

On Honing the Instrument  
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By the instrument in this case, I mean the tool you use to forge the best, most productive, most satisfying life you can in your time on this earth: your physical and mental health and capability. Your life will be no better than your instrument allows it to be. You can't sculpt a good wood carving without a sharp knife, and you can't sculpt a good life without a sharp mind and body. If you don't put in the work to get your mind and body in the best shape possible, don't expect to get worthwhile things done, or to be happy. Hone your instrument or pay the dues for not for not doing it; that's what it comes down to.

Honing your instrument has two dimensions, physical and mental. I'll briefly outline some suggestions in those two areas. Keep in mind that I have no formal credentials in this area, and I'm far from a realized being myself. All I can say with any assuredness is I've worked hard at getting my own instrument together and I'm a lot better than I used to be—more myself, with a greater sense of living the life that's right for me, more accomplished, and more personally satisfied with how things are going. So take what I say here for what it's worth. You may well get better advice elsewhere, I fully realize that. If you get nothing else out of this thought, use it as a prompt to look around other places to see what others have to say on this basic topic.

- Some things to do around physical wellbeing:

*Get the most complete medical check-up possible.* Tell your primary care doctor—general doctor, internal medicine doctor, whatever you call him or her--you want to find out anything at all that's off with you physically with the idea of fixing it if you can and learning to best accommodate it where you can't--vitamin deficiency, hormonal issues, anything, everything. Nothing is too small to attend to; it all adds up. Why try to get by with even small handicaps if you don't have to. You and your doctor work together on it, get to specialists, whatever it takes, to get you in the best physical working order you can achieve. If you need medication,

get on it. Do regular physical check-ups; no head-in-the-sand with that.

*Eat right.* Nothing is bigger than nutrition. Eat in a way that gives you the best health and vitality. It's no big secret what good food is. Get the junk food out of your diet. Keep alcohol under control. Ease off on the caffeine. Cut out smoking—a deadly habit. Get a book on nutrition, but as far as I can tell, it's common sense. Take an experimental attitude, try things—try getting off dairy, go vegan, see how that goes, learn what works for you. Take a multiple vitamin daily.

*Get lean.* Flab holds you back. The best measure of how your body ought to be is how it looks to you nude in front of the bathroom mirror. Should it be better? Go ahead and make it better, nothing is stopping you. No need to go on a big, crash, exotic diet. Know basically what calories are in food and what your daily caloric allotment is—there are all sort of books on that—and without being obsessive about being exact, have an idea of how many calories you are taking in a day. If you want to drop weight, take in fewer calories. A good way to get going on that: no junk or alcohol and no eating after the evening meal. Get a bathroom scale and record the numbers in a notebook. Get a tape measure and record your waist measurements over time. Again, and most of all, look in the mirror and make an assessment. And don't effort over it; decide what you are going to do around food and just persistently and patiently do that and get on with the rest of your life.

*Get toned and flexible and do regular cardio.* Seriously, I think you can get toned and flexible in ten minutes a day. Fine to get a gym membership, but I don't think you have to that. You could work out as part of your morning ritual, on the floor next to your bed, in the hallway, anyplace: 1) Fifteen (or so) pushups with a straight back. 2) Fifty (or so) sit-ups or crunches, whatever to call them. 3) A couple of stretches to keep the back flexible: sit on the floor with your legs out straight and bend forward and grab the soles of your feet (or as far as you can get) and hold for a minute or so; and then flip over on your stomach and lift your head and trunk by straightening your arms and hold that position for a minute or so (in yoga it's called the cobra pose). For cardio, anything that gets

you moving you can commit to regularly: tennis, golf, an elliptical or rowing machine, walk the dog or stroll the neighborhood, jog; anything, just get the blood circulating, and it would be good, it seems to me, to get out in the fresh air if you can manage it. I'm not qualified to say whether we need to double our heart rate for twenty minutes or anything like that, but I don't give it a high priority for myself. I read a lot of biographies, and I notice former president Truman just took a leisurely daily walk, and he lived to be ninety.

*Calm down.* Wherever you are, let your mind go, let the thoughts go, don't work with them, just be aware, here and now, in this moment, and follow your breath as it goes in and out on its own accord, don't force it, and with each out breath let go of the tension. Just be here now, no thoughts, no agenda, alive in the moment. Thirty seconds of that, or a minute, whenever you get a chance. And without efforting over it, try to live from that place, that posture, that way of being, as you go through the day. When you get speedy and charged up, tell yourself, "Calm down." Do what you have to do to get your life done, but leave out the wired urgency. Relax your tense muscles; say silently, or out loud, "Relax," breathing in on the "re" and out on the "lax"; let the racing thoughts go; bring yourself back to this moment and to the incredible gift of life. Measure your blood pressure at home as well as in the doctor's office. When it goes up, ask yourself what's going on to speed you up and try to fix that. If you need blood pressure medication, get on it.

*Get the stress down.* This could be put in the mental, as opposed to the physical, category, but I'm going to put it here because I think stress takes more of a physical toll than a mental one—it wears you out, plus living in a constant physically charged state can lead to disease, or so I suspect as a layman anyway. I think it's a very individual thing: each of us needs to take stock of our lives and identify what speeds us up and makes us tense and anxious and wired. With me, I need to keep my living space clean and orderly. There are certain people I need to stay detached from. There are certain behaviors that I won't name that pay off for me in the short run but in the long run cost me in terms of stress (and in other ways too). It all adds up to some rules I need to play by if I am going to keep the stress level down, and I either play by them or live with the

negative consequences. The question for you: what are your stress reduction rules?

*Get proper sleep.* Get your bedroom set up, a good mattress and a nice pillow and cozy covers. Stay away from anything that might speed you up and get in the way of good sleep like caffeine and alcohol. Watch it with sleep medication. You get to sleep tonight, but you have an even bigger problem tomorrow night.

- Some things to do for mental wellbeing.

I have had success with what could be called *bibliotherapy*; that is, using books to guide my own personal development and functioning.

I like to *read biographies*, and as part of that I look for ideas of how to improve myself mentally, broadly defined.

In order to live well, each of us needs to *resolve the question of what it all means and where we fit in the larger scheme of things and what our individual lives are about*. Different people answer these fundamental questions in different ways. Some find their answers in organized religion, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Eastern religions, and so on. Personally, I've gotten direction from the study of philosophy, especially existentialism and forms of nihilism, from writers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and Michel Foucault. Particularly important to me has been the life example and writings of the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima (1925-1970). I see this as a very individual thing; there isn't just one right answer to what difference it makes that we are alive that works for everyone. I do think, though, that it is important that each person gets clear about the significance of their life on this earth as part of honing their instrument, as I am calling it.

*Self-help books.* There's a lot of cynicism and skepticism about self-help books around, and it's articulate and comes off self-assured and credible. All I can report is that the systematic study and application of books within this genre have proved highly useful to

me. I'll list five of them in the order I read them, but they certainly wouldn't have to be considered in this order:

--Anthony Robbins, *Awake the Giant Within*.

--Don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements*.

--William Glasser, *Take Charge of Your Life*.

--Albert Ellis, *How to Stubbornly Refuse to Make Yourself Miserable About Anything*.

--David R. Burns, *The Feeling Good Handbook*. (Burns' book the handbook is based on is good too, *Feeling Good*.)

--David R. Burns, *Ten Days to Self-Esteem*.

The thrust of the mental wellbeing approach I have taken is a thought analysis and control, or cognitive, one. Basically, the idea is learning how to manage the way I think about things and not letting irrational, self-defeating thinking get in the way of my living well. If I had to recommend just one of the books I've listed, it would be between Burns' *Feeling Good Handbook* and the Robbins book. Perhaps you can get both the Burns and Robbins books and check them out to see which best connects to where you are. It'd be inexpensive to do—Burns is 73 cents used on Amazon, and you pay \$3.99 postage, and Robbins is a penny, with the same postage arrangement.

Always more to say about anything, but I think this is enough to go on for now. This topic of personal growth and fulfillment is sprinkled throughout the thought section of this web site. If you have the time and interest, read through the blurbs and check out thoughts that seem to hold promise for you.