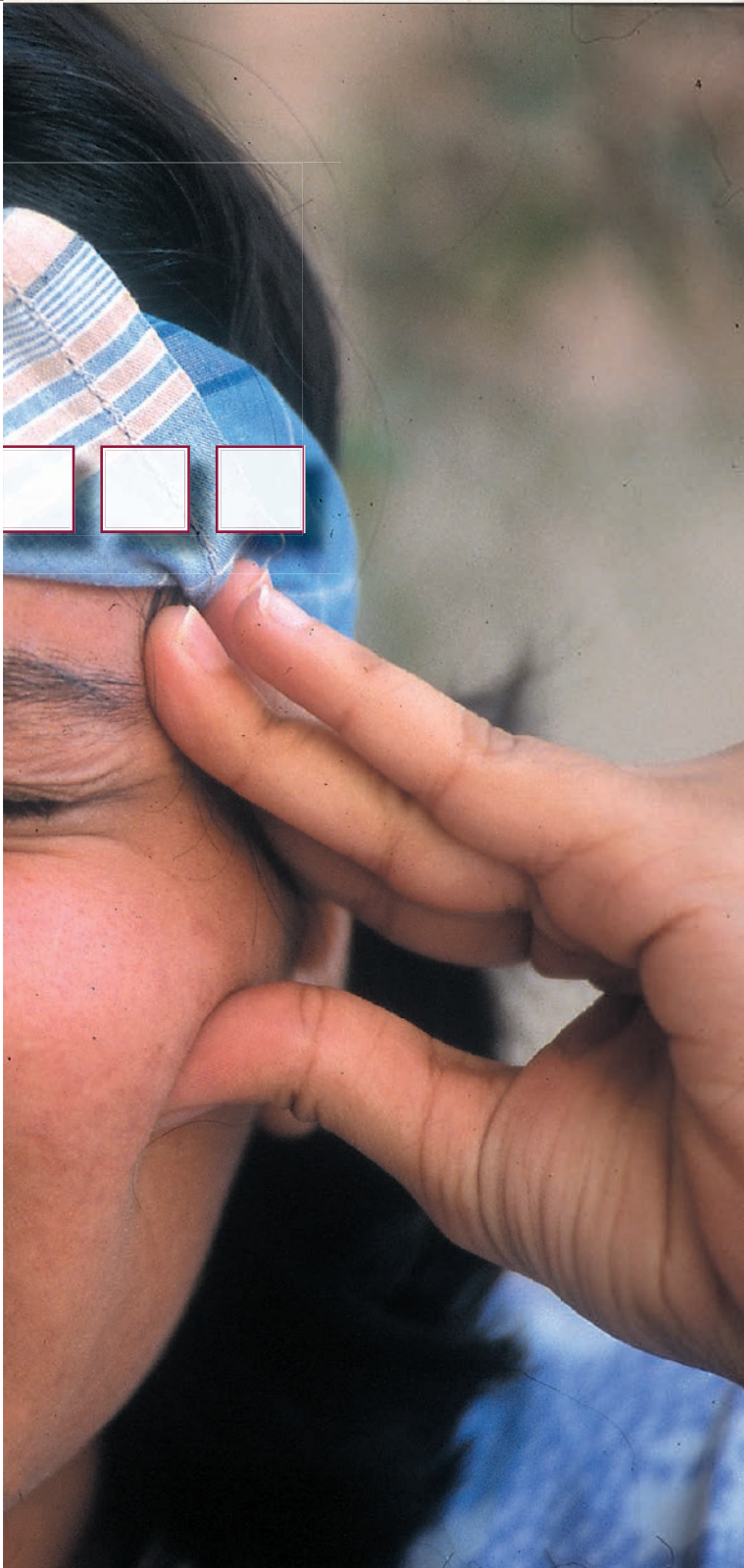


Stress

MAKES YOU





INSIGHT

How yoga disciplines and positive affirmation can help you grow under the pressures of modern living

BY SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI



STRESS: WE HEAR SO MUCH ABOUT it these days, mostly on the negative side. It used to be a sign of importance, bragged about by those who had risen to the top in their field. What was once desirable is now a no-no. There are all kinds of things that are no-no's. It used to be split ends. Megabucks were spent correcting split ends of women's hair. Scissors would have been a more economical

way to handle the problem. Caffeine, once touted as an energy-giver and work-extender, became a health no-no. That gave rise to some awful-tasting decaf. Everyone profitted, except coffee lovers. The latest from the medical world is that coffee is OK, healthy even.

Stress, too, has become a no-no. I think it was in the late '50s or early '60s, when talking with a high-court justice, I remarked, "Stress seems to be the upcoming disease." He leaned over his desk to say, "Yes, those who complain about stress must be very weak people. I have been under stress all my life. That is why I am who I am today." At over seventy years of age, he is still making decisions, still running his own office. I always remembered his statement. It made me think about army boot camps that put young men (and now women, too) through calculatedly multi-stressful situations. Why? To make them strong, to prepare them for high-performance tasks.

Interns in hospitals become resilient, able to act professionally in the most dire emergencies. By what means are they taught? Stress. Young doctors are put on call in hospitals for grueling thirty-six-hour shifts. Aspiring attorneys are directed into stressful lifestyles so they can withstand and rise above the stressful situations their professions will later demand of them. Movie stars, musicians, NASA scientists? Stress is their friend, not their enemy. Yes, those who fear and avoid stress must be very weak people, as the honorable justice said.

People are confused about stress these days. There is a solution, and that is a change in consciousness, changing the way we are programmed by those who capitalize from others' stress. This means accepting stress as a "yes-yes," not a "no-no." In the old days, *yoga* wasn't just an Indian anti-stress pill. It made the mind and nerve system more intense, not less so. Stress is a natural reaction to inten-

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STRONG!



sity. Stress is our teacher, helping us to withstand intensity.

Long before the phrase became a yuppy motto, my *satguru* often said, "No pain, no gain." He was right. Yes, "Stress makes you strong." Keep saying this to yourself when your natural *prarabdha karmas* (those you were born to live through in this life) bring you into either-or situations, meaning situations in which either you collapse or you survive. "Stress is making me strong. Stress is making me strong. Stress is making me strong." Look into the bathroom mirror and mentally say to yourself, "Stress is making me strong." It really does. Try to believe it. Begin to enjoy stress and the strength that it is giving you. Where would our world leaders, our religious leaders and parliamentarians, be if they did not accept and transcend stress? I remember during World War II an outstanding man was tortured in an attempt to extract information from him. He survived. When asked how he handled the experience, he said: "They didn't even come near to touching the areas within myself in which I was conscious during the agonizing experience."

While most are trying with all their might to avoid stress, to eliminate its every little presence in their lives, the great ones are asking for more. Accomplished businessmen, fantastic athletes, high-strung artists and fine musicians are asking for more. They want it. They thrive on it. They know it is making them perform at a higher level than normal. They know that weaker souls can't take it, and that gives them a special place in the universe, at the top.

Positive affirmations: How can you achieve your highest abilities? Use modern *mantras*, called affirmations. Impress the subjective mind. Your soul's infallible knowledge will confirm and validate this knowing. Not enough can be said about the power of affirmation. It was known only too well among the *rishis* of the *Vedas*. Everything they wrote was, in fact, an affirmation—every *mantra*, every *sutra*, every *shloka*. Whenever *karmas* peak, when troubles come to you unbidden, send them away troubled with the affirmation, "Stress is my friend. Stress is good. Stress is making me strong."

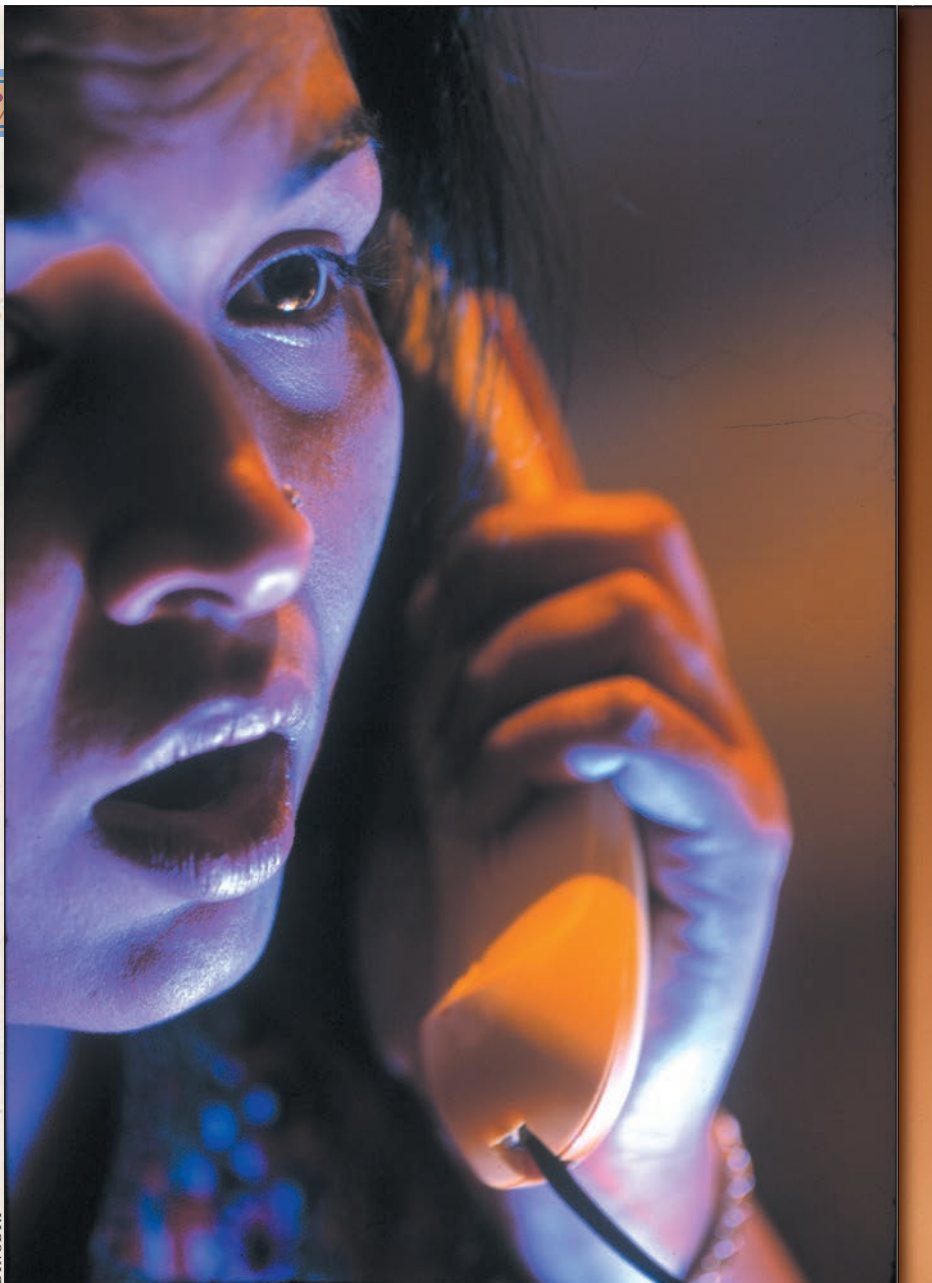
People talk about stress management. What causes stress but doing something unnatural to human nature, to humankind? Can you go through stress working on a farm? Can you go through stress working in your flower garden, your vegetable garden, riding in a boat, hiking in a forest, taking care of a beautiful home, making the home more beautiful? Those are not stress-producing activities. Stress is produced by doing something totally unnatural. Sitting at a computer all day is an unnatural situation. Being in an air-conditioned office all day, answering the telephone all day are unnatural situations. Handling problems that people can well handle themselves is an unnatural situation. But this is the way it is in today's world. Knowing that stress makes us strong, we can strengthen ourselves through affirmations and other *sadhanas* to bear up under stress and then ask for more.


Sitting by a river: Our Ganga Sadhana, we can say, is wonderful stress management, just to be at the river and to try to be in tune with Siva's perfect universe. As you sit by the banks of the river, listen to the water saying "Aum Namah Sivaya, Aum Namah Sivaya, Aum Namah Sivaya," going over the rocks. You may notice a big rock that is not wet. But it is not complaining that "All of the other rocks are wet, and I'm not wet." And the little rocks in the water are not

complaining that they are wet all the time and they would rather be dry. Every aspect of nature is happy as it is. The stars are happy, the Moon is happy, the Sun is happy, the water is happy. Everything is working together perfectly, except you, if you are under stress and fighting it. Therefore, it is for you to tune into Siva's perfect universe and be one with the all-pervasive energy that holds everything in its natural place. That all-pervasive energy is inside of you, too. That is why, as we walk to the river, we take with us some flowers that we pick along the way, and some leaves. We use those flowers and leaves as a symbol of thoughts and thank you's. Appreciation comes from the soul. Gratitude comes from the soul.

To perform this *sadhana*, sit by the river and listen to "Aum Namah Sivaya" in the sound of the river. Every time a worldly thought comes into your mind, a thought of any kind, take the *prana* from that thought, put it into a leaf in your right hand and offer it into the river. As the river takes the leaf, visualize that thought floating away with it. When another thought comes into your mind, put that into a leaf, offer it and watch it float away. Sit peacefully, listening to the river saying "Aum Namah Sivaya, Aum Namah Sivaya, Aum Namah Sivaya," as it flows across the rocks, and listen to the birds singing about the vast expanse of our universe. Each time another thought pops into your mind, take the *prana* of that thought and put

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Disharmony in relationships disturbs the nervous system and emotional body, leading to stress. It is ideal to settle all conflicts with loved ones before retiring for the evening.

it into a leaf. Each time a leaf floats down the river, to appreciate the river's taking that worldly thought away, offer a flower into the river and say, "Thank you, river." A feeling of appreciation comes forth from within you as you blend into the natural scheme of Siva's perfect universe and begin to live with Siva. That is all that Ganga Sadhana is.

So now each and every one of you can go down to the river and perform this *sadhana*. It will help you to face stress in a positive way, to realize that stress makes you strong. It doesn't have to take a long time, even ten to fifteen minutes is effective. Each of you here today can take this technique back to your homes. You can perform this *sadhana* anywhere, at any river. There are rivers in every country. And you can teach it to the congregations of your temples. You can tell everybody in your temple how this is done. And you can manifest more peace and happiness within you as Ganga Sadhana becomes part of your life. Every day, pilgrims are coming here to Kauai Adheenam on pilgrimage to perform Ganga Sadhana and the Agni Sadhana every day for a week or two. And they are returning to their homes renewed, fulfilled. Fulfilled by what? Themselves. The Sivaness within themselves. To be one with Siva's perfect universe, to blend with it until you forget who you are, that is a great form of stress management. Just be the I Am with the stone, the I

Am with the tree, the I Am with the wind, the I Am with the sound of the birds, the I Am with the entire universe.

How to benefit from stress: How many of you have ever been under stress? How many of you have liked being under stress? How many of you have benefitted from being under stress? Very good, then you know that stress is good, stress is strengthening. Don't be taken in by the medical profession that is selling all kinds of drugs on the pretext that stress is a bad thing. Drugs don't give you strength to meet life's difficulties. They are weakening. You don't want to be born and be in a cradle all of your life and have everything go nicely and pass on into the Devaloka in a worse condition than before you were born. That will happen to you unless you are under stress, some kind of challenge. Stress is strengthening if you continually rise up to meet it. Why do you go on pilgrimage in an inconvenient, uncomfortable way? Because you want to put yourself under stress to bring the spiritual aspect of you forth, to let the *karmas* manifest in your life that you have come into this birth to face and resolve.

The power of penance: In a small temple in Goodlands, Mauritius, there is a bed where you can sleep all night, right in the temple. It is occupied much of the time. But the bed does not have a soft mattress on it. It has nails. It is a bed of nails, sixteen-penny nails, about

an inch apart, a little bit rusty but sharp enough to give the message. Devotees there sleep on it for three nights as a form of self-imposed *tapas* or penance. If they have to get up during the night, they walk on shoes with nails in them in the same way. They are deliberately putting themselves under stress to smooth out their *karmas*.

If things aren't going right in your life, if Siva's universe doesn't seem so perfect, it is obviously because you did something that was not right in the past, and now you are facing it. Intentionally putting yourself under stress smooths out the *karma*. It makes you strong. What is *kavadi*? It is another form of self-imposed penance, putting small spears through the flesh during a Murugan festival. *Kavadi* puts you under stress so that you can draw on God, draw on the power of God, to relieve the difficulties in your life. You have no other place to turn but God, because you imposed the penance on yourself. Nobody did it to you, you did it yourself so that you could come closer to God.

Of course, in a high-intensity country like the United States, we don't need a bed of nails. Just living in San Francisco is a bed of nails. Stress is strengthening to the intellect. Holding up under stress shows our dominance over the instinctive mind. In Japan, high-powered executives of big corporations are put under stress to make strong, resilient men of them, to make them think fast, to make them make decisions quickly. They are run through all kinds of stressful situations. Corporations have camps for this purpose, hiking, climbing mountains, simulating all kinds of stressful situations to create a different kind of person, a responsive person, a person who can get along with others, think quickly, make decisions quickly and respond properly under intense and inconvenient situations.

Stretching the nerve system: Stress is good. Don't be taken in by television advertising that tells you that stress is a terrible thing. But you have to handle stress. How do you handle it? Like anything else. You go to God on the inside; you go to God in the temple and finally you get rid of your stress, from the inside out, and you are a better person because of it, because you have had to expand your nerve system. You have had to stretch your nerve system. You have had to use brain cells that you never used before, to stretch out your mind, awaken new capacities. It is not easy.

You have heard of how *sadhana* leads to *yoga tapas*. What is that? It is a stressful situation. Have any of you here ever been under a stressful situation in doing your *sadhana*? Of course. It is strengthening; it is what has to be. Stress and a spiritual life go together, three "S's": stress, spirituality and strengthening. If you are going through a stressful situation in your *karma* or what you have undertaken to do in your service to Siva, that is good. Be worried when it ends, because then you are not advancing. Whether you deal well with a stressful situation or not, you are still benefitting greatly. You are still benefitting because new power is coming into you, and it is a spiritual power because you are striving.

The instinctive mind cannot handle stress. The intellectual mind cannot handle stress. It is the spiritual, superconscious mind that handles stress within you. So, be happy about stress. Of course, be wise also. If you are going through a stressful situation, don't look for more stress. Just ride that one out.

Live a balanced life: Stress is a consequence of the technological age, and these days everybody is talking about stress. The stress and strains of a fast-paced and demanding modern age affect every organ of the body. A calm mind, a peaceful mind, is needed to encompass changing times. To cope with these changes, we have to rely on ourselves to keep a balance of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life. Our religion has ways to combat stress and the diseases it causes, ways to avoid the mental anguish which this fast-paced world brings about. These pressures did not exist in the agricultural age. Things were more relaxed then. All we had to do was plant our crops and wait for the harvest. Plant and wait. Plant and wait. And in-between there was plenty of time for religious activities.

But life in the technological age is a life of constant work, constant activity all of the time. So, we tend to set religion aside just when we need it the most. We have to rely on our religion to keep a balance in our life. It is a proven fact that religious people can cope with stress and strain better than nonreligious people. The answer to stress is not to take a pill to be able to relax. The answer is to not give up the temple, to not give up the scriptures which put everything into perspective, to not give up the art of meditation and the practices of yoga.

Being centered within confusion: At this time in the Kali Yuga, the whole world seems to be confused, because the intensity of the Earth is so strong, and there are so many people on the planet. We are faced with over-population. We are faced with the ozone layer being damaged and destroyed in places. We are faced with our most fertile lands becoming deserts. We are faced with the destruction of the forests to feed cattle. All the elements are confused. Everything is in distress at this time, and we feel that distress as stress within ourselves. But within confusion there is law and order. Remember, within confusion there is law and order.

Satguru Siva Yogaswami said, "There is not one thing that is wrong." "It was all finished a long time ago." In today's confusion, things are happening so fast that the finite mind of individuals cannot keep up with it. Therefore, to get out of confusion, don't try to figure things out. Try to find That within you which never changes. "That" with a capital "T." The "I Am." There is a place within you that has never changed, never will change. For five hundred years that place within you has always been the same. Maybe it is in the center of your spine. Maybe it is within the center of your head. Try to become aware of that place within your physical body, that energy within you, that Self within you, that has never, ever changed. The mind then becomes unconfused. The third eye opens and you can see ahead into your own future.

Learning to breathe properly: Through the years, I have found that the inability to stand up to stress goes hand in hand with improper breathing. That is why in *yoga* so much emphasis is placed on proper, diaphragmatic breathing. Many people breathe by lifting and expanding their chest without exercising any movement of the diaphragm muscle. But the diaphragm muscle must be made to relax, and only when it moves freely up and down in the body do the lungs properly and completely fill with air.

Let us participate in this exercise together. Place your right hand on top of the diaphragm just over your stomach and place your left hand on top of your chest. Now, as you inhale, your stomach should extend forward as the diaphragm pushes downward in the body, pulling air into your lungs. The chest does not have to move. As you breathe in, the stomach moves out. As you exhale, your diaphragm relaxes and moves back up into its normal position, allowing the stomach to come back in place.

Many people do what I call "gasp breathing." Gasp breathing is utilizing only the upper portion of the lungs. When the diaphragm is not used in breathing, a lot of toxic material may gather in the lower portion of the lungs and never be expelled. Natural, rhythmic, diaphragmatic breath is one of the first laws of health. It allows all the forces of the nervous system to flow properly through your body, giving a serene condition to both your body and your mind.



In Mumbai, traffic is backed up in sweltering heat—a major cause of stress in cities across the globe

Why do people not breathe properly? The diaphragm is a sensitive, powerful muscle, and responds to impulses sent to it by the solar plexus, the abdominal brain. If the abdominal brain becomes tied up through reacting to all the experiences of life, the solar plexus and the diaphragm become constricted, and breathing moves into the upper portion of the chest. A sense of stress is the result. For instance, a small baby naturally breathes with the use of the diaphragm. But often around the age of seven years, after receiving a beating from his mother or father and holding the memory and resentment of it—particularly if he feels meanness behind the beating—the child's diaphragm stops functioning normally and the subconscious mind also begins to tighten. Then because of the tense condition of his subconscious, he does not use the full faculties of his mind, and his body is not in a natural, workable condition. The result, possibly, is that he becomes a delinquent and goes off into the street, acting according to his new nature. We might say that he is living in a temporary state of outer consciousness, and he is cut off from the full capacity and expression of his inner consciousness.

Anytime your breathing is inhibited and your subconscious mind is tight and tense, you are cutting off your channel to your superconscious mind. You are out of touch with the real you. Realize, however, that these channels are only temporarily cut off when

you are in a disconnected state of consciousness. Breathing deeply, rhythmically and diaphragmatically is the first step to reopening the blocked channels of the mind and allowing a little greater realization of a greater "I" to trickle through.

When you go home tonight, lie down on a flat, hard surface and place a book on top of your diaphragm just over your stomach. As you breathe in, if you are breathing diaphragmatically, you will be lifting the book up and away from the floor with the action of your diaphragm. As you breathe out, the book will go down again. Do this five or ten times in a rhythm before you go to sleep every night for six months, or even a year if it takes you that long to impress your subconscious mind.

In the meantime, as your body and diaphragm become more relaxed, your subconscious will then start to purify itself, and you will begin to remember things that happened to you a long time ago that have made lasting impressions on your mind. Don't try to analyze these things when they come back into your memory by going over and over them again and again seeking for a reason. Wipe them away with the magic eraser of the understanding that your inner consciousness will present to you. Little by little you will be renewed from within yourself and be able to withstand any amount of stress.