

FINDING ZERO.....
October 2006 newsletter

How can we understand the consistent pressure that so many people feel? How is it that as the basic needs for more and more people are being satisfied that this inner pressure is increasing? What is the antidote to the negative 'stress' that so many feel as a more or less constant condition?

A story I recently heard:

In the Himalayan country of Ladakh, the values of the western world have recently had a radical influence on the lives of many of the inhabitants. It seems that a well-intentioned aid organization recognized that most of the farmers could produce only enough milk, cheese and vegetables to satisfy their local communities. Realizing that cows could produce a lot more milk than the indigenous yaks and that a rototiller could plough more fields than the simple animal drawn plows, these 'improvements' were introduced. Now, the farmers could make surplus cheese and also have other crops to bring to the big market each week. Of course now that they had these businesses and bank accounts, they didn't have as much time with each other. For example, until 10 years ago, weddings lasted 15 days. Now they last one day. People are spending more time alone and in small partnerships and no longer functioning as whole villages helping each other. Encouraging this growth of wealth has turned time into a commodity that is in short supply. Now they are much busier as they are saving time. (As I like to say, the number of labor saving devices a person has is always inversely correlated with their amount of free time).

Now, we can imagine certain benefits from these economic changes and my point is not about capitalism, wealth or modern machinery. My main point is as follows: this sense of time pressure is one of the main challenges for modern humans. Time pressure is part of the general internal pressure that most people experience on a regular basis. While simplifying our lives can be part of the solution, I believe that for most of us the evolutionary imperative is asking for something more.

In my seminars and private practice, I see a tremendous variety of people with many different diagnoses and complaints. Unbelievable as it may seem almost all of these problems are connected to, exacerbated by or caused by incessant inner pressure. By pressure I don't just mean the psychological feeling of being pressed; I am referring also to physiological pressures expressed as constriction in the tissues, blood vessels, organs, joints, etc.

Let's examine this briefly from a somatic point of view. Our nervous system is designed to function rhythmically with a time of activity followed by a time of rest. When the system is in rhythm its natural healing capacities can handle all but the most extreme conditions. For so many of us rather than: workrest, demand.....rest, effort.....rest, there is something like: on, on, on, on, on, on, on, crash.....on, on, on, on, on, on, crash.....

Some people think that relaxing from work with a television show, a movie, checking emails, listening to recorded music or creating something on the computer will give them the rest that is needed. While these activities might be enjoyable and even nourishing, from the point of view of the nervous system you are still in 'on' mode. The electronic stimulation requires a kind of brain state that does not allow for deep rest. I am not casting judgment on any of these activities, some I can enjoy wholeheartedly. I am suggesting that we need to use our ATTENTIONAL skills to intentionally find the ZERO POINT. For some this is done through hobbies such as gardening, running or walking. For many, even when engaged in these activities the same kind of internal state of attention is maintained, decreasing the health benefits. (You know the old story of the 'efficiency expert', spending the day timing everybody at their various functions coming home to make love with his wife.....).

In "The Embodied Life", we work with cultivating the conscious shifts of attention that allow the nervous system to find balance. Amazingly, the system does not need significant time to make these changes; it needs regularity, frequency and the knowledge of some particularly effective entry points.

Examples of these include:

- Shifting the use of the eyes through certain kinds of smooth eye movements,
- Changing the breathing pattern and rhythm,
- Consciously shifting one's interest through different domains of experience such as attending to visual, auditory, kinesthetic phenomena in conscious ways (the brain loves change);
- Changing back and forth between focused to diffuse attention,
- Getting on the ground (horizontal in the gravitational field) and moving slowly and with attention. When this is done without ambition or effort it is most effective for these purposes.

There are many ways to create a 'pattern interruption' from our locked in, compulsive neurological state. This shifting is central to de-pressurizing the system and is one of the prime health benefits of meditation. Of course meditation is much more than this. When one experiences significant interruption in the constant, unconscious 'thinking' and self-perpetuating inner dialogue, the organism can really enter a restorative, open place I call 'the zero point' or 'entering the vastness'. The state of 'being' requires a de-emphasis on 'doing'.

Those of you who have done these seminars know some of the skills that you can call upon. Please remember how essential it is to develop practices that support and sustain your inner harmony. Given the rhythms of our culture and the collective trance state that is dominant, it is a revolutionary act to take responsibility for your own inner life. While withdrawing from the dominant society is one potential option, we can also learn to mobilize the tremendous recuperative capacity inherent within us. Ultimately it means remembering who you are and not who you think you are. I encourage you in doing this NOW.