

Zen in “The Zone”

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

Introduction

While he was with the Chicago Bulls, Phil Jackson did a lot to popularize the idea that athletic performance can be enhanced through meditation and other spiritual means. His spectacular success in moulding the Bulls, with some odd-fitting parts such as Dennis Rodman, into the steamroller they were gave these ideas credence. Personally, all this seemed pretty airy-fairy to me. I thought that Phil was pretty smart to have found a toy interesting enough to hold the attention of a bunch of flighty, too-much-money-not-enough-brains-or-discipline pro athletes, but doubted that it had any real world relevance.

You see, I confess with pride to being a basic sports guy: I prefer doing over thinking or watching; if I thought or watched it was primarily to learn how to do; I was subject to all kinds of weird superstition and ritual as I played my sports of choice (basketball, baseball, volleyball); and my idea of a good book ranged between Bill Bradley’s “A Sense of Where You Are” (read several times just over thirty years ago as a young teenager – I can still summarize many of the book’s key points) and any issue of Sports Illustrated.

And I am not much different now, as the curtain comes down on my ability to do athletically the things I have most loved. As my doing gradually declines, I make the painful transition to being primarily a watcher and thinker. This redirection of vast amounts of energy has resulted my peeling layer after layer off a lifetime of athletic experience until the behavioural, even spiritual, mechanisms at its core came into view. As a result, I am now able to revisit the significant moments of my athletic life with greater appreciation for the miracles in which I was privileged to participate, revel with my children as they begin to catch glimpses of these wondrous things, and marvel at the presence and talent of the Tigers and Annikas of the world as they dominate as no other ever has (yes, golf has appeared on my middle aged horizon), the grace of a Jordan as his sun sets, and the rising international tide of athleticism and teamwork that the West (as in the Western world, not as is Jerry) has set in motion.

As already noted, I wrote the “Zen in basketball” stuff off as another one of the those flaky trends – kind of like genuflecting before stepping up to the plate or wearing the lucky sweater as long as your college team keeps winning during March Madness. I always recognized those things as forms of primitive silliness, although a hot shooting night for my high school basketball team (or any team now that I think of it) would usually result in my wearing the same combination of socks, shorts etc. the next time out.

The Connection Between Risk and Superstition

Researchers discovered over 50 years ago that superstitious behaviour and the predictability of outcomes go hand in hand. As Michael Shermer notes in his book “Why People Believe Weird Things”:

The anthropologist Branislow Malinkowski (1954), for example, discovered that among the Trobriand Islanders (off the coast of New Guinea), the farther out to sea they went to fish the more they developed superstitious rituals. In the calm waters of the inner lagoon, there were very few rituals. By the time they reached the dangerous waters of the deep-sea fishing, the Trobrianders were also deep into magic.

Malinkowski concluded that superstitious ritual resulted from the human reaction to risk respecting things that mattered to them. The more chance and risk involved in an endeavour, the more likely we are to find superstitious behaviour attached to it.

Shermer then went on to note baseball players' superstitious behaviour. Hitting a baseball is one of sport's most difficult achievements. And batters observe all kinds of superstitious rituals relative to hitting. Yet the same players have no similar ritual behaviours with regard their fielding where they are successful more than 90 percent of the time. And how many of us know someone who bought a new putter after dropping a few long ones, or a new driver after five minutes of impressive performance on the driving range, only to have the laws of physics and probability return him to earth before the credit card was cool? Both putting and driving are notoriously difficult, even for the best professionals.

So I thought that Zen in sports was in the camp of mere superstition. "Be the ball?" Come on! I'll go buy a new driver or putter instead. At least there is some tiny chance that they will actually help me, and I get the buzz of spending some money and showing off a new club. However, to some extent I accepted the idea that maybe the inscrutable Zen might help with inscrutable golf. Maybe if you understand one you would understand the other. I understood neither. But Zen with basketball? Nice sales job Phil!

Zen – A Little Background

With that background, you will appreciate how surprised I am to find myself, after doing a lot of recent reading, coming back to this Zen stuff and thinking that Phil Jackson and his players were perhaps pretty substantive. In humility, I have to acknowledge (it hurts to write this) that perhaps I was shallower than a bunch of pro athletes. Maybe that is going too far. But for sure I had less depth than their coach.

We need a little context to understand the Zen in sports thing. Bear with me.

Joseph Campbell, the great comparative mythologist, had a talent for finding the common, illuminating threads that run through and tie together the world's major religious and spiritual systems. The patterns these threads disclose contain great wisdom. For some reason to the Western eye, these patterns are often most visible in the Eastern religious systems. This may be because we cannot be objective about anything to which we are too close. As Campbell points out, the Western adaptation of Zen Buddhism (a la Phil Jackson's "Sacred Hoops" or "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance", for example) contains none of the rigorous discipline that is at the heart of that Eastern art. Some westerners, however, have seen something important in Zen that our culture communicates poorly or not at all, and so have taken just that part and incorporated it into their way of life.

Keeping, therefore, in mind the idea that we are looking for themes, concepts and patterns, not entire religious systems or ways of life, let us look at a few spiritual ideas and see how they might apply to sporting life.

Buddhism is to Hinduism as Christianity is to Judaism. That is, Buddhism grew out of Hinduism as a reaction to what some perceived as the deficiencies of the older system in the same way as Christianity grew out of Judaism. Buddhism bears the name of its founder, as does Christianity. Both founders exemplified their way to enlightenment in reaction to the restraining forces of their mother cultures. We are talking about more than Bob Cousy with his behind the back dribble or Wilt Chamberlain and the dunk. This is James Naismith starting with soccer and rugby, adding the dribble and peach baskets, and ending up with basketball.

One of the problems with our modern interpretation of Christianity that makes us miss much of its wisdom is our tendency to take Christ's teachings literally instead of mining their metaphoric depths. This Christian neglect of metaphor and reliance by default on literalism is largely responsible for the marginalization of Christianity in the lives of a large segment of the modern Western world. For example, many still believe in God and go to church on occasion, but don't want to think or talk about Noah and the Ark, virgin births, resurrection from the dead, ascensions into Heaven, etc. This same neglect is responsible for the vitriolic fundamentalism of a small, vocal portion of Western society. They believe, among other things, that the earth IS 6,000 years old, The Virgin DID give birth, Noah did build, populate and float his Ark, and will prove it using science! And if you don't agree, you will burn in hell!! Both of these camps perceive to a greater or lesser extent that the Christian heaven with its peace and bliss is something that will come after the pain and difficulty of this life. The Buddhists, however, have remained both metaphoric and practical. Hence, many Westerners (including the odd jock, and lots of golfers) who have little to do with Christianity, practically speaking, find increasing use for ideas whose roots are found within the Buddhist tradition.

For example, both Christ and Buddha overcame similar obstacles in the course of showing the way to enlightenment, which for Buddhists would be Nirvana and for Christians would be Heaven. In the Buddha's life we find a particularly clear illustration of this process that is connected to daily life in a fashion that is relevant to the athlete in each of us.

In order to find the peace and bliss of Nirvana and take his seat under the Bodhi tree, the Buddha had to overcome two things: fear and desire. Having freed himself from those two forces, he was fully aware, balanced and in harmony with his surroundings. He was centred. In many of the Buddha's depictions, the way to the Bodhi tree under which he sits is guarded by two frightening beings. They represent fear and desire. He invites us past them to join him in Nirvanic peace. There is a fascinating parallel between this story and the Adam and Eve narrative in the Garden where another tree is guarded by scary beings, but this is a sports story not a religious studies essay, so I won't get into that. Suffice it to say that these ideas appear to have common roots in the collective human psyche or mythic complex – you can choose the one you prefer.

Buddhism, with all its arcane philosophy, beautiful poetry, practical wisdom and extreme mental disciplines can be boiled down to two things: Free yourself from fear and desire,

and by doing, better enable yourself to do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

How Might Zen Be Relevant to Sports?

“But”, my reader is asking him or herself, “What the hell does this have to do with sports? This guy has about five seconds to make his point or I am out of here.” Hang with me. I am getting there. After all, this essay is kind of about Buddhism. You should read some real Buddhist stuff if you think this meanders a bit.

Could it be that Buddha was in “the zone” as he sat under the Bodhi tree?

Without relating Buddhist meditation to the zone, Joseph Campbell illustrates the ideal “centred” state posited by Buddhism with two athletic examples. First, he notes that in sumo wrestling (which he calls the “survival of the fittest”) the combatants spend all but a few seconds of their time during a match in a squat, looking impassively at each other (this reminds me of golf), while the crowd goes wild (I guess the golf analogy only goes so far). This quiet contemplation is followed by a few seconds of activity during which one wrestler ends up either out of the ring or on his back. This is starting to sound more like golf again – the golf some of my friends play.

What are the wrestlers doing while squatting and thinking? You guessed it – they are freeing themselves from fear and desire through meditation – they are finding that place of awareness, balance, harmony and centeredness from which their actions flow with maximum spontaneity, and not coincidentally, with maximum force. He who does this first, and best, in most cases does not end up on his back. The process these fighters use to center themselves, find energy etc. is precisely the same as the karate and other martial arts masters use before breaking impressive piles of boards, bricks etc. with any (well, almost any) body appendage.

Campbell’s second example comes from the world of Japanese fencing. A newly enlisted apprentice to a master swordsman is likely to be assigned household tasks for weeks before being allowed to touch a sword. During this time the most important lesson of his apprenticeship will be learned. To teach that lesson, the master occasionally pops out of nowhere and whacks the apprentice on the head while he is washing dishes, sweeping the floor, attending to important duties in the loo, etc. Older folk might recall a similar routine in the Pink Panther movies featuring Peter Sellers and his oriental houseboy. Maybe I’m more shallow than Sellers too? This is becoming too painful for words.

In any event, at first the apprentice responds by trying to anticipate the attacks. This does not work because whenever the apprentice is ready to be whacked here, he is whacked there. Sellers never made it past this stage. Eventually, a successful apprentice learns to be simply aware – to find that place of awareness, harmony and centeredness, free from fear of being whacked or desire catch, maim etc. the whacker, from which his reaction to attack is spontaneous and timely. This results in the apprentice avoiding one of his master’s whacks, and at that moment he graduates from housecleaning to studying swordsmanship. And his ability to so respond, with the right training, can become powerful, even lethal, to any potential whacker if that is what the apprentice desires.

Perhaps we should say, “Let the force be with you!” Accordingly to Campbell, Lucas studied both ancient mythology and Zen carefully while constructing the Star Wars series motifs.

The Zone – A Little Background

So what is “the zone”? Lets start with a few things that it is not to make sure that they don't confuse us. The zone is not necessarily being so hot that for a while you can't miss. It is usually not making that one brilliant save, or that one 300-yard drive. Those things are due to the fact that the laws of probability dictate that if you try anything often enough, it will likely work a few times. After all those misses, when you do pull off a difficult trick it feels great and the mind is capable of manufacturing a magical feeling with respect to this kind of event when it is recalled by memory. This feeling is similar to what the zone itself elicits, and so the two states are often confused. However, if you get hot on a regular basis; if you more often than not make those brilliant saves and 300-yard drives, you probably know what the zone is.

While in the zone, the perception of self disappears. We merge with the experience. We no longer think in terms of hand, ball and bat (or basket, club, etc.). We do not think. Our actions are instinctual because in some cases conscious thought cannot occur quickly enough to meet the demands being made of us, and in others because we so will it in order to remain in the zone.

But what I have so far described fits many routine, athletic and other moments in life. What sets the zone apart is the manner in which time elongates, or seems to disappear altogether, and we are infused with an energy and capacity to process information that enables us to make decisions better and more quickly than normal, and more to the point, better and more quickly than our opponent of the day.

As the case of the apprentice Japanese fencer illustrates, conscious thought is inconsistent with the zone. This is why the “what did I just do wrong” process most golfers are taught to go through on the practise tee as they struggle to correct the mechanics of their swing is death on the golf course. This is a mental state that is useful as we learn new things. But its cumbersome, halting nature interferes with performance in the pressure-laced forum of competition. The zone disengages the conscious gears and levers required to learn, and puts us in a place where the subconscious can access all we have already learned, including many capacities of which we are unaware, and connects those things directly to our primal energy sources.

While in the zone, our sense of energy and accurate anticipation perhaps does not make us any stronger, but our blows are struck with such perfect timing and so squarely that we are practically speaking invincible. We move without effort, at least one step ahead of where we would otherwise have been. We harness each source of energy that comes within our reach, including those of our foe. Her blows are effortlessly redirected back at her, or to accomplish our objectives. She melts before us, and if we notice her eyes, they are full of fear. She senses the zone operating against her.

The combination of the wonderful feeling of being guided by instinct through an intricate series of precise, difficult movements while seeming to be able to effortlessly anticipate both our opponent's next move and what our response should be produces the magical, powerful feeling that is characteristic of a zone experience.

A lot of brain mapping research has been done during the past several years using various techniques to determine which parts of the brain function during different types of activity. Andy Newberg and others summarized some of the most interesting recent findings in their wonderful little book "Why God Won't Go Away". These results describe, among other things, what occurs in the brains of Buddhist monks and Catholic nuns while they meditate. At the deepest point in their meditation cycle, the parts of the nervous system and brain that relate to relaxation as well as those that relate to arousal both operate at close to maximum capacity. This is a highly unusual state, since these two systems usually run at counter cycle to each other. That is, the arousal system that produces adrenalin, controls our fight or flight response, etc. is usually quiet when we are relaxed. And when the arousal system is in full cry, the relaxation system that conserves energy, keeps body functions in harmony, regulates sleep, digestion, the distribution of body nutrients etc. is usually suppressed. One of the other rare times at which the body is designed to operate both the arousal and relaxation systems at high rates is at or near sexual climax. This produces a feeling of euphoria that resembles spiritual epiphany.

One of the consequences of strong, simultaneous arousal and relaxation response within the brain is the partial shut down of the part of the brain that delineates between the self and everything around it, called by Newberg et al the "orientation association area". Scientists theorize that the combination of the high functioning of both the arousal and relaxation systems shuts down of the orientation association area. This produces the feelings of bliss, ecstasy and oneness with the universe that mystics of all spiritual persuasions have reported respecting their experiences ever since man started to record his experience. This also accounts for the common use of sexually charged language to describe mystic encounters – the neural experience related to sexual activity is a close cousin to that of the mystic. We will not, however, go so far as to suggest that the same type of neural patterns are related to the experience of using the latest in BIG, LONG, TITANIUM golf ball drivers and so to account for the linguistic tendencies of their users. There are other primitive forces at work in that arena.

The Buddhist monk and Catholic nun research indicate that there are at least two ways in which to simultaneously arouse both the relaxation and arousal systems. One of those may well be at work in the creation of the zone. That is, sustained physical activity combined with intense concentration on a thing, or set of things, to the exclusion of all else, can sometimes arouse both systems. This often happens to long distance runners, for example.

Athletes on the basketball court and in other similar environments are of course familiar with the feeling that comes from an increase in the activity of the arousal system as they steel themselves to achieve a chosen objective, and as they push their bodies to achieve it. However, any competitive athlete also knows that there is a big difference between the raw "flight or fight" response to danger and the controlled expenditure of effort that occurs in a successful, high-level athletic encounter. That controlled, calm response to pressure is precisely what the sumo wrestlers and Japanese fencers are disciplined to master, and evidences the operation of the relaxation system to harness the arousal system's raw power. That is, the athlete who has learned to find the zone has done precisely what the monks and nuns described above do – activate both their arousal and relaxation systems at the same time. A great deal of mental discipline is required to do this. Some people have more natural ability than others in this regard.

However, it is highly probable that everyone can, with the right training, increase their capacity to do this.

In the case of the monks and nuns, after the arousal system has been operating at high capacity for a period of time, it can spill over into the relaxation system and cause it to run counter to its usual pattern of operation and shift all the way into high gear while the arousal system continues to operate in the same fashion. No one knows what causes this to occur in some cases and not in others. As this spillover and kick start of the relaxation systems occurs, additional parts of our mind will open up, some likely only normally accessible during our dream life, and hence additional creative and mental powers will become available to us.

In some cases it has been shown that mental stimulation similar to what I have described appears to “pry open the aperture of time” and to cause glimpses or intuitions of events about to happen to slip through to us. While I am not aware of any research of this type conducted with respect to athletes, I have had the experience many times “knowing” while in the zone where a volleyball spike or baseball line drive was going, and instinctively launching myself toward the a spot on the floor or infield before the ball was struck. Perhaps a better way to describe this experience is to say that I would instinctively dive well before the ball was struck with only the posture of the spiker rising through the air or the batter swinging to guide me, and was regularly thrilled to find that the ball and I arrived at the same place at the same time and that I had a chance to play it.

Given the amount of time it takes to dive for a volleyball spike or line drive and how much less time it takes for a well struck ball to travel from hand to floor or bat to field, the experience I just described is a common one in those sports and creates some of their most memorable highlight reel segments. In fact, it is the only way many spikes or line drives can be recovered, and recovered they are on a regular basis. And each time it happens it feels like magic. Think of the most memorable of soccer or hockey goal tending performances in this light. The same processes are at work.

It is possible that volleyball and baseball players are simply making subconscious decisions based on limited information (the posture of the spiker in the air and the batter swinging), and getting lucky once in a while. However, my experience with both those sports suggests that the key to performance is being in that place of calm awareness and confidence that facilitates the lightening quick observation and processing of massive amounts of information, while being as connected as possible to the body’s adrenalin systems. It is the ability to find, and remain in this meditative state that enables the third baseman to react as he does to the one hard shot down the line at which he gets a chance each game. The requirement to remain in this state is also what exhausts the third baseman during the course of a game during which he seems to the fans to do little more than stand crouched and twitching in his position for a few seconds just before each batter swings.

And what of the basketball player who, while in the zone, seems to be able to predict what his opponent will do and be therefore before it happens? Success in basketball, as in many “hand to hand combat” sports, is determined by how well a player can keep balance, read her opponent to predict where she is going, and then wait until she has committed herself (given up her balance) before striking. This is what enables a defensive player to anticipate and steal passes, and sometimes not just block a shot, but

take it out of the shooter's hands. It is also what enables some seemingly slow offensive players to use fakes to take the balance away from more athletic defenders, and walk past them for easy baskets. This is all about processing information – being aware – while remaining connected to our power source.

How Can We Cultivate The Zone?

So, now that I have raised our expectations with respect to what we might experience the next time we venture out on the court or field, how can we realistically hope to dip our little cups into this river of energy that has apparently been flowing by us mostly unnoticed throughout our lives?

Let me answer that question in the context of a story about my daughter's high school basketball team. A short time ago I watched these girls play in what for them was a big game. This is a young team. Most of the key players are juniors. However, they have enough talent that during the pre-season they were picked by the local sports news service to be near or at the top of the heap in our Canadian province. Then the season started and their play was disappointing. They did not live up to their billing; they played tight and found ways to lose games they should have won; their team shooting percentage was (and still is) far worse than it was two years ago when they played good high school teams in exhibition games as a group of freshmen.

As freshmen they just played. They were not intentionally centred in that powerful Buddhist place described above, and certainly did not experience the zone as I have described it. However, in their innocence they might have, at times, been on the edge of that state. Now, however, it seems that the higher expectations by which they are surrounded have caused them to both try too hard (be over-influenced by desire) and to fear defeat (be over-influenced by fear). As the season wore on, all eyes were no longer on them. In fact, the word was, "What was the big deal about Springbank? They were overrated." Hence, the pressure began to subside.

Back to the game. They faced off against a team that beat them badly a month ago. At the time of that first game, our girls thought their opponents were the best team in the Province. Both teams played poorly during the first encounter. It was an otherworldly game. We caught a good team on a bad day but because we were afraid of them found a way to play worse than they did, and so lost. By the time of the next game, our girls were aware of other contests their opponents had lost, and hence no longer feared them. From the opening tip we controlled a nicely played game, and eventually won it. The girls can still play much better than they have so far. They have not even started to center themselves in the Buddhist sense, but they took a huge step forward by recognizing the role fear played in their earlier defeat.

Earlier the same day (these games were played at a tournament) the girls led the best team in our Province by over 15 points at the end of the first quarter. Somehow they had stumbled to the edge of the zone, and their opposition was running scared. They were an awesome, wondrous sight for those few minutes. And then it was as if they looked around as a group and said, "Hey, what are we doing? We can't play like this!!", and turned off the tap. By halftime the game was tied, and they lost it in the second half. Once again, fear tripped them up, and this time it was fear of themselves. They were unprepared for how well they can play, and hence rejected their own best behaviour instead of embracing it as a long lost friend.

During the remainder of this season (four weeks at this writing), I will invite my daughter and her friends to engage in an experiment. They will learn about fear and desire. They will learn the basic techniques of concentration, visualization and meditation. And they will be encouraged to practice both quietly centring themselves away from the fear and desire of the moment before games and practices, as well as concentrating intently on whatever their role happens to be while they are playing. I am certain this will help them to take their next big step forward, and that they can learn some important things about life as they explore this aspect of their athleticism.

Conclusion

And what of the zone? She remains in the realm of magic and mystery. This is a spiritual matter. We invite her presence with our actions, thoughts and attitudes, by preparing our minds, by ridding ourselves of impediments like excess fear and desire, and by cultivating our capacity for awareness. These are mental muscles that will develop like all others through exercise. There is no question that those who know how to prepare, and who perhaps have a mental aptitude for these things, have a better chance than others. But the fact remains that many try out and few are chosen for the full-blown version of this experience.

If the zone graces our play, we will be thankful forever and will remember the day so that we can tell stories about it until our children and grandchildren groan as they hear its familiar introductory words. However, they will seek the same privilege we have had, and if they are as fortunate as we have been, they will likewise treasure and polish this gem as often as occasion permits.