

The Art of Mental Training

Chapter 7

Breathing, Relaxation, and Imagery

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Breathing, relaxation, and imagery are mentioned throughout the lessons so often because they're such fundamentally important tools for the Warrior/Champion. I remember how often Leo-tai spoke of all three. They're all crucial in order to help create the Ideal Mental Climate from which peak performance springs forth.

Sometimes clients tend to get over-analytical about the “right” way to practice breathing or the “right” way to go deep into relaxation. It's always fun to show them that in reality, it's much easier than they ever thought it could be!

First let's learn about breathing.

I have a memory of Leo-tai from a time when I had been watching him high up on a mountain, and so near the edge that I worried he might fall. He was practicing what he called his focused breathing, his hands sometimes flowing to the rhythm of his breathing in slow and balanced circular motions, and sometimes not.

He had taught me to do just as he was doing, to draw the air in deeply and slowly to the bottom of my lungs through my nose, while expanding the diaphragm. Then, after holding it momentarily, he slowly pushed the air out of the lungs by drawing the diaphragm in. He explained that it's important to let the air out through a relaxed and slightly opened mouth while keeping the tip of the tongue pressed lightly against the ridge behind the front teeth, with the tongue touching the roof of the mouth.

Afterwards I asked him what was going through his mind as he practiced his breathing.

“Nothing,” he said, “I just try to observe my breathing: that's all. If a thought comes to me, I pay it no attention and it soon flows away. The more I focus on the breathing, the more I observe the breathing, the quieter my thoughts become. And also, notice that I can practice the breathing without any form whatsoever, whenever I need.”

“What do you mean, without any form?” I asked.

“I can practice my focused breathing whenever I want, even now as I sit and visit with you.” He told me. “I practice focused breathing to help keep me centered—to help bring me back to the present. I can do it without form. You do not see me moving around or flowing as a tai-chi master does do you? Yet still I am practicing my focused breathing.”

I’ll never know why, but the sureness and simplicity of the words that he spoke that day have never left me. I’m grateful for that because I’ve learned through experience that it’s through the focused breathing that he taught me that I’ve always been able to begin to achieve the mental control or focus that was required for whatever serious challenge I may have been facing at the time.

So from now on, whenever focused breathing is mentioned in any of our other lessons you’ll know exactly what we are describing, how it’s done, and why it’s part of the mix of tools that helps us achieve mental control. It’s important to practice focused breathing if one hopes to ever be able to harness the power of the technique.

There is a second important concept mentioned throughout the Art of Mental Training that Leo-tai never tired of explaining, time and time again, year after year. Let me explain as he did to me: the concept of relaxation . . . both mental and physical.

What do we mean by relaxation? And why is relaxation practice so important for the athlete and mental warrior? Relaxation matters because when used with mental imagery it facilitates and allows our inner (subconscious) mind to clearly see our success imagery and feel our success feelings.

It’s only when we are in a deep state of relaxation that the conscious mind quits acting as a filter for the inner mind. It’s when the critical conscious mind is set aside through relaxation (for several minutes) that our Imagineering can reach the inner mind directly. Among other things, the inner mind is a goal-striving mechanism. Show it your goals through imagery and feelings as having been already accomplished . . . and it sets out to help you make it so.

And that’s critically important because through relaxation and the use of some Imagineering, the mental athlete is able to tap an inner resource designed to help him achieve his goals.

Coming from within, your motivation and volition become stronger and more focused. From within, you’ll soon find yourself automatically doing all the things that need to be done in order for you to accomplish your goals. When the inner mind is able to see what you want, it’s able to help you get what you want. Relaxation skills are what open up the lines of communications between the inner mind and your Imagineering.

So what does relaxation practice entail? And how do you practice setting up these lines of communication?

The ability to achieve a state of deep relaxation easily and quickly comes only through practice. After a few weeks of practice one can usually enter a deep state of relaxation within a few minutes of deciding to do so—and for some it can happen even quicker than that.

I tell my clients to consider practicing and developing this skill by using the following process. I remind them that if they just allow the process to happen naturally, then it will. You can't try to force relaxation, but with practice anyone can learn how to slip into relaxation quite easily.

Move to a quiet space where you won't be disturbed. Lie down on your back with your feet slightly apart, arms slightly extended from your body, palms facing down, and make sure you are as comfortable as possible before proceeding. (In other words: no tight or restrictive clothing, temperature not too hot, not too cold, etc. Get comfortable).

Now, fix your eyes on a point above you on the ceiling. Remaining as still as you can, begin by taking three long, deep, deep, breaths, inhaling through your nose. Hold each breath temporarily, and then exhale slowly through your mouth. And with each breath that you release, I want you to feel a wave of relaxation begin to overwhelm you as you let go and begin to enjoy the process.

As you exhale the third breath, gently let your eyelids begin to close. Now, for the next ten breaths, imagine your eyelids getting heavier and heavier. I want you to mentally repeat the word "deeper" as you exhale and let all tension and thoughts disappear every time you breathe out. Let yourself go deeper into relaxation with each breath that you let out. If your mind drifts, that's okay; just gently bring your attention back to learning how to relax and how to let go as you exhale and mentally repeat the word "deeper". After ten easy breaths you are ready to begin focusing on relaxing the muscles of every part of your body.

Start with your toes and begin moving up your body as total relaxation begins to take over. Focus on relaxing each and every muscle in your body. From toes to calves, to thighs, to abs, to chest, to back, to arms, to shoulders, and even to your neck: every muscle letting go and completely relaxing. Continue all the way up to the scalp and facial muscles. Visualize each muscle loosening, and feel a wave of deep relaxation flowing deeply into all of your muscles, into all of your body. Allow yourself to go deeper into relaxation with each breath that you take.

Don't rush it, don't force it; simply allow your muscles to turn loose, go limp and relax naturally as you experience the serenity of total relaxation. (Sometimes clients tell me that a leg or arm twitched or move involuntarily for an instant and they ask me about it. That's nothing to be concerned about; it's only the deep hidden tension being triggered and released from where it has been hiding. The release of this hidden tension is both therapeutic and healthy.)

Now allow yourself to enjoy this state of relaxation for about twenty minutes, maybe a little more. Drift in this sea of healthy relaxation and during this time, while in this deeply relaxed state, watch yourself as in a movie, and project images in your mind's eye of you achieving what you desire. See it as being true. *Feel* it. Show your mind through images and feelings what you will accomplish. See it clearly. Watch yourself accomplishing it. Experience it inwardly as if it were already true.

Remember, that now, through deep relaxation, you've opened a direct channel to your subconscious mind. Feed it images and feelings of success in your "movies" that it will then set out to help you accomplish. With this practice you are setting a powerful force in motion from deep inside that will help propel you towards the success you envision.

After twenty minutes or so of deep relaxation and "success conditioning" through your use of your mental images and feelings, it's time to either bring yourself back to a state of full awareness—or else time to simply allow yourself to slip into restful sleep. That's up to you.

If it's time to sleep, just let yourself doze off. However, if you need to bring yourself back to a state of full awareness, then this is an easy way to do it. Imagine a staircase with five steps going up. See yourself slowly climbing up the steps, and tell yourself that with each step you take that you feel more refreshed, more alert, and more aware. And, that when you reach the top step, you'll feel relaxed, refreshed, and rejuvenated, completely alert, and ready to carry on with your day.

When you reach the last step, let your eyelids open, inhale completely, and stretch. (Of course, if you are practicing your relaxation during the day within a busy schedule - there's no harm in using an alarm clock just to help ensure that you get back to your schedule on time in case the deep relaxation ever leads to an unscheduled nap.)

That's how the Mental Warrior uses relaxation and imagery. He doesn't do it once. Instead he incorporates relaxation and success imagery into his training routine often enough over several weeks and months so that the success conditioning has a chance to actually be absorbed by the subconscious mind and to take root, thus helping to improve self-belief, self-confidence, and performance. Through practice like this, the Mental Warrior is able to engage and use the power of his subconscious mind in order to help him achieve his goals.

Remember what Leo-tai told me: "The Mental Warrior learns about focused breathing, relaxation, and imagery—and then he sets off to actually use them."