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The Feeling of Me

Part Two

By Jae Gruenke

ARE YOUR SHOULDERS TENSE?

We all respond to the world around us all the time: our feelings about what we see, hear, and experience transform us inside and out. The more you become aware of this process, the more you'll have the information you need to live in a way that's true to yourself. A number of different movement practices facilitate this by helping you become aware of yourself without trying to change what you find; in my last column I looked at dance meditation, and here I'll tell you about my experiences with the Sounder Sleep System™. But before we look closely at any specific method, take a moment to explore yourself with the tools you already have.

Three or four times during the next day pay more attention than usual to how you feel. Check in with yourself while you're eating breakfast, waiting on a subway platform, in line somewhere, or at a traffic light. Notice how you feel in a meeting, during a conversation, or working at your desk.

Consider your emotional state, your breathing, how you are moving, standing, or sitting, and how your insides feel. Begin with the first thing you notice, then expand your awareness.

Do you feel comfortable? Do you have a sinking feeling in your stomach? Are you breathing in short gasps or long, easy waves? Are you fidgeting? Do you feel anxious, irritated, happy, excited? Does your back or neck hurt? Are your shoulders tense? Are you slouching, or are you bouncing up and down on your toes?

Once you noticed the first thing – whether it was your emotional state or your shoulders – was it easy or difficult to discover the rest? If you know your feelings first, it can be fascinating to see how your body is involved. Conversely, if you feel your shoulders or your guts or your breath first, this can often help you realize something about your emotions that you weren't aware of. Perhaps you realize that you don't trust the person you are talking to, or that you're more excited about a project than you thought.

Engaging in an awareness-oriented movement practice takes this kind of expanded self-knowledge to a deeper level. Such practices have many of the benefits of meditation, yet incorporate more fully all the aspects of yourself you explored in this exercise. Taking time during the day to pay attention to the feeling of performing gentle movements not only reveals truths about your usual physical and emotional state that you might otherwise miss, but also helps build the ability to be spontaneously true to yourself in every part of your life.

My own awareness of my level of stress, and how it interferes with my creativity and my sleep, was profoundly altered when I began practicing the Sounder Sleep System™. For this second part of my exploration of awareness-oriented movement practices, I studied the system with its developer, somatic sleep specialist Michael Krugman.

LETTING REST COME NATURALLY

“This method allows you to learn what good sleepers already know: how to relax and clear your mind and allow yourself to fall asleep. You can’t *try* to go to sleep. The minute there’s effort involved, you’re already doomed.”

Michael’s explanation helped me understand the curious indirectness of his class, and also how enjoyable and effective it is. Designed to evoke a state of profound relaxation through gentle, expressive movement, pleasure, and self awareness throughout the day and at bedtime, the Sounder Sleep System™ ultimately becomes a reeducation in the art of relaxation, and a set of tools anyone can use on their own to let sleep, rest, or meditation come naturally.

The group class begins with seated movements coordinated with breathing. Michael acts both as teacher and deejay, playing music he clearly adores and giving himself over completely to his movements. I follow his lead and sink into the groove as we bow forward and up, over and over again, our legs crossed in front of us on the floor. After a while, he invites us to close our eyes and move our hands, arms and torsos to the music however we like. At first it feels a little silly, but with no one watching it’s really satisfying to do as I like, shaping the air like a sculptor or moving sinuously like a belly dancer.

As we shift to lie on our backs for the next section of the class, I’m surprised to note how good I feel. I’m extraordinarily relaxed and comfortable. Michael later explains that the pleasure of dancing freely (but not strenuously) to music is a key part of the system, since it helps quiet the mind. Enjoyment and relaxation are closely related. The rippling movements through the spine and the rhythmic breathing also trigger deeply relaxing physiological changes.

Covered with gorgeous, filmy silk scarves for warmth, we learn a series of small movements to help us relax even more profoundly. Michael leads us through them step by step with primarily verbal instructions, so we can let our own senses guide our learning.

With our elbows resting on the ground, we move our forearms back and forth through the air so that our hands flop slowly to one side, then the other. At first the movement feels jerky to me, and I start to giggle as my hand suddenly flops forward. But gradually my sensitivity increases and I become absorbed in the gradual shift at my wrist as gravity moves my hand. It feels peculiar to allow my hand to be moved -- being aware as it slowly occurs and yet not needing to interfere. I begin to feel as relaxed as during a good massage. I yawn. I lay my hands down for a moment, and then I’m fast asleep. The music laces through my dreams, and my breath feels fresh in my spacious chest.

Walking home afterwards, I am still filled with delight and a feeling of sweetness. I take a path through the park and the nature around me fills my senses. Over the course of my walk, I have an insight into a problem I’ve been wrestling with. Overall, I feel wholly myself.

Relaxation is an extraordinary window to who you are. It’s different from exhaustion, which obliterates pleasure and creativity and, if you’re lucky, obliterates consciousness too when you climb into bed. You don’t even dream when you’re exhausted - your body suppresses REM sleep in favor of stage 4 sleep, which is crucial for physical rest and repair. Your dream life - your opportunity to incorporate learning and experience your playful creativity - is deferred until you are no longer sleep deprived.

When you are relaxed, on the other hand, you come to a place of unified physical, mental, and emotional ease in which your unconscious rises to the surface to play like a dolphin in the waves. You

aren't striving to improve yourself. You bring the best of what you, uniquely, have to offer the world.

Ever since I started to study the Sounder Sleep System™, I've been practicing the daytime exercises, which can also be done unobtrusively on the subway, in a meeting, or at my desk, two or three times a day. It's become clear to me that the mode of intense focus and quick, precise movements I've always fostered is not, to my amazement, a relaxed way of being. Nor is it productive; now that I break my work day up with very brief periods of tiny, relaxing movements and dreamy rest, I find I'm smarter, more discerning, and even when working I can feel – how shall I say this? – somehow three-dimensional. And yes, I do sleep better.

FITNESS RESOURCES

SOUNDER SLEEP SYSTEM™

Michael Krugman teaches regular classes at his Upper West Side studio. For a schedule of his weekday evening and Saturday morning classes, go to www.soundersleep.com or call (212) 874-6123. He also offers individual sleep training by appointment, with home and office visits possible, and he is available for corporate consulting. You can purchase his book and audio tape on his Web site.

Michael's first batch of teachers has just graduated from his training program, and I am among them. I currently teach a Sounder Sleep System™ class on Wednesday evenings from 6:30 to 7:30pm at Capoiera Angola, 104 W. 14th St between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. Please call ahead before you come at (212) 673-1142. For more information, you can go to www.intelligentexercise.com.

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