



Are You Physically Fit?

Reflections and Practical Suggestions

“Physical culture is the process of infusing consciousness into the cells of the body. One may not know it, but it is a fact. When we concentrate to make our muscles move according to our will, when we endeavour to make our limbs more supple, to give them an agility, or a force, or a resistance, or a plasticity which they do not naturally possess, we infuse into the cells of the body a consciousness which was not there before, thus turning it into an increasingly homogeneous and receptive instrument, which progresses in and by its activities. This is the primary importance of physical culture.”¹

The Key Areas of Physical Education

Sleep and Rest

“... one must know how to sleep. Sleep must not be a fall into unconsciousness that makes the body heavy instead of refreshing it. Moderate food, abstention from all excess, by itself minimises considerably the necessity of passing many hours in sleep. However, it is the quality of sleep more than its quantity that is important.”²

“... Even during the waking hours, relaxation is an indispensable thing for everyone who wishes to maintain the nervous balance. To know how to relax the muscles and the nerves is an art...”³

Reflection

How do you normally go to sleep? How did you go to sleep last night? How was your sleep? How did your body and mind feel when you first woke up? What effect, if any, did it have on your day or the first few actions? How do you normally feel when you first wake up? Keeping the above reading in mind, what change, if any, would you like to effect in the manner and quality of your sleep? Also give some thought to what helps you relax in action, in work.

*A few practical suggestions*⁴

- ‘... take something before going to bed, a cup of milk or soup or fruit-juice, for instance. Light food gives a quiet sleep.’
- ‘... keep the mind clear, ... quiet the feelings, calm the effervescence of desires and preoccupations accompanying them.’
- If you have talked too much or have held animated discussions or read/ heard/ watched something intensely interesting and exciting, ‘... take some time to rest before sleeping so that the mind’s activities may be quieted’.
- ‘... concentrate for a few minutes upon a high and restful idea, in an aspiration towards a greater and vaster consciousness.’
- ‘The hours before midnight are the best for resting the nerves.’
- Sleep in a ‘quiet and well-ventilated place’.
- Sleep for sufficient number of hours.
- Any other method or aid (a yogasana, some music, a particular book, sketching, etc.) that suits you.
- Practise the art of relaxing your nerves and muscles (change of work every few hours, right posture during work, correct breathing, refreshing exercises or a short walk or some contact with nature, music, meditation, etc. - or any other method that suits you and your circumstances).

Food

“The all-absorbing interest that men, without exception, even the most intellectual, take in food, in its preparation and consumption, should be replaced by an almost chemical knowledge of the needs of the body and a wholly scientific system of austerity in the way of satisfying them.”⁵

“Physically, we depend upon food to live - unfortunately. For with food, we daily and constantly take in a formidable amount of inconscience, of *tamas*, heaviness, stupidity. One can’t do otherwise - unless constantly, without

¹ The Mother (1990) *Education, part 3: Physical Education*, p.141, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

² The Mother (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, pp.136-37, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

³ *Ibid.*, p.104

⁴ All text in single inverted commas is taken from The Mother’s writings on this subject.

⁵ The Mother (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, p.136, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry



a break, we remain completely aware and, as soon as an element is introduced into our body, we immediately work upon it to extract from it only the light and reject all that may darken our consciousness. This is the origin and rational explanation of the religious practice of consecrating one's food to God before taking it. When eating one aspires that this food may not be taken for the little human ego but as an offering to the divine consciousness within oneself."⁶

Reflection

How often do you think of food during the day and what motivates this thinking? What kind of food suits your body and helps it maintain its health and balance? What kind of food creates problems or weakness? What effect do your favourite foods have on your body? What elements are important for you to ensure a simple, uncomplicated and healthy diet, suited to your temperament, activities and the body's needs? (Also reflect upon the regularity in meal timings, the interval between two meals, the amount of food intake, the state of being while eating, the quality of food, hygiene, etc.) What change, if any, would you like to effect in your food habits and attitudes?

A few practical suggestions

- '... develop a taste for food that is simple and healthy, substantial and appetising, without any useless complication.' (aid: learning to distinguish between desires and needs)
- Avoid in your daily food, 'all that merely stuffs and causes heaviness'.
- Eat according to your hunger, neither more nor less. Avoid making food an occasion to satisfy greed or gluttony.
- Food must be 'prepared with all care for hygiene and cleanliness, pleasant to the taste and yet very simple.'
- Suit the food to your age and regular activities - 'it must contain all the chemical and dynamic elements that are necessary for the development and the balanced growth of all the parts of the body.'
- When eating, aspire that 'this food may not be taken for the little human ego but as an offering to the divine consciousness within oneself.'

Hygiene and Cleanliness

"Another thing should be taught to a child from his early years: the taste for cleanliness and hy-

gienic habits."⁷ (without instilling in him the fear of illness)

Reflection

What response does uncleanliness evoke in you? Are you spontaneously inclined to cleanliness? How conscious are you of hygiene and to what extent do you practise it? How clean are your habits? Remember the state of your room, house, office yesterday or this morning - did you contribute to its cleanliness in any way?

A few practical suggestions

- Cultivate a 'taste for cleanliness and hygienic habits.'
- Learn to appreciate cleanliness for its own sake - not out of any fear of illness.

Exercise and Sports

"... With regard to exercises, each one should choose what suits best his body and, if possible, under the guidance of an expert on the subject who knows how to combine and grade the exercises for their maximum effect. No fancifulness should rule their choice or execution. You should not do this or that simply because it appears more easy or pleasant; you will make a change in your programme only when your trainer considers the change necessary. The body of each one, with regard to its perfection or simply improvement, is a problem to be solved and the solution demands much patience, perseverance and regularity."⁸

Reflection

Did you exercise this morning? How often have you exercised in the last one week? Ask your body what exercises it needs. What helps you to exercise? What hinders?

A few practical suggestions

- '... devote some time daily to developing methodically and normally' all the parts of your body. 20-30 minutes, preferably on waking, 'will suffice to assure the good functioning and balanced growth' of your muscles, preventing the stiffening of the joints and of the spine.
- '... use all the movements of your life for a harmonious development of your body' - make them 'consciously, deliberately, with a definite aim'.

⁶ The Mother (1990) *Education, part 3: Physical Education*, p.77, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

⁷ The Mother (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, pp.102-03, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.137-38

*Illness and Injury*

“... children should be taught to have respect for health, admiration for a healthy man whose body knows how to repel attacks of illness. Often a child pretends illness to escape a troublesome necessity, a work that does not interest him or even simply to move the heart of his parents and get them to satisfy some caprice. ... The weak have a tendency to believe that their weaknesses make them particularly interesting and to use the attention and sympathy of persons who are around them and live with them. ... Children should be taught that to be ill is a sign of failing and inferiority, not of a virtue or a sacrifice.”⁹

“Normally as it is, the body lives always with the impression that it is not master in its house: illnesses enter into it without its being really able to oppose them... The only power it has is to defend itself, to react. ...

Now, with the supramental manifestation, something new has happened in the body: it feels it is master of the house, autonomous, both the feet planted upon earth, if I may say so. The impression it gives physically is that the whole being is erect, it has lifted its head - one is master.”¹⁰

Reflection

What is your spontaneous response to illness? What is your response to injury? How often do your thoughts dwell on these - in the form of anxiety, fear, interest, craving or in any other way? When did you last experience illness or physical pain? What effect did it have on your state of being? How do you normally overcome illness or physical pain?

A few practical suggestions

- ‘An hour’s moving about in the sun does more to cure weakness or anaemia than a whole armoury of tonics.’
- Avoid taking medicine unless it is absolutely impossible to do otherwise.
- Study the causes and patterns of your ‘favourite’ illness or mode of pain (the ones you are habituated to). What attitudes underlie these?

Awakening/ Listening to the Body’s Consciousness

“... it is very important to remember that the instinct of the body, so long as it remains intact,

knows more than any theory. ...

The body in its normal state, that is to say, if there is no intervention of mental notions or vital impulsions, knows also very well what is good and necessary for it...”¹¹

“... the method we use to deal with our body, maintain it, keep it fit, improve it and keep it in good health, depends *exclusively* on the state of consciousness we are in; for our body is an instrument of our consciousness and this consciousness can act directly on it and obtain what it wants from it.”¹²

“... One development of the utmost value is the awakening of the essential and instinctive body consciousness which can see and do what is necessary without any indication from mental thought and which is equivalent in the body to swift insight in the mind and spontaneous and rapid decision in the will.”¹³

Reflection

How much are you guided by the body’s instinct? In what kind of matters does this consciousness act in you? What makes it recede?

A few practical suggestions

- ‘Physical culture is the process of infusing consciousness into the cells of the body.’
- Read more on this subject: Sri Aurobindo, *Perfection of the Body*, pp.68-86, *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*.

Beauty

“... aspire for beauty, not for the sake of pleasing others or gaining fame, but for the love of beauty itself: for beauty is the ideal which physical life has to realise. In every human being there is the possibility of establishing harmony among the different parts of the body and the different movements when the body is in action. The human body that undergoes a rational method of physical culture from the beginning of its existence can realise its own harmony and thus be fit to express beauty. ...

... But if, for some reason or other, this education has not been given during childhood and even in youth, it can begin at any age and followed throughout life. But the later one begins, the more one must be prepared to meet bad habits that have to be corrected, rigidities to be made supple, malformations to be rectified. And

⁹ The Mother (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, p.103, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

¹⁰ The Mother (1990) *Education, part 3: Physical Education*, p.135, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

¹¹ The Mother (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, pp.101-02, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

¹² The Mother (1990) *Education, part 3: Physical Education*, p.123, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

¹³ Sri Aurobindo (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, pp.64-65, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry



this preparatory work will need much patience and perseverance before one can start on a constructive programme for the harmonisation of the form and its movements. But if you hold within yourself the living ideal of beauty that is to be realised, you are sure to reach the goal you aim at.”¹⁴

“... If you compare the human body as it now is with a higher ideal of beauty, obviously very few would pass the examination. In almost every one there is a sort of imbalance in the proportions; we are so accustomed to it that we do not notice it, but if we look from the standpoint of the higher beauty, it becomes visible; very few bodies would bear comparison with perfect beauty. There are a thousand reasons for imbalance but only one remedy, to instil into the being this instinct, this sense of true beauty, a supreme beauty which will gradually act on the cells and make the body capable of expressing beauty.”¹⁵

Reflection

What place does the ‘ideal of beauty’ have in your daily life? Is it something you consciously uphold when doing any form of exercise or physical culture? What change, if any, would you like to effect in your daily movements, keeping the above reading in mind?

A few practical suggestions

- ‘... instil into the being this instinct, this sense of true beauty’.
- Develop and follow ‘a rational method of physical culture’.
- Acquire the habit of observing the functioning of the organs so that you may control them more and more, taking care that this functioning is normal and harmonious.
- Take care to correct your ‘positions, postures and movement’.
- ‘... think constantly of the harmony of the body, of the beauty of the movements, of not doing anything that is ungraceful and awkward.’
- ‘... those who live in an inner peace, in an inner beauty, a light, and perfect goodwill, have an expression which is not quite the same as of people who live in bad thoughts, in the lower part of their nature.’

Compiled by Anuradha

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The prayer of the cells in the body

Now that, by the effect of the Grace, we are slowly emerging out of inconscience and waking to a conscious life, an ardent prayer rises in us for more light, more consciousness,

“O Supreme Lord of the universe, we implore Thee, give us the strength and the beauty, the harmonious perfection needed to be Thy divine instruments upon earth.”

The Mother

¹⁴ The Mother (1956) *Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on Education*, pp.105-06, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry

¹⁵ The Mother (1990) *Education, part 3: Physical Education*, p.72, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry