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CREATIVE MEDITATIONS

If we were to show you a photograph of a person sitting, eyes tightly closed, in the full lotus position and ask what that person was doing, you might well reply "meditating."
If we showed you a picture of someone seated on a tripod stool outdoors, painting a mountain landscape, and asked the same question, you would probably answer "painting."

But if the point of meditative practice is to stop the mind-to focus us in the here-and-now rather than the not-yet or the already-gone or the never-to-be-that painter, immersed in contemplating the exact degree of toothy raggedness of a distant line of willows while selecting the precise mix of burnt-umber and thalo blue, could be meditating as deeply as any yogi.

Virtually all arts, including most crafts, can become meditation. This is not to suggest that beauty and harmony should not be an aim of the creative meditator. However, critical judgements that intrude upon the mind during the creative act interrupt the attention given to materials and environment and inner state. It is possible that work produced during meditative moments may be less strained and self-conscious than that produced with an imagined external evaluator peering over the artist's shoulder. But the excellence or inadequacy of the work is not the point-the creative act itself is.

The loss of amateurism is perhaps one of the greatest losses of our modern world. Cheap and efficient reproductions make it less necessary that we make our own art and music, while holding up examples of such polished professionalism that the beginner is often immediately discouraged. Why stumble through a ballet class when you can see Baryshnikov on television? Why pick up the brush when you can page through a lavishly illustrated book or visit a touted museum show? Why write a poem when you can read one-or have one read flawlessly to you by a great actor?

Yet the amateur-the word includes the Latin word "amo," "I love"-is a person who can enjoy art for itself, rather than for the possible professional rewards it may entail. It could be be argued that only the amateur and the genius can find what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow" in the practice of an art form. For the amateur, once the rudiments are learned, there is the chance to create without worrying about audience approval. For the genius, who has moved so far beyond the rudiments, there is the opportunity to fully engage in the exquisite pleasure and struggle of

creation.

In this section we focus on creative arts and related processes as ways of attaining a more balanced inner state. Some of the techniques are ancient, others relatively modern. What they have in common is a focus on letting go into the creative moment. Some products of that process-a photograph, a crocheted hat, a poem-may be pleasing enough to save and display, but the most important result is the illuminated mind and soul of the creative meditator.

CREATION AS BRAIN-STAGE ALTERATION

Creative acts, like other meditations, produce certain physiological changes in the creator. In order to understand these alterations, we must first examine the structure of the brain and the way it functions.

The human brain is actually three brains, each wrapped around the other, the innermost being the most primitive, the outermost the most developed. Nature has thriftily layered our brains so that, as humans, we benefit from the development of other species, building upon rather than losing their evolutionary advantages.

The innermost brain is called the reptilian; we share these brain structures with lizards and frogs and snakes. This sector of the brain grows out of the spinal cord, which carries the enormous amount of information provided by our nervous system, rather like a main electrical conduit carries hundreds of current-filled wires. The spinal cord enters the brain at its base, swelling into an inch-long structure called the medulla. The steady movements of the heart, pumping blood, and of the lungs, inspiring and expiring air, are controlled by the medula. Like the other parts of the reptilian brain, the medula does not need conscious instruction to function.

Two smaller sections of this part of the brain-the pons (from the Latin word for "bridge") and the midbrain-are connecting links to the next two layers. Wrapped around and arching over the reptilian brain is a series of brain structures called the paleomalian, the brain of early mammal development: the thalamus, which carries most sensory information; the hypothalamus, center for sexual arousal and the autonomic nervous system; the cerebellum, which controls and coordinates movement; and the limbic system, which releases hormones and is connected to our emotional awareness and, some studies suggest, to our learning abilities.

The outer layer of the brain is the most recently-developed, the neomammalian or new-mammal brain. It includes the neocortex, a complex and rich array of cells which carry within them our ability to plan and to dream, to worry and to create. The two hemispheres of the neocortex have become

well-known in recent years. The dominant brain section (in most people, the left, controlling the right side of the body) processes language and linear thought, while the nondominant (in most people, the right, controlling the left side) filled with images and holistic ideas. Joining these hemispheres is the important corpus callosum, a kind of rubber-band of brain fibers which carries information between right and left sides of the brain, and thus of the body.

There is significant research which suggests that creativity, as it is conventionally defined, activates the nondominant sector of the brain-which we will call, for convenience and with apologies to left-handers, the left-brain. Seeing things as a whole, rather than in linear parts, the left-brain is the source of intuition and inspiration, of those "a-ha" moments when everything seems suddenly clear. It is then the project of the right-brain to articulate or otherwise express these "a-ha" moments, to organize the details of that expression. There is evidence that the corpus callosum is vital in this process, and that continued effort in such expression actually strengthens the efficiency of the corpus.

Within these brain structures, constant activity takes place. Since the invention of the electroencephalogram machine (EEG), we have been able to chart how the neurons, the nerve cells of the brain, emit electrical impulses that carry information. The impulses are like vibrations along a tightly-wound string and are thus described in terms of frequencies (Hertz). These impulses are categorized-from lowest to highest-as Delta (.5-4 Hz), Theta (4-8 Hz), Alpha (8-12 Hz), Beta (12-16 Hz), High Beta (16-32 Hz), K-complex (33-35 Hz) and super high beta (35-150 Hertz). Lower than .5 Hz is considered brain death.

Not all of these brain states are understood. Some are little explored because they seem to be relatively rare. In the case of others, technological limitations have made them difficult to study; only recently has the super high beta state been discovered, because previously the paper installed in EEG machines wasn't wide enough for the frequency bands to be charted. There have been relatively few studies of the brain states over High Beta-although there is some evidence that K-complex states can be connected with highly intuitive moments and that Super High Beta may include what are termed out-of-body experiences.

Meditators, however, only need to become familiar with the more frequently-experienced brain states. We all enter Delta when we sleep; very highly experienced meditators can also sometimes enter Delta without falling asleep, defining it as a state of imageless, disembodied relaxation. In Theta, the brain waves move approximately twice as fast as in Delta; images, visual and otherwise, created in the mind in this state seem extraordinarily real and tangible. In Alpha, the relaxed body is receptive to inner

suggestion, but there is considerably more awareness of the physical world. The Beta brain state is characterized by alertness; the inner world recedes while the outer takes precedence; this is our normal "conscious" state. High-Beta is experienced as anxiety and very intense alertness.

BRAIN-STATES, MEDITATION, AND ART

It should be clear from the description above that what we call meditation is a change from a high frequency of brain-wave activity-such as Beta-to a lower one, such as Alpha or Theta. Any activity which encourages the lowering of brain-wave frequency would have the same benefits as such traditional meditative practices as breathing and body postures.

Creative arts and traditional meditative practices both demand focus, and they both rely upon repeated physical actions. In many traditional practices, the focus is placed upon the breath; in other cases, as in yantra and mantra meditations, a specific object or word is made the focus of the mind's activities. Similarly, any artistic endeavor requires focus and concentration. This is often not a single focus but a double one, as though the mind is looking within and without simultaneously: writing demands focus on the words which are appearing on the pages as well as those heard in the mind, drawing requires the mind's eye to be open as well as the hands to be engaged. Such complex activity is often experienced and remembered as a pleasurable intensity of mind and body working harmoniously.

As for repetitive motions, this is obvious in such practices as t'ai chi, wherein the practitioner repeats a sequence of motions many times. Similarly, the repeated practice of an art offers many cues to the body-mind that concentration and meditation is to occur. The opening of the paint tubes, the soft smell of the oils, the brightness of the white canvas-all of these sensory experiences become messengers of relaxation and focus. In some creative meditations, including drumming and many needlecrafts, a repetitive motion is sustained for some time, enforcing a meditative mood.

Thus any activity which demands focus and which involves some degree of repetitive activity lowers brain-state frequency and therefore produces the effects of meditation. In addition, creative meditations encourage the use of both hemispheres of the brain. Rhythmic and visual creative arts like music and painting obviously tap into the nonlinear, image-filled left brain. But creative efforts in writing have the same effect, for the metaphoric nature of much poetry and similar genres demands the activation of the left brain more fully than does formulaic writing.

Creative meditations are not limited to those catalogued in this section. It is possible to imagine, for instance, the making of stained glass windows as permitting the emergence of a meditative state-or the sewing of a child's

garment, or the binding of a handmade book, or the throwing of a clay pot upon a wheel. Like the mindfulness meditation described in a previous chapter, creative meditations involve being entirely in the moment, entirely focussed on the task at hand, entirely committed to the dance of beauty emerging into form. There is, in fact, no end to this section. Invisible chapters appear in your own life, waiting only to be discovered, read, and employed.