

# Relaxing the body

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19 November 2022



We live in a world that is obsessed with achievement and success. Even meditation is often seen purely as a way of optimising our brain function to be more materially successful in this world. Just go into a bookshop and look for the section on self-improvement – the shelves are groaning under the weight of books telling you how meditation improves your health, body and mind and therefore your bank balance.

I don't deny that it is absolutely important to look after your body and your mind to keep them in optimum health. Even Evagrius said: *'Our holy and most ascetic master [Macarius the Great] stated that the monk should always live as if he were to die tomorrow but at the same time that he should treat his body as if he were to live with it for many years to come.'* Looking after the body with the right kind of food in modest quantities and with appropriate physical exercise such as Yoga, Tai Chi/Chi Kung is therefore undeniably important.

Sure, it is possible to use meditation purely for its health benefits, of which research has proven there are many. Of course it is wonderful to stop the endlessly chattering mind and release stress and tension. It will feel great to have 'time out' from the concerns, anxieties, hopes and fears that generally beset us and to stop the drain of energy of a mind going round and round in circles.

But that would be a missed opportunity; there is much more to meditation than its physiological effects on the body. For a serious practitioner care of the body and relaxation is seen as an essential preparation, enabling the real purpose of meditation, namely the total transformation of your mind and of the way we look at reality. In doing so, we discover the spiritual part of our being and our connection to the Source of all Being. To do that, meditation needs to be a spiritual discipline involving solitude and silence, in which we let go off all sense experiences, images, emotions and thoughts – in other words our ‘ego’. Only when we have reconnected with our spiritual essence, our ‘self’, can we live a fulfilling and meaningful life. Our action then flows from our awareness of the Divine, from our connectedness with and concern for others.

Compassion is the true sign that our mind is being transformed. In the words of Evagrius: *‘Happy is the monk who views the welfare and progress of all men and women with as much joy as if it were his own.’*

For this transformation to happen we only need to prepare ourselves by stilling the body and the mind. Then we can be open to the work of the Spirit. For it is her work: *‘The Holy Spirit takes compassion on our weakness, and though we are impure she often comes to visit us. If she should find our spirit praying to her out of love for the Truth, she then descends and dispels the whole army of thoughts that beset it.’*

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