

Stress Tonic

TAKE A DEEP breath and pay close attention to your lungs. Inhale deeply into your upper chest and see if your breath smoothly fills your chest. Then blow it out between slightly pursed lips and note if your breath flows smoothly outward, without any hitch or catch.

Did it? Good, you're pretty relaxed. But, if not, you might consider a way to release the tensions that are catching in your breath. We tend to get so carried away with our daily efforts that we forget to give ourselves permission to slow down and relax. The tide has to retreat a long way before generating a big wave of energy. Our bodies are like that, and checking your breath is like watching those waves, a good way to see how you're really feeling.

I have a special reason for these suggestions. What is the best ride you can remember? And by that, I don't mean that it had to be in a special place, or far away. Not that kind of great ride. No, I was thinking of a time when you and the bike simply moved as one, so that your transportation through space had an exquisite sense of swift relaxed control.

If I had taken that breath test last Friday night, I would have found myself stressed and anxious and relaxed breathing wouldn't have been possible. We've had an unusually difficult time this month securing the full complement of second-tier 600 sportbikes for our comparison test; that and various other delays and complications. Production is never problem-free, but I like to think I generally handle it pretty well.

But, almost miraculously, by Saturday night, everything about the world was fine again. Because Steve Natt, Steven Marks and I had spent the whole day on the road doing back-to-back testing, and a day of riding was just the tune-up my body needed.

There's a particular moment I keep coming back to that defined what was so great about the ride. I was riding the Kawasaki ZZR600 and entering an off-camber left-hand turn in the hills south of Murietta, braking from a swift but not over-excited pace on a two-lane road out in the countryside with no other vehicles around.

That was the moment I actually caught myself and became aware of how the bike and I had become one over the preceding miles. Exquisite is the right word, the totality of my awareness had become simply my connection to the controls and my movement through space, completely relaxed as I rode, barely shifting my weight, simply part of a combined center of mass.

Notice that riding this way also demands the least of the mechanical components.



Brakes are not jammed full on, suspensions are not mashed to the stops, tires are not brought to their traction limits, engines are not stressed to the max. And if you stop to consider it, I'll bet the very best racers, at speeds that would look impossible to sustain, are actually measuring out a precise amount of power, steering and braking with the same smooth restraint as you or I might apply to an involving ride in the country.

Several times this year I've been complimented on my pace and had fellow riders say how much they enjoyed riding with me. And although I am generally humbled by praise, I'm starting to think I'm on to something. Because I'm often ultimately responsible for MCN's bikes and riders' safety, I like to set a pace that pays a plausible resemblance to the speed limits on the straight-aways, yet makes good fun of the corners and stretches between them without relying on blind faith.

If Flow is the state of riding in a sense of oneness with the bike and that experience of Flow is a primary transcendent experience that motivates us to ride, there are a few things we can do to promote it.

As Mark Barnes has pointed out in his *Mental Motorcycling* columns (what could be more appropriate than this month's "Why We Ride - Part 5"), you can't force Flow, but you can optimize the conditions.

When riding with others, the urge to ride over your head in an effort to show how fast you are should be avoided. Full-throttle-to-redline acceleration, on even a mid-sized 600cc bike is rarely needed, and you want to keep a pace that doesn't jeopardize anyone or make them feel like they are begging for a speeding citation just to keep up. The pres-

ence of cross-traffic, driveways or any other opportunity for a collision is a sign to slow down, to a speed that can accommodate the unexpected. Fellow riders will be grateful for your common sense, and will be more likely to trust your pace and enjoy the ride.

Ride swiftly to keep your concentration sharp, and ride smoothly with a sense of flowing speed. The rest just happens.

I should also give some special credit to the Kawasaki. Its engine response is so good that it greatly contributes to the sensation of smooth control that felt so satisfying. Notably, the ZZR is carbureted, and a well-tuned set of carburetors is still very hard to beat for feedback and smooth control. Of all the Japanese manufacturers, Kawasaki typically set the standard for carburetor tuning, and the rest would need jet kits and fine tuning to come so close to perfection. The usual fuel injection's abruptness and On/Off quality at small throttle movements really interferes with the experience of flow. So do slack throttle cables.

Suspension quality also makes a big difference. A compliant stability over the bumps is a reassuring quality, but a race-track stiff suspension on less than racetrack-smooth roads is another hindrance to flow.

Positive and responsive steering can be achieved without resorting to overly stiff suspension, and a tactile front end feel is perhaps the most desirable quality because it means so much to your confidence.

Brakes that can return the best feedback from the front tire's contact patch are what you want. Pad composition and the structural integrity of the calipers, so as to apply even parallel pressure on the discs, are key factors. The Honda's brakes had incredible feedback.

Take a bike that works *with* the rider, a challenging road and flowing pace and you've mixed all the right ingredients for a perfect stress tonic. And because a good ride serves to integrate the mind and body without separation, it turns the usual preoccupation with imaginary troubles on its head. We tend to give too much credit to the mind and ignore the body. Your head won't do you much good when it's not completely integrated with your body.

Riding will continue to be my favorite form of meditation for as long as I can share that sense of oneness with the bike.

Here's to your next ride!

DAVE SEARLE

—Dave Searle
Editor