GETTING REAL ABOUT EXHAUSTION
by Chris McKenna

“As modern humans, our average, day-to-day nervous system set point is hovering somewhere around the edge of the fight-or-flight response,” Steve Hoskinson, a clinical psychologist and trauma expert, noted at a recent training. To put it another way, the state of low- to medium-grade anxiety and stress has become so pervasive in us that it is “the new normal.” Even for those of us who have been practicing a long time, it can be shocking to really check in and see how much of our daily life we spend in some kind of low-grade, contracted stress response.

Our collective inability to ground and discharge this accrued stress creates the backlog that we get to “enjoy” each time we practice—the somatic knots in the abdominal area, the ghost-like pressures in different parts of the head and body, the cascade of disorganized and repetitive images and thoughts.

This accrued backlog in our biology births “the great companion” of chronic stress—a sense of being tired all the time. Our biological system gets stuck in an oscillating cycle between various forms of stress arousal and a deeply under-resourced state of exhaustion.

I currently spend the majority of my professional life designing and implementing mindfulness programs for some of the most mentally, emotionally and physically dysregulated environments in this culture—public schools, juvenile detention facilities and youth and family service agencies. This stress and exhaustion “package” is the first thing I’m presented with in 99% of my training work in these environments, and I’ve had to fundamentally change how I introduce mindfulness practice to accommodate it.

One change, which I’m sharing here as a stand-alone practice, is an emphasis on the mini-self-retreat. With a few modifications, it tracks Shinzen Young’s idea of doing extended doses of practice about once a month in your own living space.

Given the chronic exhaustion many of us carry, we need a long, insulated
period of time where we can let ourselves completely soften, ground and recalibrate. After this system reset, right mindfulness and right concentration become more accessible because we have reestablished basic, normal physiological functioning. Here are my basic guidelines for doing this:

**The Bathrobe Hermit—Becoming Intimate with Unstructured Time**

Block out at least two hours (three to five would be better) on a day off. First and most importantly, remember that the mini-self-retreat is not a call to enroll in some expensive weekend workshop. Carve out some private space where you live that’s quiet, keep your robe or pajamas on, burn some incense, take refuge in the Triple Gem, toss a bunch of cushions on the floor, and tell everyone else to leave you alone. This may not be possible every week or even every other week, but if it’s not possible once a month, I recommend looking closely at your priorities. You are way too busy.

For at least the first hour, assume a comfortable supine position and focus on surrendering completely to the force of gravity. Allow the “weight” of the gravitational field to sink, release, and soften the muscles and tendons of the body. Throw out all the usual cautions about the need to combat sleepiness. Do not resist the haze, the confused mind-states, the leftover emotions and the general sense of being an overly tired or restless mess. You are. Own it. But approach it with a different view. Rather than thinking you’re going to “nail that first meditation,” start from the view that in the first hour you are going to be a complete, hazy mess. You need to recover normal and that is never a neat and tidy process when you’re out of whack.

Trust that your nervous system wants to unwind into a state of freer, more open and relaxed attention. The tension, restlessness and exhaustion are created by the personality structure in its endless attempts to be and do things in the so-called outside world. Our biology has no interest in holding onto these states and, given the chance, knows how to intelligently release them.

The process of release is characterized by the oscillation between short moments of mindful awareness and a tired, disassociated mental haze. The main commitment is to lie there anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours until the tired haze has completed itself. You may also find yourself completely “going under” during this time; when the body is starved for rest, sleep can often be
experienced as a kind of blackout state.

You know the discharge process is nearing an end when the softness, openness and aliveness in the bones, tissues and energies of the body become foreground in your awareness. You feel simultaneously more spacious and more aware of the intensity of inner sensation. The boundary between you and the so-called outside world seems softer.

It is from that place of softness that an authentic (versus endlessly compulsive) exploration of seated meditation can occur. As you transition from the lying-down position to the seated posture, your main emphasis is on maintaining softness and receptivity as you begin to increase concentration. You now actually have the energy reserves to concentrate. Spend at least another hour exploring what it is like to gather and sustain attention from a place of absolute softness.

Finally, bring the softness and sustained attention you’ve cultivated in sitting to your walking. Let the energy you’ve stored up begin to circulate and “play.” Your mini-retreat reveals that the four postures (sitting, standing, lying, walking) can be experienced as a soft and continuous circle.

These practice recommendations are definitely part of a larger context. Within the Indian, Chinese and Tibetan traditions, there is a long-established focus on the hygienic aspects of being human—particularly on how we sleep, eat, rest and move around. Whether it’s Tibetan texts on sleep, or the aspects of the vinaya (monastic code) that provide structure to the daily routine, there is a kind of right conduct of caring for the body that is built into many of the Buddhist practice lineages.

In working with the stress of modernity, I believe that these practices take on a new level of importance. Far too often, we overlay meditative practices (particularly concentrative practices) on top of chronic depletion and exhaustion with the idea that we can cut through these states with sufficient effort. What’s happening in many cases is that we’re confusing chronic exhaustion with sloth and torpor (thinamiddha)—one of the traditional hindrances to practice referenced in the Buddhist suttas. In the process, we’re also adding an additional layer of unskillful, contracted effort over an already exhausted and dysregulated nervous system.

In reality, most people sleep through the first few sessions of a retreat
because they are chronically overtired, not because they are struggling with the third hindrance. An easy way to verify this is to follow the practice guidelines above and simply let yourself “go under.” My experience is that rather than being taken further into some dull, disassociated state (what the sloth-and-torpor hindrance is warning us against), most modern meditators emerge with a calmer, more stable physiological base on which they can develop skillful meditative states. I’ve come to see this process as one of the key preliminary practices of our time.

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