

ALTERNATION: KEY TO A BALANCED, HEALTHY LIFE

Alternation is a natural rhythm that is woven into the fabric of life on this planet. We go back and forth between day and night, the seasons of the year, breathing in and breathing out. By tuning into and aligning ourselves with alternation, we can come into deeper harmony with nature and with ourselves. When alternation is not naturally present, by consciously creating it, we bring our lives into greater balance and open ourselves to accelerated healing.

I first became aware of the power of alternation when coaching tennis. If a student's arm was relaxed when hitting a forehand, but tight when hitting a backhand, I would have her alternate between forehands and backhands with the instruction to simply notice the difference in tension in her arm, without judging or trying to change anything. Within a few minutes, her backhand would be as relaxed as her forehand. I have since applied the principle of alternation to many aspects of life and found it be consistently effective. I'll discuss a few applications below.

In every moment of our lives, we alternate between breathing in and breathing out. Bringing our attention to this alternation can have an instantaneous, powerful impact. Every time the breathe goes out, we can experience a deep release, allowing the breath to carry with it tensions and stagnant energy. When the breath comes in, we can consciously and gratefully receive fresh energy, creativity, and inspiration. To some extent, this happens whether or not we focus on the breath. But when we bring our full awareness to even one cycle of breath, we come home to the present moment and experience immediate relaxation and/or energization, whatever it is we need.

Another fundamental alternation is between doing and nondoing. In some activities, this alternation is built in. For example, in tennis, this is a 15-30 second break after each point. But many activities, including most work situations, are not structured to include regular periods of nondoing. In an office job, we can easily go from one task (phone call, meeting, preparing a document, etc.) to the next one, without a gap. Particularly, when we believe that we don't have enough time to do everything we think we need to do, we can go into an overdrive mode of rushing and pushing ourselves through the day. The simplest way to break out of this stressful mode is to create regular gaps, when we take a total break from the doingness of our jobs. Standing up and taking a few conscious breaths is a very quick and effective way to create a gap. If we want or need a longer gap, doing some stretching, walking around the block, or listening to one of our favorite tunes, can be very renewing. When we alternate between doing and nondoing, the doing becomes more joyful and effortless.

If our lives are very busy, it is helpful to create longer gaps. The traditional practice of taking a Sabbath day once a week is an excellent one. Scheduling time

regularly for vacations and retreats is also a wise practice. A well-planned retreat, which includes time to relax and rest fully, to connect deeply with God, and to examine your life from a fresh, clear perspective can be transformative. When you return from a retreat or vacation, it is helpful to watch closely to see if you jump back into your pushing mode and begin recreating stress. Whenever you catch yourself doing this, be grateful for the awareness, then take a few conscious breaths.

In intimate relationships, alternation between time together and time apart can be very healthy. Spending quality time alone is often renewing and strengthening. The partners can let go of identifying themselves as part of a “we” and reconnect deeply with the core of who they are. The time apart can also be a great opportunity to break patterns of neediness and co-dependency. When the partners come back together, they have the opportunity to create new, healthier ways of interacting.

Alternation also can be a powerful key to healing. One simple way to apply alternation in this regard is to first bring your full attention to a place in your body where there is pain or tension. Spend a moment simply experiencing the physical sensations and allowing them to be as they are. Then, shift your attention to another part of your body which is free from tension and pain. By going back and forth between the two spots, noticing the difference, but not trying to heal or change anything, you may find the tension or pain diminishes. Shifting awareness between a painful point and the breath can also be effective.

Similarly, alternation can be very effective in emotional healing. Say, for example, you are experiencing a lot of fear. The first step would be to experience the fear without resisting or trying to change it. Then, you could ask yourself the question, “Who is aware of the fear?” You wouldn’t look for an answer to the question in a word or a concept, but would allow the question to take you directly to the experience of the answer. Next, you would go deeply into experiencing the one who is aware of the fear. Then, you would dive back into the fear and notice whether it had changed, approaching the fear with an attitude of curiosity and discovery. You would continue to go back and forth between fear and awareness until the fear was gone or, at least, significantly diminished.

As you can see, the principle of alternation has many applications. I invite you to have fun exploring ways to use alternation to bring more balance, health, and freedom into your life. A great place to start is by paying more attention to the natural alternation of your breath. Playfully, see how often during the day, you can bring your full attention to the breath. Notice how this impacts the quality of your experience. Then, as life presents you with various challenges, be creative in finding ways to use alternation to meet those challenges effectively