

mindful

taking time for what matters

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Taking Tension Out of Attention

Thanks to computers, smartphones, television, and other technology, our senses are extremely busy. The more our bodies strain to pay attention, the more our minds space-out. **Chris McKenna** suggests ways to help us go from tense and strained to relaxed and focused.

“You need to concentrate harder!”

How many times did I hear this phrase—or some variant of it—during school. My second grade teacher delivered it as a hostile bark from the back of the room during study hour, and I immediately felt it in my gut. It made me feel like my classmates and I were being lined-up against the wall, bolt-upright, in military formation. We felt a palpable sense of what I would now call “nervous system activation”, and it was definitely not conducive to absorbing and retaining information.

For many of us the act of paying attention is intertwined with a subtle (or gross) sense of strain, a physiological effort to pull it all together, and—in many cases—a low-grade fight-or-flight response.

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Chris McKenna is the Program Director of Mindful Schools and has taught mindfulness practices to diverse youth & adult populations.

We felt threatened. In remembering his own schooling, Keith Johnstone, one of the masters of modern improvisational theatre, recalled: “If you screw your face up and bite on your pencil to show you were ‘trying,’ the teacher may write out the answer for you. In my school, if you sat relaxed in thought, you were likely to get swiped on the back of the head.”

Over my years of teaching meditation in youth mental health, juvenile justice, and K-12 education, I see two main modes that people shift between on the attention spectrum, in their effort to be present.

The first mode is characterized by the coupling of contracted, unskillful effort and focused attention. In this mode, we usually bring much more effort than we need as we attempt to stay connected to a mental or physical task. Signs of this way of acting are fairly easy to observe from the outside: tight and shallow breathing, deep tension in the facial muscles, strain in the eyes, unconscious contraction or gripping in the hands and shoulders, chest, and →

stomach, and an off-balance posture. We don't look like we're comfortable in our own body.

Coupling this kind of strain with attention for even short periods of time automatically produces the second mode: *disassociation*. In short, our mind and body get separated. Paying attention unskillfully uses up a lot energy resources, and in so doing we can end up in a kind of spaced-out haze. And then we try to revive our attention with ever more strained efforts. We wear out again. We get tired and hazy. Then we try to revive. And so on the cycle goes, back and forth, between trying too hard and checking out. It wears us down.

To alter this pattern we need to decouple *strain* from *attention*. To put it another way, stabilizing attention needs to be married to a soft, open and deeply relaxed body, and mind. And of course, mindfulness meditation is thought of by many as the gold standard for developing a consistently relaxed body and mind and developing good synchrony between our senses and our thought processes. And yet, when we learn meditation—particularly if it's not taught effectively and gives short shrift to what's going on in our body—we end up in the same old cycle of binging ourselves on strained efforts to pay attention and relieving ourselves of the pain by spacing out.

In *The Attention Revolution*, B. Alan Wallace notes that establishing this base of relaxation may be significantly more important in our practice than it was in pre-modern contemplative traditions:

“When Tibetan meditation manuals advise beginners to focus their attention firmly, the instructions are aimed at a very different reader than the average city-dweller in the 21st century. Before we can develop attentional stability, we first need to learn to relax.”

But how do we relax?

To address that question with meditators, I rely on a series of principles and practices that help us to take the tension out of attention.

The overall theme of these practices is that, to get more grounded in body sensations and breathing (the meat and potatoes of modern mindfulness), it is often wise to pay attention to what is going on “above the neck” as well. How we engage our sense organs and head plays a crucial role in our ability to relax, open, and stabilize awareness.



3 Practices to Relax the Eyes, Face, and Head

Thanks to prolonged computer and smartphone use, TV watching, and other forms of focusing that were little practiced before the 20th century, our senses are extremely busy. They're conditioned to process a steady stream of information. When we're asked to pull back from that stream, a withdrawal response can ensue, one that's a little bit like detoxing from drug use.

After two hours of fairly unconscious meandering around the internet, we might experience a gap where our awareness and sense organs spontaneously wake up and attune to the inner and outer sensory environment. Some things that keep us from surrendering to this gap of self-awareness are the unconscious mental, physical, and emotional contractions that have accrued during our sojourn into *The Huffington Post* and our friend's Facebook baby pictures.

After a brief moment of relief that comes from being back in the present moment, we find ourselves having to pay the toll of the last two hours by experiencing any of a series of unpleasant sensations: tightness in the forehead and neck, a sense that the eyes are exhausted but simultaneously wanting new content to focus on, ambient discomfort throughout the body, and fatigue mixed with currents of compulsive energy looking for new objects and activities to attach to.

The three practices below work with the role our eyes, facial muscles, and head position have in cultivating stable relaxation and attention. They ask us to make micro-adjustments to how our focus is affecting our body. Working with them immediately after a period of prolonged unconsciousness—and before attempting to re-direct attention deeper into the body—can be extremely helpful. →

When Tibetan meditation manuals advise beginners to focus their attention firmly, the instructions are aimed at a very different reader than the average city-dweller in the 21st century.

1 Release the Eyes

In both formal mindfulness practice and daily life, notice the tendency for the energy of the eyes to aggressively “grasp” at external reality. This feeling can also be described as constantly “going out to get” objects in the visual field rather than letting objects “come to you.”

Whenever you notice this pattern, practice the following exercises:

1

Allow the muscles of the eyes to completely release. If you notice that the muscles are particularly tight or fatigued, do a few very gentle clockwise and counter-clockwise circles with your eyes. You can also lightly visualize any excess tension draining down from the eye sockets, through your body and into the ground.

2

As the eyes let go, become attuned to the spaciousness of the visual field. Appreciate that the eyes can take in information with absolutely no effort. You don’t need to do the

seeing. Instead, your attention meets the visual field with soft awareness. The softness of the visual field gives rise to a sense of being balanced and oriented in space. Mindfully orienting to the visual field creates an immediate sense of safety and engagement with our environment. It is for this reason that it is one of the first and most important tools taught in many forms for trauma therapy.

3

Appreciate that by doing nothing but consciously releasing the eyes, relaxation, spaciousness, and attention are all enhanced.

During daily life, notice that when you return to the present moment after a period of dissociation, it is often the visual field that wakes up first. There is a sense of suddenly seeing your environment, sometimes after hours of being totally unconscious of it. In this situation, giving attention to the vividness of the visual field—even for a few seconds—is a great entry point for resuming your practice of mindfulness of the breath or body.

When you study the facial physiology of babies, the complete lack of excess tension, the “receptivity” in the facial tissues, and the general sense of equanimity are striking.



2 Release the Face

Closely related to the grasping patterns many of us find in our visual field is the chronic strain and tension present in the facial muscles. Some of this is caused by the way we use the eyes themselves (particularly strain in the forehead). Other patterns can simply be the result of “holding” the facial muscles in certain habitual ways.

Like the eyes, whenever you notice strain or holding in the face, practice completely releasing the face. Do this many times a day. In particular, focus on the following:

1

Let the flesh of the cheeks hang (you can lightly visualize weight pulling them down and releasing them).

2

Allow the forehead to soften (you can lightly visualize the sense of tension draining down as with the eyes).

3

Feel how fine the sensations are in the lips and the tongue (the mouth is the site of some of the most delicate sensations in the body and for this reason has been featured prominently in meditation instructions across many traditions).

4

After playing with these releases for a while, you will notice that they become second nature. Therefore, over time, shifts in attention become coupled with a softening response that has a powerful effect on the entire system.

A good reference point for these adjustments is the face of a baby. When you study the facial physiology of babies and other mammals, the complete lack of excess tension, the “receptivity” in the facial tissues, and the general sense of equanimity are striking. →

3 Position the Head and Neck

The final practice in this series concerns the head itself. F.M. Alexander—the developer of the Alexander Technique—observed that in all vertebrates there is a dynamic, ever-changing relationship between the head, neck, and back. Some people interfere with this basic relationship by using the wrong muscles (recruited from the spine, shoulder blades, and collarbone) to adjust the position of the head, resulting in issues with breathing, moving, speaking, and other difficulties.

The key to working with the position of the head (both in meditation and daily life) is to start with the sense of spaciousness, relaxation, and delicacy you've achieved from releasing the eyes and face. Just releasing these areas should already produce a sense of spaciousness. Aggressive jerking and adjustments will not deliver the results we seek.

In working with the head, we are going for a state of dynamic receptivity, not rigidity. The easiest way to describe what we are going for is the sense that the skull and head are softly floating on top of the spine. Here are three ways to encourage this:

1

Whenever you remember, consciously release the tendency to “hold” the head. Release it and let it micro-adjust and softly settle on top of the spine. Also, bring more general awareness to the atlanto-occipital joint—the place where head meets the spine.

2

Lightly shift your attention to a place roughly in the center of your head (a few inches back into your skull from your eyes). I call this place “the cockpit.” You will know you've found it because there is an unmistakable sense of neutral witnessing associated with it. When you find this neutral feeling, simply allow your head to re-adjust around the feeling.

If I've been working on the computer in an unconscious posture for a while and I find this place of attention, my head usually does a few small turns followed by a subtle “lifting” movement in the entire skull.

3

The final and most commonly taught way of arriving at the floating feeling is to actually visualize a force lifting your head upward. For example, you can imagine a string pulling the upper palate of your mouth upward (encouraging a subtle lengthening in your neck and head). The downside of this technique is that it can become too much of a conscious act of doing something, meaning there is a danger of adding yet another layer of artificial compensation on top of the patterns we are looking to decondition. We're going for subtle re-calibrations here. Awareness and attention are our primary tools. ●

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