

ROLE OF ASANA AND MEDITATION IN SURVIVAL OF SOCCER PLAYERS TRAPPED IN FLOODED CAVE

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Abstract : This paper is focused on the significance of meditation in case of young Thai Soccer player boys, who were trapped for 18 days, in the Cave flooded with water in Thailand. When the news was broadcast all over the world on all the news channel, internet, social websites and other media, people were worried everywhere. All were deeply concerned to save boys somehow. People and government from various countries offered help by providing money, man power and technology to save the boys. Indian engineering company, Kirloskar also helped in evacuation process by providing high quality pumps and other material. The company has excellent deal of expertise in pumping out the flood water. Though the rescue operation was on full swing, the most important concern was how the boys will survive for so many days without food, sunlight and oxygen. Thanks to the soccer coach, Ekapol Chanthawong, former Monk, who knew the technique of meditation. He trained boys with technique of meditation that helped them in conserving energy throughout the ordeal. In Indian religious philosophy, importance of yoga and meditation is explained with great significance since ancient times. It's time to understand the importance of meditation as method of survival with relevance to different sufferings existing in present times.

IndexTerms - Meditation; Soccer player boys; Cave; Thailand.

I. Introduction

Modern Medical Research is supporting Yoga and meditational practice for healing and curing of serious illness. It has been found that Yoga practices helps the patients suffering with stress. It has been reported that Yoga asana has regulatory effect on neurobiological systems like the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal, HPA, axis and the Sympathetic Nervous System, SNS. When patients undergo stress for longer duration, these systems are attacked by catecholamine such as epinephrine and non epinephrine also known as stress hormones. As a result such patients become hyper vigilant and deregulated. When these systems are dysfunctional, they are said to dispose one to diseases like Diabetes, Obesity, Autoimmune Disorders, Depression, Substance Abuse and Cardiovascular diseases, **Ross & Thomas (2010)**.

Srinivasan and Baijal (2007) together conducted studies of Sudarshan Kriya Yoga meditation. They studied the mismatch negativity (MMN), an indicator of pre attentive processing. The Sudarshan Kriya meditation is the combination of breathing exercises and concentrative meditation. Larger MMN amplitudes were noticed in meditators as compared to non-meditators. There was a significant increase in MMN amplitudes immediately after the meditational practice. Thus it suggested that, the transient state changes due to the meditational practices. Their studies concluded that regular meditational practices enhance the pre attentive perceptual processes, enabling good change detection.

Present study is focused on the significance of meditation in case of young Thai Soccer player boys, who were trapped for 18 days, in the Cave flooded with water in Thailand. On Saturday 23 June 2018, a group of twelve boys aged between 11 and 16 from a local junior football team named the Wild Boars and their 25-year-old assistant coach, Ekkaphon Chanthawong, went missing after setting out to explore the cave. According to some local sources, they planned to have a birthday party in the 10km long Tham Luang cave system after the football practice, and spent a significant sum of money on food, but they disclose this in a news conference after their rescue. There was sudden and continuous rainfall after they had entered the cave, hence the players were stranded in the tunnels. They had to leave some food supplies behind when fleeing the rising water. The boys became trapped when they entered the cave system, leaving their shoes and bags near the mouth of the cave to write their names on the wall. After ten days, British divers found them sitting quietly in the dark. They were meditating. They were young boys and even after trapped for ten days, they were not screaming or crying. Because they learn to meditate and save energy and keep calm from their coach. The healing practice of these boys can be compared with Yoga and meditation practice.

Ekapol Chanthawong, the boys' soccer coach, who had first led them into the Tham Luang complex following a game on 23rd June with the apparent goal of their signing their names on a cave wall as part of an initiation ritual. Chanthawong himself is in actuality a former apprentice monk, having left his vocation three years ago and begun working with the Wild Boars soon after. Local media suggests that he was among the weakest in the group towards the end, having sacrificed what supplies he had in order to keep his charges strong, together with teaching the boys how to meditate in order to conserve their energy throughout the ordeal. Having trained to be a monk, he left his monastery in order to care for his ill grandmother in Mae Sai, before taking up his position with the junior soccer team, many of whose members are themselves from impoverished backgrounds or are ethnic minorities without a nationality of their own.

Chanthawong was not sanctioned legally for his actions of taking boys into the cave. According to his friend, he loved them more than himself. Chanthawong is himself reportedly an orphan whose parents died when he was 10. He didn't had habit of drinking or smoking. He knew how to look after himself and he guided the young boys to do same. Chanthawong had cheated death earlier also at the age of 10 years, when a disease swept through his village, sparing only him. He was the only member of his family who survived the epidemic which overcame his Northern Thailand home town in 2003. The disease killed his seven-

year-old brother, then his mother and father. Until he was 12, Chanthawong was looked after by extended family but he was a "sad and lonely" little boy. His relatives decided to send the him to a Buddhist temple to be trained to become a monk. Chanthawong spent a decade at the temple, learning meditation and wearing a saffron robe. He had learned the survival skills at the monastery, which had helped him and the schoolboys to survive in their subterranean trap. Chanthawong had spent a decade as a Buddhist monk, and so he knew how to meditate for up to an hour at a time. He helped and guide the boys in the meditation practice when they needed it most.

2. It has been proved in many past studies of Yoga, that yoga and meditational practices helps in developing and acquiring 'siddhis'. Yoga is the Astika darshana school of Hindu philosophy. Rishi Patanjali was the founder of yoga sutras in around 400 CE. The meaning of "yoga" in Sanskrit is union with God. Yoga also means discipline or effort. It signifies an effort to establish union of body and mind. (Ranganathan, 2008). The yoga practices include concentrating one's consciousness on physical body through breathing and postures. After achieving concentration yoga helps person to seek a deep state of relaxation and overpower the mind. Thus a person reaches a state of enlightenment. Meditation is final step of Patanjali's Yoga. Rishi Patanjali explained, in eight steps, how one can achieve the state of meditation.

Rishi Patanjali, 400 CE, mentioned eight important steps of Yoga, also called as limbs of Yoga. The *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* are the eight steps to be followed to achieve salvation. The first five steps of Yoga are the aids for controlling outer senses perceptions. The last three are the aids for internal awareness. The first aid, Yama has five abstentions related to material world, quiet like the five vows of Jain philosophy. Five *Yama* include *Ahimsa*, *Satya*, *Asteya*, *Brahmacharya*, and *Aparigraha*. *Niyama* are the daily duties. Five *Niyama* are the good habits relating to self. They are *Shaucha*, *Santosh*, *Tapas*, *Svadyaya* and *Ishvaraparanidhan*. *Asanas* are the body postures that help in meditation. *Asana*, as described in Patanjali Sutras, is steady, pleasant, motionless and comfortable posture attained by a *Yogi*. Verse 46 of second Chapter describes asana as, '□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□□□ *Asana* has great relevance in the present paper. Patanjali has not mentioned any names for various 'Asanas'. In verse 47, it is stated that 'Asanas are perfected after some time of practice. One finds relaxation of effort in performing 'Asanas' with time and with meditation on the ultimate truth. The quivering of body is stopped after some time of practicing 'Asana'. A Yogic posture never experiences pain and restlessness while doing 'Asana'. The secondary texts of Yoga have mentioned that the correct Yoga posture is with erect spinal posture. One should keep chest, neck and head erect while doing any 'Asana'. The names of various 'Asanas' are mentioned in texts of later Yoga scholars such as 'Vyasa Rishi, 200 BC. *Pranayama* are the breathing exercises that increase attention inwards and also regulate life force energies or prana. *Pratyahara* stands for control of senses or to withdraw the five body senses from the outer physical world. This practice helps in one's own self awareness or 'knowing self'. The *Yogi* has to control the mind processes from the senses and worldly perceptions. One can gain self knowledge and connect to inner world by this practice. The last three steps of Yoga - *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi*, are the inward practices or aids. *Dharana* is to focus on object or image for concentration practice. The practitioner has to hold one's mind into the inner state. The mind is fixed on some '*mantra*', place, object or any conception to focus. This helps avoiding drifting of mind by sensory perceptions. *Dhyana* is deep and steadfast meditation. It is contemplation of object of 'Dharana'. It is the process of mind where the person involved is actively engaged with the object of meditation. While *Samadhi* is to unite with the object of meditation that is God. It is the oneness of meditator with the subject of meditation. The practice helps in increasing consciousness, extra sensory perceptions and concentration that helps in spiritual, physical and mental health benefits for individuals. It is the spiritual state of consciousness. The consciousness of *Yogi*, in meditation fuses with the subject of thought that is 'God'. One acquires oneness with supreme consciousness.

3. Meditation in Buddhism: The meditation method in Buddhism is also explained by concentrating one's mind and acquiring a correct posture. Make correct and comfortable posture: arrange the legs in the most comfortable position; set the backbone straight as an arrow. Place your hands in the position of meditative equipoise, four finger widths below your navel, with the left hand on the bottom, right hand on top, and your thumbs touching to form a triangle. This placement of the hands has connection with the place inside the body where inner heat is generated. Bending the neck down slightly, allow the mouth and teeth to be as usual, with the top of the tongue touching the roof of the mouth near the top teeth. Let the eyes gaze downwards loosely -- it is not necessary that they be directed to the end of the nose; they can be pointed toward the floor in front of you if that seems more natural. Do not open the eyes too wide nor forcefully close them; leave them open a little. Sometimes they will close of their own accord; that is all right. Even if your eyes are open, when your mental consciousness becomes steady upon its object, these appearances to the eye consciousness will not disturb you.

Within meditations also, there is an object of observation : external or internal. Now, instead of meditating on the mind itself, it is advised to meditate on an external object of observation -- for instance, the body of a Buddha for those who like to look at a Buddha or a cross for those who like that, or whatever symbol is suitable for meditator. It is explained to mentally visualize that the object, about four feet in front of you, at the same height as the eyebrows. The object should be approximately two inches high and emanating light. Try to conceive of it as being heavy, for this will prevent excitement. Its brilliance will prevent laxity. While concentration, one must strive for two factors: first, to make the object of observation clear, and second, to make it steady.

If one sees red with the eyes closed or is bothered by what he see when his eyes are open, he is too involved with the eye consciousness and thus he should try to withdraw attention from the eye consciousness and put it with the mental consciousness.

Anything which interferes with the steadiness of the object of observation and causes it to fluctuate is excitement. To stop that, it is advised to withdraw your mind more strongly inside so that the intensity of the mode of apprehension begins to lower.

It is not sufficient just to have stability but it is also necessary to have clarity. That which prevents clarity is laxity, and what causes laxity is an over-withdrawal, excessive declination, of the mind. First of all, the mind becomes lax; this can lead to lethargy in which, losing the object of observation, you have as if fallen into darkness. This can lead even to sleep. When this occurs, it is necessary to raise or heighten the mode of apprehension. As a technique for that, think of something that you like, something that makes you joyous, or go to a high place or where there is a vast view. This technique causes the deflated mind to heighten in its mode of apprehension.

The object of meditation that one is visualizing has to be held with mindfulness. When powerful steady mindfulness is achieved, introspection is generated. But one must check from time to time whether the mind has come under the influence of

excitement or laxity. When one develops mindfulness and introspection well, he is able to catch laxity and excitement just before they arise and can prevent them. In this way one can sustain meditation with an external object of observation.

Another type of meditation in Buddhism involves looking at the mind itself. One has to stay in natural state without any thoughts of past, present or future and without generating any conceptuality. This meditation is not associated with eyes but with inner consciousness. This is quiet similar to Ashtaang Yoga of eastern Yoga philosophy Meditation. With regular practice, consciousness can be eventually perceived or felt as an entity of mere luminosity and knowing. The best time for practicing this form of meditation is in the morning, in a peaceful and quiet place. One should meditate with clear mind and with full alertness. It is also advised to eat less and sleep less the night before as this makes the mind lighter and sharper the next morning and the person is able to meditate with full concentration. With regular meditation, gradually the mind becomes more and more stabler, and mindfulness and memory will also become more clearer.

With deep meditation, the ultimate nature of the I -- emptiness -- is analyzed and realized. When it is analyzed, it doesn't exist. One should remove the nature of 'I' from mind then only he is able to meditate. The conventional existence of the I and pleasure and pain, make it necessary to generate compassion and altruism. Because the ultimate nature of all phenomena is this emptiness of inherent existence, hence one must cultivate wisdom. When compassion and wisdom are practiced in union, quality of wisdom grows profoundly and the sense of duality diminishes. At the same time the mind itself becomes more subtle. These are a few of the types of meditation practiced in the Tibetan tradition. Besides this there are many other techniques such as mantras.

Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment and taught in India over two thousand years ago, yet his teachings remains refreshing and are followed by people all over the world today. Everyone of us want happiness and remove suffering from our lives. The Buddha recommended that in working to overcome suffering we should help others as much as we can. He further advised that if we are unable to help others, we should at least not do any harm to others.

Buddhist Meditational practice also involves training our minds through meditation. But if our training in calming our minds, developing qualities like love, compassion, generosity and patience is effective, this must be in practice in day-to-day life. Being more concerned for removing the suffering of others instead of your own is truly to follow the spirit of all the great religions including Buddhism. The purpose of Buddhism is to serve and benefit all sentient beings, including man. The Buddha gave an example of contentment and tolerance to his followers by serving others with selflessness.

The Dalai Lama quotes *"I am often asked whether the teachings and techniques of Buddhism continue to be relevant in the present day and age. Like all religions, Buddhism deals with basic human problems. So long as we continue to experience the basic human sufferings resulting from impermanence, attachment and wrong view, there is no question of its relevance. The key is inner peace. If we have that we can face difficulties with calm and reason, while keeping our inner happiness. The teachings of love, kindness and tolerance, the conduct of non-violence, and especially the Buddhist theory that all things are relative are a source of that inner peace."*

'Om mani padme hūm' is the six-syllabled Sanskrit mantra associated with the four-armed Shadakshari form of Avalokiteshvara (Tibetan Chenrezig, Chinese Guanyin), the bodhisattva of compassion. Here, Mani means "jewel" or "bead" and Padma means "the lotus flower", the Buddhist Sacred Flower. It is commonly carved onto rocks (called "mani stones") or written on paper which is inserted into prayer wheels. When an individual spins the wheel, it is said that the effect is the same as reciting the mantra as many times as it is duplicated within the wheel. It is the Most Popular Mantra in Tibetan Buddhism. This is also known as the mantra of the deity of love and compassion, Chenrezig or Avalokateshvara in the Sanskrit language, translation meaning 'Hail to the Jewel in the Lotus'. In Tibetan Buddhist meditation or retreat, the mantra, 'Om mani padme hūm' can be chanted quietly or silently. It is short and easy to pronounce. It is one of the beliefs in Buddhism that if one recites this mantra repeatedly there will be lesser chances of taking birth in lower realm and will eventually lead to enlightenment.

In this case, it seems that the soccer players, being isolated in cave ironically acquired 'pratyahara' state of Ashtaang Yoga philosophy, that is withdraw the five body senses from the outer physical world. Pranayama, was there major focus in the darkness and also in low oxygen supply. The asana they opted for meditation was padmasana. The meditation technique taught to boys were according to Buddhism. It was deep concentration in self similar to dharana, dhyana and samadhi of Yoga. This helped boys in retaining the inner energy and keeping their spirit high to survive.

Meditation is known to have a host of health benefits and may be uniquely suited to help people cope with extreme stress. Several studies have found links between meditation and an immediate, measurable reduction in feelings of depression and anxiety as well as physical pain. That benefit of meditation could have proved hugely helpful to the Thai players, who were cold, scared, and alone more than 2.5 miles deep into a labyrinthine cave network. In addition, meditation may be linked with heightened feelings of empathy, another key asset for a small team of isolated individuals who need each other to survive. Totally cut off from the outside world, trapped alone in the dark and freezing cold without food or clean water and barely enough oxygen to survive, the team turned to meditation to ease their severely stressed bodies and calm their anxious minds. It was difficult to survive in this conditions.

Thus Meditation Became the Saving Grace For the Trapped Thai Soccer Team

Power of Meditation: The soccer team managed to keep their spirits high in spite of their weak and dwindling bodies and dire circumstances. The coach led the boys through meditation while they awaited their fate. Due to meditation, a calming, soothing, and stress-reducing practice kept them alive and hopeful for longer time, enough for rescuers to find them. The Sitting posture in silence, darkness and stillness enabled them to conserve energy as they went days without food and water. Even after they were discovered after ten full days of isolation, Thai Navy SEAL divers were unable to offer them a timeline for when they would be extracted and taken out safely from the cave. At this situation, once again, the coach and his team turned to meditation to subdue their fears and find peace with their circumstances. This powerful tool of meditation thus became crucial to their emotional states and spirits.

Conclusion: Meditation is a powerful tool. It allows one to choose which thoughts you'd like to dwell on and which thoughts you'd like to release. By meditation, and becoming an observer of one's own mind, one can simultaneously gain and release control. Meditation helps in not attaching to mind's ever changing tides, inspite of flowing of mind. In all kinds of stresses, whether one is dealing with a life-and-death situation, severe disease, the loss of a loved one, difficult assignment or high pressures from work, meditation can be a powerful force in helping you to cope. If meditation can save the lives of 12 young boys

trapped in an isolated cave on the verge of death, then just imagine the wonderful and positive effects it could have on one's everyday health and mental wellbeing and also in times of need.

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