HAVE you ever wondered why the highest civilizations in ancient times were in the subtropical countries, whereas in modern times the highest civilizations are located in the cooler parts of the temperate zones? The explanation of this geographical transfer of the world’s centers of civilization is the invention of the chimney, which made possible the heating of a house without filling it with blinding smoke.

Without artificial heat to make him physically comfortable, it was impossible for a man to think effectively, in cold weather. While we deride the energizing effects of luxury that cause men to cease to think and to give themselves over to sensuous enjoyment, on the other hand, a vital essential to prolonged thinking is physical comfort. Excessive warmth checks both physical and mental action; excessive cold stimulates physical activity, but checks the concentration of the mind in deep thought.

Elaborate tests have shown that men do their best thinking when comfortably clothed and at air temperatures of from forty to sixty degrees. Because of the necessity of writing with the hands and exposing the bare fingers, the somewhat higher temperatures from sixty to seventy degrees are used in modern buildings. The application of these principles to your personal work is that you should keep the room in which you work at the lowest temperature consistent with physical comfort. If the temperature rises much above seventy degrees, the mental efficiency falls off rapidly. At a temperature of eighty-five degrees mental efficiency was reduced in all forms of tests.

Physical comfort is essential to thought because the physical comfort is essential to thought. But physical comfort does not mean physical indulgence. Nothing is more destructive to mental energy than the excessive indulgence of the physical appetites.

One of the best known efficiency engineers of New York City, in supervising the working methods of a large force of buyers for a series of chain stores, made a rule that these buyers should not close any deals after one P.M. A second rule was that they should not go to lunch before one P.M. This was merely a clever way of circumventing the salesman’s usual trick of taking a buyer to luncheon and wining and dining him until his mental powers are drugged by excess of food and he...
becomes less critical and more agreeable to the persuasive arguments of the salesman.

One effect of heavy eating is to induce sleep. Many would-be thinkers eat and sleep themselves into sheer stupidity. Without the wholesome blood-building effects of prolonged muscular activity, they indulge in the size of meals and hours of sleep required by the manual laborer.

Periodic sleeping is undeniably an essential to the continuance of life, but sleep is required more as a means of recuperation from physical weariness than from mental activity. The best thinkers are the shortest sleepers, and on the other hand, the manual laborers require the longest periods of sleep. The classic example cited to prove that the thinker does not need as much sleep as the ordinary man takes is Thomas A. Edison, who during the most active years of his life is said to have slept only four hours a day. It is not so generally known that Herbert Spencer, who is often called the world's greatest thinker, in his later stages of life did not average over three hours of sleep a day.

These instances should not lead to ill-advised efforts to emulate the extreme examples. One should not attempt to do better thinking by keeping longer awake, but the effort should be to do better thinking, which will result in keeping longer awake. For if the body be not fatigued or drugged with poison, sleep comes chiefly from the slowing down of the mental processes until consciousness lapses. If an adult is not tired or full of fatigue from physical labor, or if his system is not otherwise burdened with poisons from faulty diet or overeating, it is possible in many cases to cut down the sleeping period from twenty to forty per cent. of that commonly indulged in.

A certain "gentleman of leisure" known to the writer found himself at the age of forty in a state of chronic ill health, which fact excused him in indulging regularly in nine hours of sleep per day. By a sudden stroke Danie Fortune deprived him of his income, and in sheer necessity he was obliged to act as caretaker for a small office building. Ashamed to be seen at such neutral labor by his former prosperous friends he arose at four A. M. and did the necessary work of cleaning up the place. Thus his nine hours' sleeping period was suddenly decreased to five hours, and much to his astonishment his chronic ill health disappeared as if by magic.

The position of the body has a considerable influence upon the power of thought, but here again we can follow no fixed laws, and each must work out for himself and for the particular types of thinking the positions that will give the best results. David Graham Phillips, the novelist, did all his work at a stand-up desk. Mark Twain wrote a great deal in bed with his head propped up on pillows. Both methods attract our attention because of the novelty, but neither indicates abnormally good health, for the artificial posture of sitting upon chairs.

Many men in thinking out problems or in dictating, stand up or walk about. Taking outdoor walks as a means of thinking out problems is almost universal. When such movement or physical activity is resorted to, it is often only for the preliminary stage of thinking out a problem, for after the problem is nicely gotten, the thinker often quietly settles down and finishes the work at his desk.

Vigor and speed in thought can be consciously developed by the cultivation of vigor and speed in physical action. The reason for this is that all physical activity has its corresponding mental process and hence physical activity is merely an external sign of mental activity. However, as physical actions become reflex through habit, their association with the higher planes of mental activity grows less. Therefore, the type of physical activity which will be most helpful towards the increase of the mental speed powers is not the routine activity that one has well mastered, but a variety of physical action calling for constant novelty in mental processes. The thinker should, therefore, indulge in vigorous sports and pastimes and cultivate in all activities of life quickness and dispatch.

As the mental part of the action precedes and dictates the physical, it follows that the type of physical action which is under the best control of the mind, rather than a blind rushing hither-thither by emotional impulse, is the sort that will best develop the mind. That is why constantly taking up new sports and games calling for activity and skill will be helpful mentally.

The time of day at which mental activity is greatest does not correspond absolutely to the time of physical freshness. In the management of factory labor, it is found that the nearer the close of the day, and hence the greater the amount of physical fatigue, the poorer will be the quality of work done and the greater the percentage of accidents, indicating decline of physical powers through progress of the work. In the case of mental action, the process is for a time quite reversed. As the mental work proceeds the quality of the work often improves.

Contrary to many preconceived opinions, tests have shown that the best mental labor is performed in the latter part of the day. Some of these tests, however, may be affected by conditions of temperature, food taking, or other factors that would alter the mental potential. The time of day at which great thinkers have done their work seems to vary widely; so that no general laws can be laid down. Common opinion is that the early morning is the best working period, but here again we may have other factors of mental efficiency, such as coolness, an empty digestive tract or freedom from intrusion.

The individual student should follow no iron-clad rules but should make careful tests to determine, under the circumstances of his own labor, the best time of the day in which to do his primary thinking. For those living in warm climates, and for all of us in the summer time, the utilization of the early hours of the morning for mental work is to be highly recommended. Training oneself to think amid a confusion of sights and sounds is highly desirable and necessitated by modern business life, but such a thinking environment rarely equals that of solitude. In the modern corporation the rank and file of clerks and petty officials are now made to work in vast rooms like those of ancient palaces. This is highly to the discredit of the intellectual level of such workers, for it simply means that corporation managers have found out that when they shut them up alone they will idle like bad children when the teacher is not looking. But when a man has proven his ability to do consequen
tial thinking, he is given a private office in which to do it.

If your work requires that you think among disturbances, do what you can to think with this handicap, but do not attempt to carry through your life an unnatural burden of such disturbances. If you wish to do the best thinking that is in you, have some (Continued on page 62)