



Sleep that knits the ravelled sleeve of care

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One of the eight blessings mentioned in Buddhist teachings is the ability to enjoy good quality sleep. Any of us who has spent a night tossing and turning will attest to that truth, but it is interesting that a philosophy that stresses the importance of 'waking up' should also sing the virtues of sleep. Perhaps the two are intimately related? Being awake or 'watchful' is obviously vital in order to remain free of mental impediments with all the anxieties, depression, anger and incongruent action they bring.

One can readily see the importance of wakefulness emphasised in philosophical and theological works such as the allegories used in the Christian teachings where a person must remain 'strong' (reason) and 'awake' (awareness) to 'guard' their 'house' (mind) from being ransacked by 'thieves'. Shakespeare, too, had Hamlet murdered by having poison poured into his ear while he slept. It might seem like just a good plot for a play, but when we consider the noxious thoughts we inadvertently listen to, it is far more likely that Shakespeare used these theatrical images in an allegorical and not just literal sense.

According to Macbeth, such anxieties can literally 'murder sleep', whereas the sleep of a well guarded mind can 'knit the ravelled sleeve of care'. How we use the mind during the day has a profound effect upon what happens at night and how we wake up in the morning. How often do we notice that we awaken to feel like we have

had little or no rest at all? Although we were all born 'sleeping like babies', as time goes on good quality sleep on a regular basis is not that common. Studies put the level of sleep disturbance in the elderly at 74% for men and 79% for women.¹ Obviously this figure will be contributed to by factors such as pain or other medical conditions and not just worries.

Quality sleep is vitally important to our mental and physical health. It is a common assumption that sleep disturbance is secondary to mood disturbance, but much of the time it may be the other way around. Poor sleep is a major etiological factor in mood disorders.^{2,3} Up to 70% of people with depression may resolve or significantly improve their depression by undertaking sleep strategies.⁴ There are, of course, strong links between sleep, mood and anxiety states. Low mood and anxiety produce effects on corticotrophin releasing hormone and other stress hormones that have a negative impact upon sleep patterns.⁵

There are many options for managing sleep problems. Nonpharmacological solutions include not going to bed unless sleepy, no stimulants before sleep, not napping for significant periods during the day and the rationalisation or cessation of sedatives. If pharmacological measures are needed there might be better options than benzodiazepines (eg. the administration of 2 mg of melatonin for people with seasonal affective disorder has been found to improve quality of sleep and

vitality, addressing a common problem with the more conventional sleeping pills⁶). Perhaps more promising is that melatonin can be stimulated endogenously, eg. when meditating, exercising, or by calorie restriction,^{7,8} and is also stimulated by certain tryptophane rich foods including milk and seaweed products.

For many generations we have been fed the idea that eight hours sleep is optimal but this seems not to be entirely accurate. There will be some individual variation and differing needs for sleep depending on age and illness, but from long term follow up of over 1 million people it seems that seven hours sleep is associated with best long term health as measured by mortality even when controlled for other risk factors. In fact more than eight hours and less than six hours were associated with higher mortality as was long term sleeping pill use.⁹ These findings were confirmed in a study which found that nine or more, or six or less hours was associated with significantly higher mortality due to heart disease in women controlled for other risk factors. The risk was nearly doubled for those who had less than five hours sleep and nearly 60% higher for those who had more than nine hours of sleep.¹⁰

Therefore, as one of the foundations of good health and vitality, the value of quality sleep cannot be overestimated. Sleep might be one more proof of the old adage that one should have all things in moderation.

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