

Basketball and Mindfulness

Basketball is a complex dance that requires shifting from one objective to another at lightning speed. To excel, you need to act with a clear mind and be totally focused on what everyone on the floor is doing. Some athletes describe this quality of mind as a “cocoon of concentration.” But that implies shutting out the world when what you really need to do is become more acutely aware of what’s happening right now, this very moment.

The secret is not thinking. That doesn’t mean being stupid; it means quieting the endless jabbering of thoughts so that your body can do instinctively what it’s been trained to do without the mind getting in the way. All of us have had flashes of this sense of oneness--making love, creating a work of art--when we’re completely immersed in the moment, inseparable from what we’re doing. This kind of experience happens all the time on the basketball floor; that’s why the game is so intoxicating. But if you’re really paying attention, it can also occur while you’re performing the most mundane tasks.... The point is to perform every activity, from playing basketball to taking out the garbage, with precise attention, moment by moment....

For some people, notably Michael Jordan, the only impetus they need to become completely focused is intense competition. But for most of us, athletes and non-athletes alike, the battle itself is not enough. Many of the players I’ve worked with tend to lose their equanimity after a certain point as the level of competition rises, because their minds start racing out of control.

When I was a player, not surprisingly, my biggest obstacle was my hyperactive critical mind. I’d been trained by my Pentecostal parents to stand guard over my thoughts, meticulously sorting out the “pure” from the “impure.” That kind of intense judgmental thinking--this is good, that’s bad--is not unlike the mental process most professional athletes go through every day. Everything they’ve done since junior high school has been dissected, analyzed, measured, and thrown back in their faces by their coaches, and, in many cases, the media. By the time they reach the pros, the inner critic rules. With the precision of a cuckoo clock, he crops up whenever they make a mistake. How did that guy beat me? Where did that shot come from? What a stupid pass! The incessant accusations of the judging mind block vital energy and sabotage concentration....

We show players how to quiet the judging mind and focus on what needs to be done at any given moment. There are several ways to do that. One is by teaching the players meditation so they can experience stillness of mind in a low-pressure setting off the court. The meditation practice we teach players is called mindfulness....

Here’s the basic approach: Sit in a chair with your spine straight and your eyes downcast. Focus your attention on your breath as it rises and falls. When your mind wanders (which it will, repeatedly), note the source of the distraction (a noise, a thought, an emotion, a bodily sensation), then gently return the attention to the breath. This process of noting thoughts and sensations, then returning the awareness to the breath is repeated for the duration of the sitting. Though the practice may sound boring, it’s remarkable how any experience, including boredom, becomes interesting when it’s an object of moment-to-moment investigation.

Little by little, with regular practice, you start to discriminate raw sensory events from your reactions to them. Eventually you begin to experience a point of stillness within. As the stillness becomes more stable, you tend to identify less with fleeting thoughts and feelings, such as fear, anger, or pain, and experience a state of inner harmony, regardless of changing circumstances. For me, meditation is a tool that allows me to stay calm and centered (well, most of the time) during the stressful highs and lows of basketball and life outside the arena. During games I often get agitated by bad calls, but years of meditation practice have taught me how to find that still point within so that I can argue passionately with the refs without being overwhelmed by anger....

Awareness is everything. Also the experience of sitting silently together in a group tends to bring about a subtle shift in consciousness that strengthens the team bond. Sometimes we extend mindfulness to the court and conduct whole practices in silence. The deep level of concentration and nonverbal communication that arises when we do this never fails to astonish me. - Pp. 115-119

Other excerpts:

I find it amusing when people ask me where I get my ideas for motivating players. The answer is: in the moment. My approach to problem solving is the same as my approach to the game. When a problem arises, I try to read the situation as accurately as possible and respond spontaneously to whatever's happening.... You have to trust your inner knowing. If you have a clear mind and an open heart, you won't have to search for a direction. Direction will come to you. - Pp. 163-164

In Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, Suzuki Roshi writes that when we "cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer."...Winning is important to me, but what brings me real joy is the experience of being fully engaged in whatever I'm doing. I get unhappy when my mind begins to wander, during wins as well as loses. Sometimes a well-played defeat will make me feel better than a victory in which the team doesn't feel especially connected....

Eventually, everybody loses, ages, changes. And small triumphs--a great play, a moment of true sportsmanship--count, even though you may not win the game.... As strange as it may seem, being able to accept change or defeat with equanimity gives you the freedom to go out on the floor and give the game your all.

I used to believe that the day I could accept defeat was the day I would have to give up my job. But losing is as integral a part of the dance as winning. Buddhism teaches us that by accepting death, you discover life. Similarly, only by acknowledging the possibility of defeat can you fully experience the joy of competition. Our culture would have us believe that being able to accept loss is tantamount to setting yourself up to lose. But not everyone can win all the time; obsessing about winning adds an unnecessary layer of pressure that constricts body and spirit and, ultimately, robs you of the freedom to do your best. -Pp. 194, 201-202

Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior

- Phil Jackson (1995, Hyperion)