

## The Art of Relaxation

It was after coming to her first yoga class with me one day a year or so ago that my sister Anita remarked “*You know, that’s the most relaxed I think I’ve been since Alec was born.*” She was referring to her son who was about three and a half at the time. Her comment really got me thinking. It was a great realisation for both of us. My sister realised just how stressed she had become and I, given that I thought of my sister as a healthy, well-balanced individual, realised more than ever how important it was to teach people how to relax!

Relaxation sounds easy. We might think we’re relaxing when we’re not doing much, like reading the paper, taking a stroll, sleeping or going on holidays. But relaxation is more than the times when we physically unwind or get away from work. Most importantly, true relaxation involves also a release from mental tension, where our incessant thinking and mind-chatter are eased for a period of time that allows for complete rest and revitalisation. Now think again, when was the last time that you truly relaxed?

Yoga’s relaxation and meditation techniques work by taking your mind away from emotionally charged thoughts and directing it to activities that are emotionally neutral, such as awareness of your breath and different parts of the body. Try these simple techniques and notice how you feel afterwards:

**Practice deep breathing.** Sit quietly and comfortably with an upright spine. Close your eyes. Focus on breathing from just above your belly-button. Take long slow inhales and exhales. Ignore any thoughts that arise and continue to focus on your breathing for up to 10 minutes.

**Put your legs up the wall.** Lie with your back on the floor, your bottom against the wall and your straight legs up the wall. Allow the feet to fall apart naturally. Turn the hands palms-up, away from the body. Focus on the natural rise and fall of your belly as you breathe. Rest here, completely still, for 5-15 minutes at the end of the day.

The physical and mental relaxation practices that we do in yoga and meditation classes may only last for an hour or so, but its benefits leave a lasting impression on the mind. When practiced regularly, just like learning any new skill, the mind learns to handle situations in a different way and cultivates the ability to relax under all conditions. This frees our mental energy for the things that really matter to us - and helps us to permanently adopt a naturally more relaxed and happier attitude to life.

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