



WHAT IS RELAXATION?

The body has three basic reactions to everyday life:

- The stress response (identified in the 1930's by Dr Hans Selye)
- The 'shut down' response (identified by Peter Gilligan as collapsed relaxation in "What is Tai Chi?" published by Singing Dragon, 2010)
- The relaxation response (identified by Herbert Benson in 1975)

STRESS

The stress response is designed to protect the body by sending it into short term survival mode (fight or flight). This is a normal and necessary function. The problem nowadays is that we can get stuck in the stress response for things that don't really threaten our survival and we have learnt to stay in the stress response for extended periods of time.

SHUT DOWN

When we flop in a heap in front of the TV or lie down to have a 'rest', our circulation systems (blood, lymph and energy or 'Chi' in Chinese medical system) are designed to react by gradually slowing down until the bodies' organs and muscles go into the 'shut down response' (sleep or hibernation). Both of these functions are necessary – sleep to re generate our cells and immune system and hibernation to protect the body in times of severe food shortages.

RELAXATION

The relaxation response is also designed to slow down the breathing and bodily functions. But it requires more than flaccid muscles and inactivity. In general our lives have too much inactivity and we are too sedentary...glued to our desks, computers and tv's, driving everywhere in our cars. Rushing about being busy So when we try to relax by doing nothing we are actually encouraging our bodies to shut down.

Unlike the stress response and the shut down response, which kick in automatically, we have to encourage are bodies to stimulate the relaxation response and it requires us to practise it until it becomes automatic.

HOW TO RELAX - DYNAMIC RELAXATION

Dynamic relaxation is a process designed to teach the body and the mind to access the relaxation response. It teaches our bodies to focus on constantly making the necessary adjustments to balance and rebalance our stress and relaxation levels so that we can cope with our busy lives in a calm, alert and energised way by simply focussing the mind on the activities of the body. If we are sitting or standing still, we focus your mind on the movements of our breathing, if we are moving we focus on the movements made by the muscles. For the relaxation response to kick in, our muscles and circulation systems need to be mildly active which is why we



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practise relaxation sitting, standing and walking. This keeps our systems working, nourishing and protecting the body.

The essence of Dynamic Relaxation is that we learn not to relax too much or have too much stress held in our muscles and our mind. The balancing of these two responses is the Chinese concept of 'Song', pronounced 'sung' which describes how the Tai Chi movements and breathing encourage the circulation of blood, lymph and energy by letting the muscles and the mind be alternately worked and rested. This in turn triggers the circulation systems so that they balance and re balances the activities of the body.

ARE WE THERE YET???

How do we know when we have the relaxation response?

We can feel it.

Everyone is different and the techniques of relaxing that work for you may not work for others. But you know when you've reached the 'song' point. It's that 'Ahhhh' feeling you get when you are very cold and you walk into a warm room or out into the sunshine. That instant letting go in the body and the mind to let the warmth in. Or if you are too hot and walk into a cool room it's that feeling of energy flooding into your body and your mind becoming more alert and energized.

Using the movements of Tai Chi to get the relaxation response keeps your clever, active mind occupied and engaged on the intricacies of Tai Chi. So then we can learn to use the breath to extend those 'Ahhhh' moments and incorporate them into the Tai Chi movements to get the 'flow' that Tai Chi is famous for.

If we get too worried about getting the movements 'right' then we won't get the flow. It's important to let ourselves gradually and progressively experience the Tai Chi movements without trying too hard and then with practise it will all become an effortless flow that refreshes and revitalizes the body and the mind.