

Letting Go of Stress

'Seven times down; eight times up.'

– Japanese proverb, frequently quoted by Zen master Shinzan

We're going to look at stress, but before we do, just take a moment to settle more comfortably. Relax your body. Bring your attention to the crown of your head and then take ten seconds or so to send a wave of awareness down through the body, from your crown to your feet. Just check in; notice how you are right now. Do the same things two more times.

You've spent less than a minute doing this; notice the effects. We'll do more with this later. Now let's look at stress.

It's no secret that stress is the number one killer in our modern, fast-paced world. More than that, the American Medical Association notes that stress is implicated in 60–90 per cent of physician visits.¹

When I was studying in a Zen temple in Japan we regularly used to have stressed-out salarymen or executives come to stay,

1 Avey, H., Matheny, K.B., Robbins, A. and Jacobson, T.A. (2003) 'Health care providers' training, perceptions, and practices regarding stress and health outcomes.' *Journal of the National Medical Association* 95, 9, 833, 836–845.

hoping to prevent their health breaking down. There was dark talk of *karōshi*, where employees literally work themselves to death. We also had visits from *freeters*, people who opt for part-time work to avoid the ruthless rat race, but then end up locked into stressful, insecure and unfulfilling positions. Zen master Shinzan used to say, ‘We have to show them, *nana korobi, ya oki*,’ meaning, ‘Seven times down; eight times up.’ He was referring to a Daruma, a type of Japanese doll with a weighted base that regardless how it is rocked always comes to rest upright. Before we explore how to develop this kind of resilience, let’s look a little more at how stress affects us on emotional, physical and mental levels.

Stress can be caused by both external and internal factors. External causes can range from an overwhelming workload to a challenging romantic relationship. Internally, stress can be caused by factors like cycles of rumination and negative thoughts. A certain amount of stress keeps us alert and motivated. Too much stress, however, leads to a miserable existence.

Worryingly, many of us have come to believe that it’s normal to live with excessive stress. We can become numb to what we’re doing to ourselves. Or we react to stress in a knee-jerk fashion by resorting to quick fixes. Doctors continue to prescribe more and more pills for anxiety and depression – both stress-related conditions. Health analysts Medco found that, over the 2000s, the proportion of US citizens on anxiety and behavioural medical prescriptions went up 22 per cent (with the number of young men taking prescriptions increasing by 43 per cent). While this avalanche of pill popping might alleviate symptoms in the short term, it’s clearly not going to resolve the root causes of stress. Plus there’s the problem of a range of unwanted side effects.

Let’s dig into what stress actually is. The word ‘stress’ was popularised in the 1950s by Dr Hans Selye. He was studying

animal behaviour and defined it as ‘the nonspecific response of the organism to any pressure or demand’.² So *stress* is how your body and mind react to these demands, also called *stressors*. Selye and other leading researchers established that stress has a direct impact on the immune system. This, in turn, makes us more vulnerable to disease. The origins of the word ‘disease’ come from the old French word *desaise*, meaning ‘lack of ease’. A wide range of illnesses result from failed attempts to adapt to stressful conditions.

So how exactly does this stress reaction manifest?

Stress makes most sense when we go back into our past. As a species, we’ve spent most of our time on this planet wandering in small groups on the great plains of Africa. In this setting, the stress reaction helped in survival.

Essentially, a stress reaction occurs in three stages:

1. The initial *fight, flight or freeze* reaction that mobilises the body for immediate action. For example, on encountering a predator we might fight it off, we might run away, or we might remain utterly still and try not to be noticed. Each of these reactions could give us a survival edge.
2. A *slower resistance* reaction. In this longer follow-up phase, the body is mobilising all its forces to enable us to get to safety and begin recovery.
3. *Exhaustion*. This sets in eventually if the body doesn’t get to a place where rest and recovery can happen.

In the first stage the nervous system diverts energy to the muscles and organs needed for immediate survival. During this initial reaction, the body releases stress hormones, particularly adrenaline, heightening sense perceptions and

² Selye, H. (1974) *Stress without Distress*. Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Co, p.14.

creating hyperarousal so we can absorb as much information as possible. The heart output jumps and more blood is directed to the arms and legs. At the same time, blood flow to non-essential areas like the digestive and reproductive systems shuts down.

During the second, resistance, stage, the body releases cortisol and human growth hormone. Over a short period these hormones produce increased energy, help the body repair damaged cells and reduce inflammation.

In the third stage, if rest and recovery have not been possible, the body continues to produce large amounts of stress hormones. Prolonged exposure to these (especially cortisol) destroys healthy muscles, bones and cells and weakens the immune system.

So, if our stone-age ancestor is going about his daily business and suddenly a lion leaps out from behind a rock, his survival chances are enhanced if he stands and fights or runs away at maximum speed or freezes to stillness. The stress reaction is perfectly suited to his situation.

We also have access to a further response, often called the 'flop' response. When our system perceives the threat to be totally overwhelming (with no way of fighting or fleeing), we literally play dead. The system goes into shutdown and collapse. Many predators don't eat carrion, so playing dead would have given us a survival edge too.

Nowadays, however, things are different. We don't encounter hungry lions that often. And if we are in the middle of a stressful dressing-down from the boss, very likely the three worst responses would be to kill him, to run out screaming, or to play dead! So we have to learn how to manage these archaic stress responses.

As we all know, in day-to-day modern life we're rarely dealing with life or death situations. Rather, we typically experience

an accumulation of minor stress reactions. We may well be dealing almost constantly with mild states of hyperarousal without many avenues to discharge the stress hormones. Then, as each small, irksome incident increases our stress load, our system is gradually undermined. Eventually our health starts to break down.

So what can we do to alleviate this? The good news is that we can change how we respond to stress. While we may or may not be able to change the stressor, we can learn to shift how we perceive and handle situations. Doing this will change what happens internally. With practice we can change our world.

We need to be realistic here. Stressors exist in a spectrum. On the upper end, strong enough stressors will kill us regardless of how mindful we are. Take the absence of oxygen as an example. On the other hand, some stressors are so mild they aren't really registered by the conscious mind. It's the huge mid-range of stressors where this work is most effective, but in what way?

According to Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, in his book *Full Catastrophe Living*, 'You have the power to affect the balance point between your internal resources for coping with stress and the stressors that are an unavoidable part of modern living.'³

So, the same event is more stressful for someone who has fewer resources. Building up our inner and outer sources of resilience is an effective way of combating stress. Friends, family, teachers and our environment can provide vital external resources. Meanwhile, our beliefs, our mental skills and our view of ourself are all valuable inner resources. These are important for happiness and wellbeing.

3 Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013) *Full Catastrophe Living* (revised edn). London: Piatkus, p.293.

Right back to the time of the Buddha, we find claims that these practices can develop warrior-like inner resources for dealing with the struggles of life (and, in fact, they were used that way by samurai back in pre-modern Japan). How would this work? Well, first, our practice can provide an oasis of calm and relaxation in which we can recuperate and recharge. And second, it develops awareness so we can perceive clearly what we are going through. This is critical because there is a huge difference between conscious and unconscious stress.

Hakuin, the great Japanese Zen master, wrote, 'Buddhas are like water and ordinary people are like ice.' Our mindfulness, our awareness, is like the warm sunlight, which begins the process of melting away the stress.

At the heart of East Asian philosophies like Buddhism and Taoism is the conviction that change is universal. We have some of this stance in Western culture too. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus taught that 'you never step into the same river twice'. There is nothing in life that doesn't slowly or quickly go through a process of change. In fact, if we investigate this concept on a deeper level, we can experience a perspective where we see that there are no fixed things, just processes in motion, and that includes us.

Quantum physics also opens a window into this kind of viewpoint. Even the most solid-appearing objects and substances are found, on a microscopic scale, to be intensely dynamic. In the modern world, this ungraspable dynamism is very relevant to day-to-day experience. Experts talk about the 'RoCoRoC principle', the rate of change of the rate of change, which is apparently doubling every ten years. If you reflect, it's clear that our own bodies, relationships and roles are constantly changing.

Learning how to surf the ocean of change rather than fight it is critical to our wellbeing. In *Full Catastrophe Living*,

Jon Kabat-Zinn states, ‘The ultimate effect on our health of the total psychological stress we experience depends in large measure on how we come to perceive change itself in all its various forms, and how skilful we are in adapting to continual change while maintaining our own inner balance and sense of coherence.’⁴

When we start living mindfully, we improve our relationship with change. Rather than change being the enemy, we become able to relax and enjoy the ever-changing quality of experience. Over time, and with practice, our realisation of change in every dimension makes the universe seem like a vast symphony, and moment by moment, we arise as a newborn being in a newborn world.

Making friends with change is a great medium-term goal. We get there by focusing on experience now. And it’s in the present moment that we can deal with stress. We all have a range of stressors – some very transitory, like worrying about whether that child on the street might step in front of your car; others are more long term (and ongoing), such as paying our yearly tax bill. Some stressors are external – the freezing cold rainstorm that suddenly lands on you. Some are internal, such as the strange lingering headache that has you looking up symptoms on the internet. When we experience a stressor, internal or external, the body and mind will react to it as if it’s a threat.

As mentioned, in beginning our journey to stress relief the critical element is awareness. There’s a natural tendency to want to avoid unpleasantness, but suppressing feelings doesn’t stop their effects. Unconscious stress can lead to poor sleep, indigestion, chronic head and backaches, heart attacks, and

4 Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013) *Full Catastrophe Living* (revised edn). London: Piatkus.

so on. When our health starts to deteriorate, we become more fearful, and the whole situation becomes a vicious circle.

The avoidant person's coping mechanisms might include denial, distractions (including 'busyness and workaholism'), shopping, alcohol, drugs, gambling, exercise (both beneficial and excessive amounts) and food (overeating or undereating). Even meditation itself could be an avoidance mechanism.

In my teens, as I mentioned previously, Father Jack Madden taught me a meditation practice involving concentration on a syllable (an Indian sacred word). After some time I found myself more and more able to rest my attention on the concentration point. I began to feel great – deeply relaxed; peaceful like I'd never known peaceful. It was wonderful. But then, over time, I found myself spacing out, simply not dealing with things. I felt like I was floating in a cloud above it all. The technical term for this sort of experience is 'dissociation'. In a sense nothing was going wrong – the meditation was designed to induce this sort of thing. But I found myself uncomfortable with the results. I ended up quitting my practice, feeling that what I was achieving was just another form of avoidance.

None of the above solves the root cause of stress, and almost always the negative effects simply continue, masked by the distraction. And as we saw above, if left unresolved for long enough, stress leads to burnout, breakdown and long-term sickness.

So avoidance doesn't serve us. But what actually works? Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, "The healthy alternative to being caught in this self-destructive pattern is to stop reacting to stress and to start responding to it."⁵ Reaction is largely unconscious; response is the path of awareness.

5 Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013) *Full Catastrophe Living* (revised edn). London: Piatkus.

How do we work with this greater awareness that Zen meditation and mindfulness practice make available?

First, apply your awareness within the physical stillness of your practice time. Simply be present with the tension or butterflies in your stomach or whatever stress-related sensation arises. Just be with it. You're lying on the floor and moving your attention through the body and you land on it. Good. Now all you need to do is simply be here. Don't try to change it or make it go away or suppress it. Simply be with what's here. Shinzan Roshi, my Zen teacher, constantly uses the Japanese term *nari kiru* to express what we do here. *Nari* means literally 'become' and *kiru* means 'totally' or 'completely'. So once you find the tension or stress, don't separate yourself from it; quite the opposite, be *with* it, *become* it. In that moment there is no gap between you and the sensation.

Perhaps we can explore this right now. Is there somewhere in your body right now that might be exhibiting a stress reaction? You might find tension or discomfort of some kind. If there is, turn your attention towards the feeling and just be here with it. If you can, sit right in the middle of the physical stress effect rather than being on the outside looking at it. Notice what happens. We mentioned previously that change is universal. This physical symptom, too, slowly or quickly, will change. It might dissolve or move somewhere else; it might turn to heat. Trains of memory or emotion might start to come. It might even seem that it intensifies. Whatever's going on, just stay with it. Awareness is a great accelerator of the change process. Don't worry if the stress effect doesn't seem to be changing immediately; the most important thing, the revolutionary step, is that you're here, you're aware, you're allowing. Don't try to impose your own timescale. You can come back tomorrow if necessary. You can come back the day after. From now on, every

time you encounter the symptoms of stress in your body in your meditation, you can do this, you can just be with them and notice what happens.

Through developing this attitude in the stillness of your meditation you'll become dramatically more able to deal with stress in the midst of activity. How do we do this? It's basically the same process. In a time of stress, try to remain centred and aware. The more aware you are, the more you will be able to distinguish between the stressor and your response. The stressor has reality and there may be some way of changing that reality – moving away from it or attenuating it in some way.

The stress you experience also has its reality. Be aware of your thoughts, feelings and sensations. Simply and unreservedly be with them. This awareness provides a freedom. As we know, you don't have to run away from these thoughts, feelings and sensations, and nor do you have to react to them in any particular way. This presence reduces the strength of your reaction, reduces your stress, even to the point where you start to find that many things no longer push your buttons.

Establishing this non-reactive space will also reduce the time you need to recover from stressful situations. Things will release so much more easily.

Naturally, it takes time to develop this stability and awareness. That's why we practise meditation every day. Your practice in stillness will inform your practice in life. Over time your awareness strengthens, making it much easier to shift from a stress reaction to a stress response in the heat of the moment.

As mentioned, stress-related illnesses are the number one killer, so we can truthfully say that this Zen approach can literally save your life. It will also provide you with a huge sense of liberation.