
Differential Relaxation

In Differential Relaxation we learn to apply effort to one part of the body while the rest of the body remains completely relaxed, for example pointing the right foot and curling the toes while the left foot remains completely soft and gentle.

With practice, we can bring this technique into our day-to-day life off the mat – exerting only the muscular tension or effort that is required for a particular activity. For example, when driving we are holding on to the steering wheel but is there unnecessary tension creeping in elsewhere within the body – perhaps the shoulders becoming tense and hunched? By noticing these two opposite sensations we can release any gripping or tension from parts of the body that have no need to be involved or over-exerted in the activity.

We can also use Differential Relaxation to help manage pain. Often when we are experiencing pain or discomfort, we generate a secondary pain by tensing other muscles within the body. A headache will often result in us tensing the forehead or furrowing the brow, and this additional muscular tension can increase the sensation of pain from the headache. But, if we can learn to gently guide our awareness to rest within the pain while noticing that elsewhere in the body there is no pain then we can begin to greatly ease any suffering that we may otherwise experience. So, in the example of the headache, noticing without any judgement where you feel the pain, breathing softly into that space for several rounds of breath, inviting the inhale and exhale to bring nourishment and healing. Then inviting your awareness to explore the rest of your body – and resting in a part of the body that is completely free from pain and discomfort. Settling your awareness there and allowing each exhale to gently soften and release through you.

I've been known to use this technique while in the dentist's chair – being aware of the sensations within the mouth and then guiding my full awareness to the tips of my toes. This made the whole experience much more bearable!

It can even be used in your asana practice – consciously relaxing parts of the body where tension may creep in. Have you ever noticed when in a balance that your toes are gripping on to the mat, or in a challenging posture that you're gripping your jaw? Next time you notice this, consciously relax into these areas and see how this affects your experience of the asana.