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Thomas O Sargent

Conditioned Meditation

ConServ in Hartford, Connecticut, the United States, had developed a method for assuring that the benefits of meditation and of meditative exercises will be accessible in emergency and in other high stress environments. Such exercises provide a measure of mental flexibility which is characteristically absent in high stress conditions. Cognitive flexibility is essential for assessment of emergency situations. Without it, the rigid programming of the mind is likely to lock onto an initial and incorrect assessment of the emergency. The same programming will filter out all contradictory information, thus supporting the veracity of the incorrect assessment. This is the process which continued for the first two and a half hours of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident.

ConServ uses a method of interrupting this condition in both power plant and medical situations. Briefly stated, cognitive flexibility and personal awareness is developed, and then closely associated with one instrument or control in the work situation. Encounter with that element of the work situation then will automatically elicit the desired elements of flexibility. The learned associations are brought back from the exercise in such a way that the associations themselves can be relied upon to replicate the needed parts of the exercise, even in high stress situations. When they are strongly associated with something in the work environment, the meditative content will automatically become present.

A surgeon in New Jersey uses this method to maintain his flexibility and awareness during stressful situations which may occur during an operation. The instruments he uses remind him of the exercise, in which he reexperienced himself on a ski hill. He can feel the ski pole in his hand, the flexibility of his body and of his response to the environment, and this comes back because

of the association with the instruments. The surgeon focuses emotionally upon the ski hill, this allowing himself to also focus awarely on the events of the emergency.

The process by which this is developed is simple. Called "Imaging and Association" the workshop or classroom participant is led to a solitary and pleasant "Special Place". There, associations are built with a wide area of self discovery and appreciation. The associations are built through simple repetition until they can be expected to be reliably recalled under any work conditions. This provides a way of relying on programmed associations to replicate the flexible ease of meditation.

Imaging and Association((Relaxed).This is most like the usual meditative experience. Short relaxation exercises are used. Often these will include breathing instructions and tension followed by relaxation. Sometimes participants are merely instructed to relax. Music is used both to develop association and to cut out any background noise. ConServ used the flute and harp music of either Rampal or Galway, preferably the western sounding Japanese music recorded by both, because it has few associations which will intrude upon the exercise.

With the music on and the people comfortable and relaxed, they are asked to go to the Special Place, alone. They are urged to use a wooded place, a beach or a mountain, and are told that a quiet room or the like is fine. For the first exercise, the leader describes some elements of such a place. This is annoying to some and necessary for others. The leader uses a quiet and firm voice tone. The people are told to look around the Special Place, with eyes closed to keep out the interference of the room they are in.

As the participants look around their Special Places, they are asked to notice how the environment feels on their bodies, and say their first names.

Your first name and feel the breeze or the sun, and how your body stands, sits or lies on what you are on, and your name. Now reach out and touch some things around you, and your name. Select one thing to touch, and your name, and touch what you touch. Your name, and touch. Look around and notice how all the things in your Special Place are different, one from another. Your name and touch what you touch. See how you are different, and the trees and rocks are different, and you are different, and your name and touch. Now notice how you are different, and some things about you that are different that you appreciate, and your name and touch. Now select one of those appreciations, and touch and your name and the appreciation. And now come back to the room, and your name, touch and appreciation. Say your name, touch and appreciation, and when you feel like it, open your eyes and your name, touch and appreciation.

Even this shortened version, read and without music, will provide the exercise. For most, the touch is the magic ingredient. Recalling the soil or the bark or the rock that is touched will bring back all. Gradually, extensive areas of self appreciation are integrated through this exercise. It is a beautiful vehicle of both personal exploration and of structured recall.

It is usually the touch that is associated with the work environment. On other trips into the Imaging, the participant can select other things to touch in the Special Place which may be more easily associated with things in the work place. Participants become inventive.

Because emergency situations often produce feelings states which are powerful, the quiet of the Relaxed Imaging and Association can be easily replaced by stress. In response to this, ConServ has developed an energized exercise.

Imaging and Association (Energized) In this case, the relaxation exercises are those that will relate to standing, and centering, as, for example, imagining a cord up the centre of the spine and out of the top of the head. This is pulled and relaxed as some breathing exercises are done. The music is Spanish guitar, with the most unfamiliar music available.

Participants are asked to go to a highly energized and pleasant Special Place, such as skiing, sailing, motorcycling or running. Here, the body sensations are important, the strength, coordination and energy. They are asked to feel the environment on the body, as they stand with their eyes closed. The leader uses the same associations, but the voice will be louder, excited and firm. The whole exercise tends to move much more rapidly. The associations are brought back to the room in the same way. They will bring back a variety of touches, a mast stay, sky pole, motor cycle handlebars, and maybe even a periscope handle.

This particular exercise is the most powerful for recovery of the image in high stress situations. It is less useful for self exploration. It also has some advantages that other meditative techniques do not have. The power of the energized state will force itself through stress, while the quiet and "alpha" states will be lost. This becomes important also when these exercises are used in counselling. The quiet states are close to depression, and often lead depressive persons into depression. The energized exercise will not. It is even possible to so integrate the experiences that individuals will move from one to the other, without music, as needed.

The payoff is, of course, when the exercise is integrated with the workplace or with whatever will be around when the emergency occurs. A nuclear power plant operator made an association between the handlebars of his motorcycle and the bakelite handle of one of the turbine controls. His hand on the control brings back both the exercise and his cognitive flexibility, and his extensive knowledge of the plant.

Through this simple exercise, the rigid, programmed and hence reliable part of the mind is used to assure the availability of the kind of mental flexibility that is usually absent in high stress situations. The meditative elements are conditioned to be available under any work conditions.

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Willow

THE SAMADHI TANK

Meditation through Sensory Deprivation

The Sensory Isolation Tank is a most exciting tool, which was developed in the States and is just beginning to be used in this country. It is an incredibly powerful instrument for self discovery. I first read about it in a book by Dr John Lilly, Programming and Meta Programming the Human Biocomputer, which I came across 'by accident' last year. Lilly's style of writing is deliberately boring because he didn't want the isolation tank to be generally known. He invented the tank in the 50's and kept in secret for the first year of its existence while he tried it out for himself. After that it was known only a small number of people in the scientific community until the 1970's when he considered that the design had been perfected to such a point as to be safe for use by the general public. He then held workshops on the use of the tank and as a result Glen and Lee Perry started production of a commercial version known as the Samadhi Tank. This is a fairly small tank primarily built for one person to use at a time but large enough for two people as well. Very few of these tanks are in Great Britain, perhaps three in all. The first person to have a Samadhi Tank, John Alcock, decided that he could build a better version and so there is now an English version which is smaller than the Samadhi Tank and incorporates a body centering system which prevents the body from touching the sides. This tank is easier to maintain and will take up less space but is only large enough for one person at a time.