

Slow Hands

Sometimes the fastest way to speed things up is to slow down. Try this slow-motion hand meditation to clear your mind.

By Jonathan Foust, M.A.



Recently, I made a list of things I wanted to accomplish. It was much too long and ambitious—but I geared up to move on all fronts anyway. After some exasperation at the slow headway I was making, I sat down with a wise friend for some counsel. “It sounds like you want to get a lot of things done,” he said.

“Absolutely,” I replied. “But I’m frustrated at this pace.”

After a long pause he replied, “If you really want to speed things up, you have to slow down first.” Much as I wasn’t ready for that bit of wisdom, once I tried slowing down, I realized he was right. By slowing down I became more relaxed and clear. I was able to trust my intuition and choose the best steps for the projects that truly resonated with my highest aspirations.

TAKE A BREAK

In our hyped-up and caffeinated culture, who doesn’t want to do more faster? But you may also crave a break from your overstimulated mind and aspire to a calmer, more intuitive, and present state. It’s easy to lose sight of your main purpose amid the distractions of a frenzied mind. Slowing down brings you back to the here and now.

Many meditation techniques use one point as an object of concentration. Whether it’s the breath, a mantra, sensations, the thought of love, or awareness itself, the object of concentration can be a doorway to the moment. But sometimes this single focus is too subtle for the mind to track easily. If that’s been your experience, you may find that slow-motion movement, which begins with attention to strong sensations in the body, to be a more tangible and satisfying focal point.

This process of gradually shifting your attention from the large movement of the asanas to the small movements of the breath is the essence of raja yoga. As you attend to the postures, you encounter and release deep-seated tensions. You also refine your awareness by concentrating on the subtlety of your breath and turning inward (pratyahara). From there you can move to increasingly subtler forms of mindfulness, from one-pointedness (dharana) to one-flowingness (dhyana) to absorption (samadhi).

A wonderful and accessible means of moving meditation involves concentrating on the slow movement of your hands. (See “Try Your Hand,” end of article.)

FEEL THE FORCE

Any meditation practice quickly reveals how your mind is habitually consumed by thoughts of the future or past. Moments of awareness in the present are comparatively few, but slow-motion movement, because it captures your mind’s attention, can draw you directly into experiencing the sensations of the present moment. This technique can pull your mind into one-pointed concentration forcefully, but it also has larger implications as you become more sensitive to the life force.

Many yogis believe that life force, or prana, runs your autonomic nervous system, animating your body and keeping all systems working at optimal levels. Usually, your mind submits to the healing presence of prana when you’re sleeping, which is why a good night’s sleep can be so restorative.



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However, you can learn to tune in to prana when you're awake and to build reserves of it. When you remove obstacles to free-flowing prana, you feel more alive and present in your life. Think of how great you feel after a yoga class or a night of dancing or making love. Movement can awaken both prana and awareness.

Slow-motion movement slows your mind. Just a few minutes of it before sitting is an excellent segue to a more subtle meditation practice. Try lifting your arms overhead and slowly releasing them to your sides, concentrating on the micro-movements of your hands as they flow through space. Just a minute of this helps you move into pratyahara, sense withdrawal.

Paying attention to slowing down helps you be mindful during the day. Try brushing your teeth or washing dishes more slowly and see how that brings your mind into the present. Slowing down a yoga pose also helps draw you into a dynamic flow of sensation, breath, and awareness.

A fascinating paradox emerges when you allow yourself to become absorbed in the small details of any physical action. Embracing movement, you are inexorably drawn to the stillness within.

Try Your Hand

1. Sit comfortably and shake out your hands, as if you were flinging water off your fingertips. Deepen your breath slightly. When your hands feel energized, place them on your thighs, palms facing up. Take a few moments to focus on the sensations in your hands. Feel, if you can, the pulse in your fingertips.

2. As your breath deepens, see if you can activate your belly, diaphragm, rib cage, and upper chest. Breathe deep into your belly. Fill your upper chest with air at the top of the inhalation, then see how much you can relax with each exhalation.

3. Imagine a light at the core of your being. As you breathe in, let the light pulse a little brighter. When you exhale, let it pulse a little dimmer. You can even give it a temperature or assign a color to the sensations in your belly.

4. With each breath, imagine this energy filling your chest and shoulders. Feel it flow down your arms and into your palms. Notice light and warmth filling your chest cavity, your rib cage, your arms, your hands.

5. Rest your awareness in and around your hands. Feel the air touching your palms, fingers, and thumbs. Feel the outline of your hands and the space between your fingers. When you're ready, gently lift your hands off your body just enough to release them into the air, then let them be perfectly still. Relax your shoulders, arms, and palms.

6. Then lift your hands as slowly as possible, almost imperceptibly. Feel the smallest movement in your awareness as you continue to lift your hands. See how much you can slow down. Imagine the molecules of air rolling between your fingers. See if you can slow the motion down so much that your hands feel as if they're moving by themselves.

7. When it feels right, turn your palms toward each other. As your hands come together, pulse them ever so slowly. Imagine, if you can, the edges of the energy field between your hands. You may feel as if you're holding a ball of pulsing energy, or as if your hands were opposite poles of a magnet. Your mind is relaxed but also aware, witnessing the flow of sensation into your hands.

8. For the next few minutes, let your hands move naturally and your mind observe the smallest details of sensation. At some point, bring your hands to a place on your body that needs healing or attention.

9. In your own time, let your hands come to rest in your lap and sit for a few more minutes in silence.

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