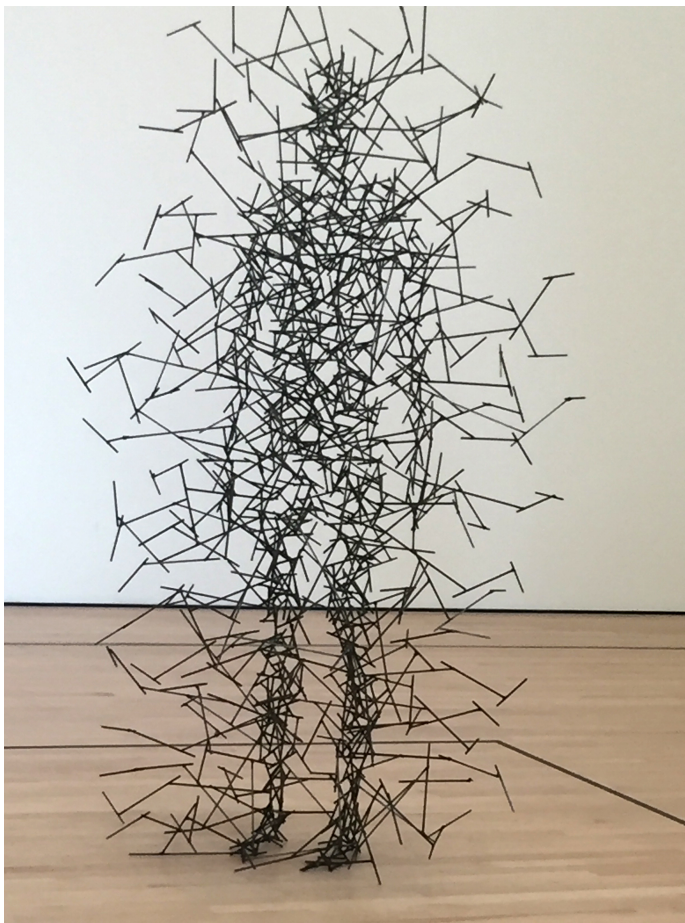


Practice Tips for Nurturing the Body

By Shu Liu, Integral Leadership cohort member

To keep the body in good health is a duty... otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear.

— Gautama Buddha



What is the Body?

The body is made up of complex and interconnected systems. So much of what the body does is autonomous that it's easy to forget about it until something goes wrong, maybe in the form of an injury or illness. When we inquire what the body is and does, we see a deeper beauty and mystery: the interrelatedness of the body, mind, heart and soul. Our physiology affects the quality of our thoughts, the vibrancy of our emotions and our connectedness with spirit. In this article, we'll aim to develop a better understanding of a critical component in our body--the nervous system--and share some practice tips on how to engage with it for our optimal health and performance.

Self-Regulation and the Autonomic Nervous System

Modern life is filled with stressful stimuli. Regulating our mental and emotional states in response to stressors starts with understanding our nervous system, specifically our autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS is responsible for functions like regulating our breathing, heart rate, and digestion, and operates mostly subconsciously without our control.

The ANS has two antagonistic parts: the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS). The SNS upregulates the body by increasing heart rate, breath rate and directing circulation to our limbs for fight or flight. This response is very useful in keeping us safe from physical threats but also gets triggered in more benign situations like public speaking. In contrast, the PSNS slows the heart and breath rates and directs blood flow back to our digestive and reproductive systems. Hence the PSNS's downregulating response is nicknamed "rest and digest."

The SNS also triggers the release of adrenaline and cortisol. Adrenaline can give us a boost of energy but if our bodies are constantly in an upregulated state, we can suffer adrenal fatigue and exhaustion. The stress hormone cortisol helps us focus and improves memory at low levels but too much make us feel anxious. Cortisol also increases our appetites and contributes to weight gain. So while the SNS does provide benefits, it needs to be moderated by the PSNS.

Practicing Self-Regulation

Most of us can benefit from strengthening our relaxation response. Because the functions of the PSNS are autonomous, we can't directly control our heart rate, our circulation or our hormones. However, we can control our breath, our muscles, and our attention - the gateways to inducing the relaxation response in the body.

Breath

One of the most important breathing techniques is diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing massages the vagus nerve to trigger the PSNS response. In ITP, diaphragmatic breathing is simply breathing into our Center. When practicing this breath, focus on maximizing the movement of the diaphragm by fully releasing the belly out on the inhale.

Another effective breathing technique is the Ujjayi breath or the ocean breath. The Ujjayi breath is performed by inhaling and exhaling through the nose with a soft constriction at the back of the throat like you're whispering or fogging up a pair of glasses. The Ujjayi breath also massages the vagus nerve and provides a soothing sound like rolling waves in the ocean.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

A great tool in the ITP kata is progressive muscle relaxation. This is performed by tensing and relaxing certain muscles, one group at a time. Often we are not even aware of when we are tense. By first tensing a muscle, we bring our attention to that body part. When we release the contraction, we're able to relax more deeply. The more we practice the relaxation response, the more accessible it is. Eventually, we won't need to

tense up before we let go. We can relax just by bringing our awareness to any places of tension.

Mindfulness

In order to use these tools, we need to have an awareness of our nervous systems. It's important to realize that the relaxed state is our default state. When we are not at threat, it is our natural state to feel calm, relaxed and at ease. Next time you feel very relaxed like after a good night of sleep, a hot bath, or a good yoga class, pay attention to your somatic experience, your bodily sensations. Perhaps you feel more sensitivity in the hands and feet, have tingling throughout the body, or experience an openness in the heart or belly. Continue to focus on those sensations in your everyday life and use them as indicators for when you're not relaxed and connected.

Each of us hold tension in different ways. It's important for us to discover what are our own habitual patterns of tension. Notice any feelings of anxiety, elevated heart rate, quickness and shallowness of breath, and muscle tension in the jaw, eyes, shoulders. Just as you studied the sensations of relaxation, also get curious about the sensations of tension. Only by getting to know your somatic experience intimately, can you catch the signals earlier on and engage your tools to self-regulate into a healthier and more balanced state.