestingly enough, letting go into deeply relaxed breathing is a profoundly spiritual act. Instead of breathing our breath, we feel the breath breathing us, moving through us. We realize then that we are part of something much larger, and more powerful, than our individual selves. We let ourselves enter the flow of that larger being.

We let go, and once we give over our fear of losing control, we discover that by letting go we are truly free. For we have no more resistance to living. Since our resistance to life is the primary source of our pain, by eliminating our resistance, we learn to enter into life more fully, and with greater joy.

So you see: by using your mind to explore the way you live in your body, and by learning to listen to your body's rhythms and to experience its inner wisdom, you find not only physical health but also emotional balance and spiritual freedom. By learning to immerse yourself in and love your body, you eventually learn to love all of life.

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