

Economising Our Energy

A. R. Orage

Orage examines how we lose a large portion of our physical, mental and emotional energy each day. He makes suggestions about how it can be economised for the purpose of serving conscious development.

The human organism is a machine capable of doing work; and the energy to run it is derived from food, air and impressions. We eat food, we breathe air, and through our sense organs we receive impressions; and the give and take between these three forms of nourishment creates the various energies we manifest. These energies are of three kinds: physical, emotional and mental; and for each of these expenditures of energy it is necessary to create the means in ourselves. We cannot possibly spend more than our income. Not only can we not do physically more than our food permits, but we cannot feel and we cannot think more than our corresponding incomes allow. We get 'tired' of thinking, so that we think no more; and we get 'tired' with feeling, so that we can feel no more—exactly as we get tired with physical exertion. Fatigue in any of these respects means the same thing, namely, that we have temporarily used up our store of energy. After sleep or food or change of air or situation, we can act and feel and think again; but for the moment we are empty.

There are, however, two degrees of fatigue—imaginary and real. It is common enough for people to think they are tired when really they are not. Given some new motive, they surprise themselves by the energy they find they possess. This phenomenon in physical terms is sometimes called 'second wind'; and it is as if there were a second reservoir of energy which comes into use only when the first is exhausted. The same phenomenon can occur in the cases of feeling and thinking—only usually we give up after the 'first wind' is finished. But we can, so to say, work on past our first fatigue to a second wind or reservoir.

Real fatigue, as distinct from a merely first fatigue, occurs when the second or perhaps the third reservoir is used up. Then rest and recuperation are necessary or the machine will break down. Our machine is so constructed that practically every day we create within ourselves a superabundance of the three kinds of energy. We do not spend more than a small part of our income. Nevertheless, it is spent; and we go to bed tired, used up. Why is this?

The human machine may be compared to a three-storied house, each floor of which is devoted to a particular form of work. On the ground floor we carry on our physical life; on the second floor we carry on our emotional life; and on the top floor we carry on our intellectual life.

Now when we are working on one of these three floors, it is not necessary that the others should be working too. We do not turn on the lights over the whole house when we are only using one floor. That would be a waste of light. Similarly we ought not to be using energy on all three stories of our organism when we are only actually using one of them. For instance, if we are thinking, it is not necessary for the body to be expending energy as well; or if we are working physically it is not necessary for the mind to wander and waste energy doing nothing. We ought to learn to shut off our energies on each floor at will, so that the machine is not running when we are not in the room to direct it.

All 'unconscious' actions waste energy; only conscious action saves it. The first principle of economy is thus to employ ourselves consciously and voluntarily and not to allow any activity to escape our attention or to run away with energy itself. The three chief sources of loss correspond to the three stories of our organism; and they may be defined as loss by unconscious muscular exertion; loss by mind-wandering; and loss by worry.

Just examine the state of your muscles at this instant. Observe that in all probability you are sitting with a quite unnecessary exertion. Your legs are braced, your neck muscles are taut, your arms are not loose. All this means that you have the lights on in your ground-floor rooms, though, in fact, you do not need them; and the meter is ticking away your energy uselessly. The cure is to relax the body when it is not in use. Always when you are not using the body, leave it loose. By long habit the body does not relax of its own accord; but it can be trained to do so; and the consequent saving of energy is enormous.

Thinking aimlessly is to leave the lights on in the upper story when they are not really needed. But everybody does it. Observe your fellow-passengers in a bus or train.

They are not engaged in working out some definite problem. Their minds are just running over the incidents of the day or of yesterday or of last year. They are not trying to arrive at any conclusion; they are not, in fact, thinking. But their mechanism is being worked by association of ideas; and as it grinds out chance memories and images, it consumes energy. And when, later, we wish really to think, and to use our brains to some purpose, we find that our day's supply of energy is exhausted. The remedy is never to think aimlessly. When you catch your mind just thinking by itself—day-dreaming, musing, plunged in reverie, lost in memory—make it think definitely. Say the multiplication table backwards, or repeat some verse to yourself. Compose a letter or a speech. Think out clearly tomorrow's work. Recall exactly the day's events. Do anything so that you intend to do it, but don't allow your mind to be done. This effort to make the mind work may seem to be exhausting; but actually it is refreshing. It uses blood; whereas unconscious and uncontrolled thought is simply bleeding to exhaustion.

Worry, or involuntary feeling, is the third cause of our fatigue; and it is even more common than thought-waste and body-waste. As Shelley said: 'We look before and after and sigh for what is not'. About the events of yesterday or tomorrow it is not only absurd to allow ourselves to feel, since they are not present, but exist only in memory or imagination; but the habit robs us of the energy with which to feel today. We call sentimentalists those who dwell in feeling or events of the past or future. The lights on their second floor are always on. At the same time it is notorious that sentimentalists do not feel intensely the situations immediately present; it is jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never jam today with them.

The remedy consists in concentrating attention on the person or situation immediately present. Here, just in front of us, and not in memory or imagination, is the thing to be felt about, sympathized with or helped. Let tomorrow and yesterday take care of themselves. Those who practise these three methods will very soon find themselves with more energy that they now know what to do with. They will be hard to tire.

