

**RELAXED  
INTENSITY**

TRANSFORMING THE COMPETITIVE EXPERIENCE

# Instinctive Tennis

*Happy Bhalla*

264 pages Softcover  
145 × 225 mm ISBN 81-901297-8-3



*Instinctive Tennis* sees tennis as a microcosm of life. The author believes that we can transform ourselves and our lives by transforming the way we play tennis. This can be done by bringing greater awareness into the way we play tennis and of *why* we play tennis.

The paths towards being the best tennis player you can be and being happy and contented in your life do not go in different directions. The road is exactly the same! The author's awareness of this has transformed the way he teaches tennis and the focus of this book is to provide the opportunity to others for a similar transformation through a greater awareness of themselves.

*This book will be a valuable tool for tennis players, coaches and parents.* It is for those players who are starting out to play for the first time as well as for top tennis professionals who are at the pinnacle of their profession, and for all levels in-between. It is for coaches who are inexperienced and new to the teaching profession and eager and open to embracing new ways of looking at old things, as well as for those individuals who have been professionals their entire adult lives and for whom change, in whatever form it comes, is difficult and threatening. Finally, it is for parents, those largely well-meaning individuals who wish the best for their children, but who, if they are honest, will admit that they have no idea of what is 'best' or how to achieve it.

**Happy Bhalla** lives six months of the year in the Hamptons of Long Island, NY where he runs a Tennis Academy for both juniors and adults.

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ISBN 81-901297-7-5

Published by Mosaic Books. Typeset by Print Services,  
B-17, Lajpat Nagar Part 2, New Delhi 110024 and printed at  
Print Perfect, New Delhi 110064.

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## Preface

We are living in the most prosperous era in the history of humanity, and yet this prosperity has not brought most of us any measure of the peace of mind we ultimately seek. The advances in science and technology have certainly brought us material comfort and convenience, but the inner journey of humanity has remained alarmingly stagnant resulting in no discernible transformation of the individual. Consequently, true and lasting peace of mind, happiness and the ability to co-exist in a spirit of love and harmony continues to elude us. Periodically the world seems to satisfy our desires and at those times we feel content; at other times our desires are unfulfilled and we feel unhappy. This ongoing conflict never seems to remain resolved for any length of time, resulting in constant mood fluctuations. This way of being has become so much a part of who we think we are that many of us can conceive of no other way of being. Is there some way to experience an enduring harmony, not only within ourselves but also with the world around us?

This general dissatisfaction within individuals is reflected in all our activities and tennis is no exception. Tennis players will almost unanimously agree that their desires are two-fold: they want both to have fun and to play better. More often, the focus is placed on playing better, as measured in terms of victories. It is assumed that winning is success and will naturally lead to fun, happiness, peace and contentment. This is a false assumption, and as a result there is little peace of mind

to be attained from playing in the prevailing competitive environment. This is especially true the higher up the competitive ladder one climbs. The negativity and frustration that many players feel is easily viewable wherever tennis is played.

I am asking the reader to consider the possibility that tennis—or any sport, or for that matter any activity—can be used as a vehicle to grow spiritually. In other words, if the way we play sports or do anything in life is a reflection of our consciousness, then the reverse must also be true, which means our consciousness can be affected by how we play. Consequently, how we play offers us an opportunity not only to grow, but also to allow this expansion of consciousness to transform our lives by changing how we do all the things we do.

However, the casualty in this journey towards higher consciousness is the all-consuming desire for success as seen in terms of winning. For those individuals who have never even considered this journey, this trade will seem totally unacceptable. This book is addressed to those individuals who have tasted both success and winning and have yet felt no deep inner contentment. Even for these individuals it will not be easy to give up their dreams and ambitions, but the good news is that nothing has to be given up. All one has to do is to bring greater awareness into ones life. This beam of light will make all things clear; there will be no struggle.

*Happy Bhalla*

# 1. Introduction

## The Rewards

Two amazing things happen on the tennis court when we use the game of tennis as a tool to grow spiritually. First of all, the emotional roller-coaster based on winning and losing that most of us are on completely disappears, and in its place there emerges a serenity and peace of mind intrinsic to being in the here-and-now. Secondly, by letting go of the result and focusing on the here-and-now we will play the best tennis we are capable of playing. Ironically, although this will not guarantee winning, a player who is able to do this will, among other things, maximize his or her opportunity for success in the limited sense of winning and losing by playing to the best of their ability. Off the court, another transformation can happen if we are successful on the court; a transformation that can bring us peace and contentedness in all that we do.

In the field of tennis literature, the focus is on helping the reader become a better tennis player through instruction in either the technical, tactical, mental or physical aspects of playing. Until now, everyone in this field has seen winning as the primary goal, however more recently, there has been a shift from the Vince Lombardi model of 'Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing' to a more process-oriented way of thinking. However, this shift is not as

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sincere as it looks at first glance. Closer observation reveals that the change is purely cosmetic because the major focus is still on the result: winning tennis matches. In other words, eastern thought and its emphasis on process over result has been accepted by main-stream thought only to a point. I understand the difficulty of letting go of any emphasis on result, but the reader must understand that there is no alternative. Wanting to win does not increase our chances of winning, in fact, that desire will often actually make it more difficult for us to win.

The real difficulty lies in the situation arising from the reality that it is the worldly ones, with the financial means, who are interested in winning and success and those others who have focused on eastern thought and brought it into western psychology are dependent on selling their 'wares' to this group. Their 'wares' are only valuable as long as there is a market for them. The market lies in helping this group achieve what they want, which is better results. To suggest to this group that winning or success is not as valuable a commodity as 'peace of mind' is a much more difficult task because there is the prevailing belief that 'peace of mind' will arise from success and the financial and other rewards that it brings. This is simply untrue.

Sports psychologists are primarily concerned with maximizing the player's ability to win tennis matches. However, I do not believe this to be society's or the individual's most pressing need. A more relevant question is: how will playing tennis, or any sport, impact our life and allow us to achieve the overall peace of mind and contentment that we really crave? Sports in general and tennis in particular, despite the somewhat distorted significance they have assumed in our society, are still only a part of life. Of what value is success on the court or on the field if we remain generally unhappy or dissatisfied

with our lives? Actually, the dissatisfaction is within us and not in our life or in the world. How do we know this? Does happiness truly lie within? Or is it possible to achieve it by creating the 'ideal' situation? Closer examination of these questions and your life will reveal that we can create the perfect life scenario and within a short period of time dissatisfaction will set in. This clearly will 'prove' that happiness is a state of being that lies within us. It will only happen when the individual is transformed and no amount of achieving, becoming or attaining will help.

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The irony is of course that once we can let go of the desire for winning or even improving and instead focus on the joy of hitting a tennis ball by becoming completely lost in the playing, we will find the rewards that we previously sought now flowing to us in abundance. However, these rewards will mean nothing to us if this transformation has taken place within because we will discover the real rewards to be intrinsic to the playing and when that happens all the gold ceases to glitter.

### Tennis and Spirituality

The quantity of books presently on the market regarding the mental side of the game illustrates the increasing popularity of a wholistic approach. The field of sports psychology is growing in leaps and bounds, as more and more coaches and players are recognizing the importance of the role of the mind in achieving peak athletic performance. However, all this activity has not resulted in the emergence of a healthy attitude towards competition as is clearly evidenced by the range of emotions that we witness within the sports arena. In addition to which, we

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have neglected to identify the wholistic connection between peak athletic performance and success on a personal level in life, if in fact such a connection exists.

This book will provide a bridge for those already on the path—those who are eager to see how spiritual practice meshes into everyday mundane activities. In addition, I believe this book will provide a stimulus to those who have a sense of spirituality lying dormant within them—and who does not?—while those who are more entrenched in material reality will find this message thought-provoking at the very least.

Without wanting to seem disrespectful, I honestly believe that the body of literature presently available in the field of sports psychology, although providing short-term benefits, does not delve deep enough to ensure long-term satisfaction.

Enter the field of Tennis and Spirituality, which is just waiting to be explored. I believe this book could be an interesting addition in the embryonic field of body/‘no-mind’/spirit exploration in sports. Please note, the replacement of mind with ‘no-mind’. The field of body/mind/spirit is also emerging and making huge in-roads into mainstream thought, but as I have said before, for me, this body of literature largely misses the point because it remains in the mind and nothing of the ultimate can come from the mind. In other words, the enduring peace and contentment we all seek cannot arise from the

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mind because the mind takes us outward and that which is of ‘real’ value is within. The ego is the mind and when action happens not from ego, but from love, the action is totally transformed. Timothy Gallwey was, I think, the beginning and end of the Tennis and Spirituality body of literature. His book, *The Inner*

*Game of Tennis*, was published in the mid-seventies and there have been very few books after that point that have been as sincere to the spiritual side; most have become influenced by the sporting side and the need to win. I feel there is a tremendous need to build on Gallwey's legacy.

The ideal competitive mind-set, which I call '*Relaxed Intensity*', describes spiritual ways of being, where the conscious mind is completely silent and calm, which in turn allows the individual to operate from a much deeper place where the brain is certainly working, but is doing so from a more all-knowing source. In this state the individual is so in tune with himself that the body starts flowing instinctively and a beautiful harmony emerges. It is only in this state that ultimate human potential can be realized and experienced. Certainly, this state does not easily arise, and before it can the reader must be convinced of its merit, because this experience requires an awareness of the nature of the individual and the world in which we live. The fact that the contents of this book will seem so out of sync with the common values displayed in everyday life is indicative of the social, cultural and religious conditioning we are all struggling with. Hence the difficulty in achieving a state of being which in my experience is as natural as a sunset and every bit as beautiful.

This is a book ostensibly about tennis and transforming the competitive experience, but deeper analysis will reveal that the contents are also relevant to Life and that tennis is simply a microcosm of life; no emotion arises on the court that is also not present in our day-to-day lives. Presently, the competitive experience is extremely ugly at its root; some-

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times this ugliness is apparent, but often and for most people it is just beneath the surface. Transforming the competitive experience is less about tennis than it is about the individual. In other words, for this transformation to occur the change will have to happen to the individual, not to his tennis, because the experience is *his* and once the individual changes, the very quality of all his actions will automatically be transformed. Consequently, this book is geared towards bringing awareness to the individual about his competitive experience. The ugliness that exists, to whatever extent it exists, is there because we are performing the activity unconsciously. As we bring, more awareness to our actions, the ugliness drops all by itself, there is nothing more we have to do. So, the 'goal' of this book is to help you go through the competitive experience more consciously: with more awareness. Whatever transformation is to happen will not be something we will have to make happen, it will take place by itself.

For ambitious tennis players who pick up this book hoping to improve their game quickly with the minimum of effort, this book will be a bitter disappointment. However, if you give yourself a chance, you could change your life and in the process discover a vehicle, tennis, that will allow you to express the tremendous beauty you are carrying within your self. Yes, you will become a better tennis player, but by then the person who was so obsessed with that desire because of the ego-gratification it offered will be long gone. I am hopeful that this book will inspire the reader to begin this process of self-discovery that will ultimately lead him or her to understand the value of *Relaxed Intensity*.

## 2. The Possibilities That Tennis Presents

### My Passion

Sports were *the* consuming passion in my youth. There was nowhere else I felt as mentally at peace and as physically engaged with purpose. As I look back on my childhood, I understand better how sports offered me an opportunity for expression without which my life would have been completely different.

Instinctively and naturally my attitude towards sports was self-supportive and healthy. Although I was very committed to winning, losing never disturbed me too much because I simply loved playing. I was able to give the utmost effort and walk off the playing field feeling at peace and satisfied, this despite the emphasis on the 'win at all costs' type of attitude, which admittedly, was much less in Europe than it is in the States. In addition, although, I was affected by losing, I had the 'good' fortune to be able to deflect the pain because I played a number of sports at a fairly competitively proficient level. So, for example, a loss at a chess match was soon followed by a table tennis tournament; or a tennis match soon followed a loss at soccer. In short, I just did not have the time to dwell on either the defeats or the victories. As a result, I think playing multiple sports took much of the 'pressure' off me because I had

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other things to fall back on. It was almost as if not being solely committed to just one sport allowed me some sort of excuse for losing. I remember many advisors in my youth counseling me to focus on just one sport and offering me all sorts of enticements (promises of fame and glory) that must have been tempting to a young man. Somehow though, I was able, instinctively and very much unconsciously, to resist all the allurements perhaps because deep down I knew this was the best way to deflect the pressure that I would surely have fallen prey to otherwise.

I undoubtedly have felt the pain and agony of defeat at times; there is no way I could be so compassionate for my fellow sufferers without this experience. However, despite these isolated feelings, I was definitely an individual who handled losing pretty well and someone who thoroughly enjoyed the process of competition. My increasing awareness of how rare this attitude is has led me to write this book. Everywhere I look, I am inundated with images within sports of pain, suffering and violence; individuals full of anger, anxiety or fear; individuals behaving rudely, aggressively and without consideration for the other—all in the name of competition. Also, sports have become such a major preoccupation of modern society and as a result we revere our athletes in all sports as role models, whereas in actuality, with an eye to the big picture, they are anything but heroes. The material rewards of star status are the highest our society has to offer: money, fame, glory and all the 'perks' that go along with them. As a result, our youth are drawn to various sports in droves, even though the motives—not surprisingly, given the rewards at stake—are not always pure. Amazingly, even when the rewards are not high or professionalism not a probability, intensity and its negative accompaniments do not diminish one iota because ego, our false sense of who we are, remains.

Teaching children the tools by which they can lead fulfilling and contented lives should be the primary focus of our societal leaders. Presently, despite the incredible technological advances, modern society is facing a slew of social and psychological problems that do not appear to be going away. I believe these problems are, at their root, due to our dissociation from the spiritual aspect of our being. Sports are a wonderful opportunity to teach children and adults alike the spiritual integration, which is the core of our being. Schools will no doubt continue to teach us how to make a living; however sports can teach us how to live!

This book is an attempt to redefine sports, competition and winning for the purpose of individual transformation. We are offering readers the opportunity, not for money, fame or glory, but something infinitely more valuable: serenity, peace of mind and the ability to love, with all the ac-

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companying benefits. This state of being emerges, not by transforming the external world by fulfilling desires, but by transforming ourselves through an examination of who we are: our thoughts, our feelings, etc. When this happens, our perception of the world changes and when that happens everything we do is transformed. As individuals become transformed the entire world is transformed. This turns out to be great news, because if true happiness or peace of mind were determined by the external world we would be in great trouble, since we have no control over it. However, the revelation that true happiness lies within our own being frees us to attain it whenever we so desire. It is entirely within our grasp and is dependent on no other individual, situation or possession!

### **A Bit About Me**

I was born in London, of Indian parents. In my late teens I moved to America and went to college in New York, where sports continued to be the focal point of my life. After brief but intense flings with chess, soccer and table tennis, I rekindled my life-long love affair with tennis—a relationship that has afforded me the opportunity to travel extensively and learn continuously.

In my early twenties, alongside this passion for tennis arose an even greater passion for philosophy, the pursuit of Truth, and spirituality, individual transformation through existential experience. This search for understanding led me around the world until I finally discovered the eastern traditions, which spoke to me most powerfully, although I am well aware that Truth is not the exclusive preserve of any individual tradition, country, religion or culture.

I am more aware of the spiritual side of my being right now than at any other time in my life. However, one of the challenges this awareness presents is to continue to live on the material plane and somehow reconcile the apparent meaninglessness of material life and spiritual reality as I experience it. Spirituality permeates every aspect of our life. Material existence and spiritual reality are inextricably linked, so much so that to talk of one independent of the other is impossible. Spirituality manifests on the material plane through every little thing we do, from brushing our teeth to attending to our daily vocation and everything in between. Consequently, material action within the world is not to be transcended through avoidance, as some of the eastern traditions seem to be suggesting, but transformed through awareness and the resulting understanding that arises from it.

For a while, I vacillated between my spiritual instincts and my worldly passions as reflected by sports in general

and tennis in particular. Ultimately, the spiritual aspirant and the tennis coach in me came to realize that we are not separate; that reconciliation between these seeming juxtapositions is really possible. The spiritual aspirant is sensitive to the deep disharmony that exists in the world today: the pain, the suffering, and most cruel of all, the indifference and the ignorance of most humans, not only to the plight of all sentient beings, but to all of nature. The seeker understands the need for personal transformation and for spirituality to be identified, defined and, ultimately, integrated into everything we do. This understanding springs from an awareness that the interconnectedness of life's illusory diversity is a reality to be recognized if we are to become a society of integrated, balanced and happy individuals; individuals capable of living in harmony with not only our neighbors and the environment, but most importantly with ourselves.

### **Tennis as a Metaphor for Life**

For the casual observer tennis is a fun game, a frivolous way to while away the hours on a sunny afternoon: a harmless hobby or recreational activity for individuals of all ages. However, for those of us who are more intimate with the nuances of this sport of a lifetime, we know that tennis stirs powerful emotions, emotions that are often uncontrollable and which can and do explode frequently. Behind the veneer of the 'gentlemanly' image there is an ongoing vacillation between frustration and anger, joy and happiness. Fortunately or unfortunately, neither mood remains for long. If fun is the major motivator for playing tennis or living life, the stark reality

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is that it is an ever-elusive oasis in the middle of a desert of unrealized and unrealistic expectations.

What could possibly be the link that joins life and tennis? Spirituality identifies the very real and serious problems facing our society today, while tennis seems to represent a frivolous pastime, a game played by the young or idle rich. Two personally profound although completely varied experiences helped me understand the connection.

The first experience occurred when I was in my early twenties and had just finished College. Sports had played a major role in my life as a youth and now, as I stood on the threshold of adulthood, I found that sports were still the single most powerful motivating force in my life. On a lazy Sunday afternoon I was flicking through the television channels, hoping to catch a 'winner-take-all' tennis match worth \$100,000 between Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert.

As chance would have it, my attention was caught by a documentary on Africa, where graphic photographs depicted starving children living and dying in less than human conditions. It was a heart-wrenching program that contrasted dramatically with the tennis match that followed on-screen, showing two young women, both dressed daintily in white, hitting a yellow ball back and forth across a net. The dirt and squalor seemed so real, while the tennis match, which moments earlier had seemed so important, paled to insignificance in comparison. A deep depression set in because I was unable to reconcile these two realities. My own life seemed as meaningless as the tennis match, while the cry of hunger and pain from all those suffering around the world rang powerfully in my ears. I chose to heed the call of the suffering and abandoned any sporting ambitions I may have entertained and decided to travel to India to help the deprived millions.

The journey that followed was both illuminating and insightful. Illuminating because I was exposed to a reality

I barely knew existed. Insightful because after seeing people living on the streets with very little of the material benefits we call essentials, I realized that the answers to the problems facing humanity were never going to be solved politically or even materially because these were simply symptomatic of a greater ill and not the root of the problem. I felt that the answer to our problems lay in raising the consciousness of the people on this planet—those suffering as well as those allowing the suffering to continue. The problem was not that we lacked the resources to eliminate the hunger, pain and suffering, but that we lacked the ‘will’. An individual’s ‘will’, it seemed to me, is determined by his consciousness, his value system. How to change people’s consciousness was a question that remained unanswered.

The second experience brought tennis into the equation. While teaching tennis at the Quogue Racquet Club, a small club on the East End of Long Island, a gentleman about thirty-five years of age signed up for a series of hour-long tennis lessons on Saturday and Sunday mornings for July and August. He was a stockbroker from New York City, which meant, at least in this case, that he did not take instruction well, lacked concentration, was impatient with himself, could be rude and abrasive, and became frustrated and angry every time he missed a ball. I worked with him all summer long, although his personality did not always render the labor enjoyable or easy. We worked on his strokes and his attitude, but in retrospect, most important of all was how we worked on them. His spouse remarked in the middle of August that her husband had undergone a remarkable transformation, and she had chosen to credit his tennis lessons for this dramatic change. She told me that he seemed more at peace with himself, and this reflected in how he behaved towards her. He had become more patient and considerate

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and less prone to bursts of unprovoked anger and irritation. Upon reflection, I realized that she was right: he had changed. He was much more at ease on the court; he enjoyed his tennis more and was even able to smile at his mistakes at times. Before, he had always seemed to be in a rush, his mind agitated; it seemed he was impatient to become a 'good tennis player' and just not at peace with himself. But now, he truly seemed to be enjoying the process of playing and seemed much more relaxed. This experience suggested to me that perhaps it was possible to affect people's consciousness through tennis.

A few years later, when I returned to teaching tennis, my major objective became to increase my own awareness of spiritual truths by living them and practicing them daily in my own life. This personal journey to which I became committed arose from the realization that before the consciousness of others could be changed, my own consciousness had to be transformed. I am hopeful that my personal journey may offer other individuals with whom I come into contact the opportunity to transform their lives. I fully understand that an opportunity through sharing is all I can offer because my main preoccupation is still with living my own life as consciously as possible and because I know that no one can change anyone else, we can only change ourselves.

### **Opportunity for Transformation**

In the beginning, a part of me agonized over whether I was over-stepping my boundaries as a tennis teaching professional in the attempt to provide students the opportunity to transform their lives. Certainly, a part of me argued that I was perhaps being more than a little arrogant in supposing that I had the understanding to effect such a change in peoples' lives. Eventually I came to accept the fact that the manner in which I was teaching

tennis was a reflection of my consciousness, and that to do anything less would be a falsehood. I recognized my limitations, but I also realized that to teach tennis in the traditional manner, where 'winning' and 'success' are synonymous and the only ultimate goals, led to unhappiness and was an ill I could not perpetuate. I came to see tennis as my language, and I never belittled its importance because without it communication would be ineffective; but I also never lost perspective or ever viewed it as more than it actually was. Maintaining this perspective was essential to me, because I often ran into parents, players and fellow coaches who had completely lost theirs.

Tennis challenges individuals to look for a way to bring joy and inner tranquility to themselves regardless of the result or outcome. The spiritual dimension, on the other hand, takes this simplistic, albeit honorable goal and expands it to include much larger issues. What is the purpose of our lives? Why are we here? How should we live our lives? Can we be happy? What is happiness? Can it be enduring or is it by nature transitory? The task of placing the seeming insignificance of our lives into the greater context of the universe presents a challenge that is both inspirational and necessary.

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If you place a spoonful of sugar in a glass of water, the entire contents of the glass will be sweet. Similarly, spiritual Truths must hold true in every aspect of our lives and not just when it is convenient, for entertainment value or in esoteric discussions. Sometimes, and for some people, the understanding of these Truths may be easier on the tennis court than in the classroom. What is more important, however, than the understanding of these Truths on an intellectual level is an existential awareness of them, which in turn will allow for the living of them on a day-to-day basis. The value of any activity is intrinsic

to the activity itself and never as a means to something else. Many people will intellectually understand the precepts presented here. My challenge to you, the reader, is to go beyond intellectual understanding, which I contend is no understanding at all, to awareness with your whole being. Intellectual knowledge will leave you planning a strategy to facilitate change, while more wholistic and deeper knowing, available only through ones own existential experience will transform you, and the change will be instantaneous and effortless.

Readers are being offered the opportunity to transform their lives through playing tennis a little differently than they have in the past. The game will remain the same, but by changing our attitude we transform the entire experience. If we do this we will replace the stress, anxiety and frustration that usually accompanies competition, and replace them with peace, tranquility and bliss. What is more, these qualities will remain with us as we walk through other areas of life. Usually in every match there is a winner and a loser. I am offering readers the opportunity to transcend this paradigm. By changing values and perception through observation and understanding we can transform our experience and we can 'win' every time we step onto the court. I am suggesting that there is another way to look at and understand competition, tennis and life. So many of our beliefs are entrenched in social and cultural conditioning, which has become so much a part of who we think we are that we can no longer differentiate between reality and illusion. We are taught to look at things a certain way and we are so used to this that it seems ridiculous to attempt to view the same thing in a completely different way.

Only if the reader can relinquish his or her preconceived notions and examine everything in a spirit of openness and honest inquiry, will this book be of any value. I hope that is possible.

### 3. The Root of All Problems: False Identification

Even the casual observer of tennis will notice how much disharmony exists in the minds of the overwhelming majority of tennis players during competition. Why is this so? The vast majority of tennis players are pursuing a recreational activity out of choice and for pleasure. Why is the pleasure not always evident?

For too many individuals, tennis, instead of being an opportunity for relaxation and growth, becomes one more battlefield to reassert their ego and improve their self-image. In certain philosophical traditions, this is referred to as 'false identification', which alludes to the lack of awareness of our essential selves. What is this essential self? Usually it is our understanding of *who we are*, as determined by the parameters of our understanding of the word 'self'. Our understanding of the word 'self' is invariably inaccurate. We identify with the various roles we play in society and perceive these roles to be who we are. However, we are not just the roles we play, our essence lies beyond such limitations. The roles we play are constantly changing, but our essence is that part of us that is eternal and unchanging.

*For too many individuals, tennis, instead of being an opportunity for relaxation and growth, becomes one more battlefield to reassert their ego and improve their self-image.*

In other words, in trying to ascertain the essential nature of each individual it is easier to identify with

easily visible external factors rather than more subtle esoteric ones. Unfortunately, these factors limit our understanding of ourselves. Consequently, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of seeing myself as my physical body, my mind, my profession, or any number of a host of roles that we play during the course of our life. A simplistic, albeit obvious example of this as far as tennis is concerned occurred in the mid-seventies, when Chris Evert and Jimmy Connors ruled the roost in the world of professional tennis. Both players executed two-handed backhands that were their dominant shot. The general public aspired to emulate the success of their heroes by employing the two-handed backhand en masse. In trying to capture the essence of those two champions, most people identified with the two-handed backhand. However, we know that the qualities that catapulted those two individuals to superstardom were not limited to that particular shot. Inarguably, they both executed that shot magnificently, but their mental qualities far exceeded any special physical attributes either displayed, and these qualities were the primary determinants of the 'success' each enjoyed.

This concept can be applied not just to individuals but also to objects. Marketing strategy by major corporations involves creating an association with the product that is favorable and desirable, but often less than true. Advertisers are constantly trying to hawk their products, whether they are shoes, rackets or clothes, by implying that we will hit a forehand like Agassi if we use the same racket as he does, or we will move like Michael Chang if we use the same brand of shoes that he wears. Truth be told, Agassi's awesome forehand has little to do with his racket, and similarly Chang's movement would be pretty spectacular even if he wore no shoes at all.

Even more common is the inclination to identify with ones physical body. The recent boom in health clubs and

the accompanying interest in 'looking good' are double-edged swords. On one level it is truly beneficial, because physical well-being is an important aspect of wholistic living. On the other hand, however, our society is obsessed with youth and beauty, and that does not bode well for our overall spiritual development.

A consequence of false identification is that it contains a built-in recipe for disaster. If I identify with or become attached to that part of me which is a tennis player, I will feel joy when I win and pain when I lose. Similarly, if I feel good about myself because I am considered beautiful or handsome, what will happen to my self-esteem as my body undergoes the natural changes of maturation? The more I identify with my physical looks, the more devastating the mid-life crisis will be. The modern answer to this is depression, often followed by heavy medication or cosmetic surgery for those who can afford it. Obviously, this is no answer at all, but simply another way to suppress symptoms all the while leaving the root cause untouched and ready to re-emerge at any moment.

### **The Illusionary Battlefield**

So why can tennis players not compete in a detached, friendly manner and yet still try one hundred per cent? Why is it necessary to hate our opponent as many coaches suggest? Why is it assumed that the more we hate to lose, the less we will lose? Why do so many emotions arise in the pursuit of a simple skill?

The 'ego'—that part of us with which we most identify—is the chief cause of the battlefield analogy. Sports have taken on the aura of 'survival of the fittest'. There is a sense of 'You or me? One lives, the other dies!' This sense of do or die can only be achieved if one believes one is fighting for life—the essence of who we are. If we

identify with and believe we are the ego, then the war becomes tenable; but if we realize that losing a match does not detract one iota from our essence, who we really are, then we can 'give it our best shot' in a more detached manner. This detachment will result in being relaxed, calm and focused, which in turn will offer the best opportunity for peak performance. When Boris Becker was nineteen years old, he was the two-time defending champion at Wimbledon, but lost in an early round upset. The media were stunned and made all sorts of commotion. It took for Becker himself to remind all and sundry, 'All I did was lose a tennis match, nobody died!'

The simple fact is that it becomes extremely difficult to remain detached while in the fray. It is hard enough for coaches, parents, media, sponsors and even spectators; small wonder then that players suffer from the same disease. At the root of the ills that are discussed in this chapter is a fundamental lack of awareness of who we

*Naturally we desire to cultivate the good and avoid the bad, which is an impossible task because the two are as inextricably connected as the two sides of a coin.*

really are, which renders us victims of many emotions. The identification with ego causes many problems that simply disappear when we realize that our ego is not who we are.

Some of these emotions are considered 'good' and others 'bad'. Naturally we desire to cultivate the good and avoid the bad, which is an impossible task because the two are as inextricably connected as the two sides of a coin. We are caught in this duality of good and bad from which there is no escape. The only way out is transcendence through understanding, and an increased awareness of what *is*.

When we do not know our essence, false identification becomes a factor because the void of not knowing needs to be filled by something. The realization of who we are,

is the greatest spiritual wisdom, or in fact the *only* spiritual wisdom, the knowing of which renders all other questions and knowledge futile. When we operate from a place of not knowing this essential Truth, life becomes a problem to be solved rather than a mystery to be lived. Emotions and situations arise which have no basis in reality, but because we lack fundamental understanding, which is the identification with ego, they appear to be real. It is not that problems are solved when we identify with our true self, but rather, we realize that they never existed.

Anger, expectations and choking arise because we think there is more at stake than there really is. But the outcome of an athletic contest does not define us in any significant manner. Pressure and confidence are states of being which have no independent existence. They are illusions we create because of the false identification between ego and our true essence. Success and perfection are ideals that have to be redefined in light of the new-found wisdom: that of the ego being separate from our 'true self'.

### **Sports Psychology**

Sports psychologists identify two possible responses to the threatening situation that competition seems to offer. The 'flight or fight syndrome' is well documented and largely recognized, but there is a fundamental flaw with viewing the competitive experience solely from this perspective.

The problem lies in the fact that both responses are rooted in fear. Certainly, it is obvious to the casual viewer that the flight reaction is predicated on fear and as such utterly fails in the competitive environment. However the fight response, which is generally regarded as the most

## 22 *Relaxed Intensity*

desirable reaction within the competitive paradigm is also based on fear and as such will not allow us to perform at our peak. Yes, on one level the fight response will result in better play than the flight response, but there is an alternative available and it is that alternative I wish to highlight. That alternative is transcendence. It is the ability to play, not from fear, but from a centeredness, a calmness. It is what we in sports call the 'zone state'. This state of being happens, not by aspiring to it, but all by itself through examining the emotions that we are experiencing at this very moment. This is the difficulty, we cannot reach the zone state by wishing it to happen or by reading or intellectually understanding these precepts. We have to begin where we are and it is through getting in touch with the emotions we feel during the competitive experience that change will happen. How do we get in touch with these emotions? By watching. Observe yourself the next time you play. The ability to step back and watch your anger raging within you is the first step towards watching this anger disappear, but it has to be your existential experience. Nothing else will work.

### **Anger**

Definition:

*'On the court, anger occurs when we want or expect to win a particular point, game or match and do not. Off the court, anger is an emotional response to a situation we wish to control but cannot.'*

Anger is an emotional response that hinders peak athletic performance. However, any attempt to label anger as negative or to suppress it will only tie you to that emotional state that much closer, as will uncontrolled venting of it. Consequently, we need to find that point exactly in

the middle between suppression and indulgence. That point arises through simple observation without judgment. What is required is understanding—understanding the experience of anger. What is it? How does it feel? And ultimately: what is its cause? Only realization through personal observation can allow us to grow and perhaps transcend anger, although transcendence can never be the goal because the desire to transcend will inhibit simple observation and therefore understanding. We miss an easy shot, one that we thought we could have made and anger in its seed form, negativity, results. Or, we lose a game, a set or a match and we become extremely agitated. What is at the root of this powerful emotional response to a simple event or series of events? Anger is obviously a function of our own mind. It is our reaction to a particular situation. The anger and the situation are two separate phenomena. The situation is real and exists in the here-and-now, but the anger is our personal reaction to that situation. The anger is not arising from the situation but from ourselves. It is as if we are unable to accept that we just missed that point or that we lost that match, but the reality is that these things did just happen. Why can we not accept that which just happened before our very own eyes? Because we are blind, of course! Actually, we are blinded by our unrealistic view of how we play. Can't we simply accept the fact that no matter how easy the shot we just missed, we are at the level where we can miss that type of shot at times. How do we know that? Because we just missed it. Is that so difficult to come to terms with? With acceptance comes great freedom and relaxation; without it we will continue to torture ourselves with no end in sight and no chance of a way out of the maze of negativity.

*With acceptance comes great freedom and relaxation; without it we will continue to torture ourselves with no end in sight and no chance of a way out of the maze of negativity.*

## 24 *Relaxed Intensity*

### *Unfulfilled Desires*

What precipitates the negativity are our unfulfilled desires and our attachment to those desires. In other words, we want something and anger is a reaction that occurs when we cannot get what we want, much in the way a small child may cry when she wants to be picked up but is not.

The consequences of anger are multi-fold. On one level, there is a reaction at a cellular level that makes fine, motor-skill performance increasingly difficult. On another level, anger prevents us from remaining calm and psychologically poised, which is the ideal state from which to make balanced decisions. On yet another level, anger depletes energy from the individual and can adversely influence the environment by throwing negative energy into the universe.

As tennis players, we instinctively know that anger does not feel good and that it impedes peak performance. Unfortunately, we are so unaware of the different levels I have described that some coaches and players actually feel that anger can enhance performance by increasing motivation. This is simply untrue; anger and peak performance cannot co-exist. However, anger is sometimes used accidentally as a release, which will feel good in the short-term. In other words, if there is tremendous tension inside the individual, overt action, in the form of anger, can release that built-up tension, which will allow the individual to feel more relaxed, at least temporarily, until more energy is built up again.

Bjorn Borg's success and his stoic on-court demeanor would have been a powerful role model for the youth for many years to come had John McEnroe not appeared on the scene. McEnroe helped create the illusion that anger can be used to improve athletic performance. However, John McEnroe was a tormented individual who was full

of turmoil and his outward displays of anger helped him release the tremendously powerful pent up energy within. Besides, McEnroe achieved whatever success he did because of his inordinate genius with a tennis racket and in spite of the tremendous mayhem that raged within him throughout his career.

Besides, can we consider John McEnroe, the competitor, a 'successful' human being? There is little doubt that he had immense talent as a tennis player and he certainly won numerous tournaments and accolades, but was he successful? If ultimate success is somehow related to peace of mind, tranquility and happiness, I am not sure John ever achieved any semblance of such an emotional state on the tennis court during a tennis match.

### *Expectations*

Another major cause of anger is our expectations. Expectations can be defined as 'what is, plus what we think should be'. What is, is reality; while what should be, is our own personal perception or desire. Our expectations are simply our own personal creation, and if they differ from what is, guess which one is erroneous? Despite our expectations, we will play the way we play. Our expectations do not help our physical skills to improve. They will stay the same unless we practice and receive competent instruction. Although expectations will not help us in any manner whatsoever, they can hinder performance and result in unhappiness during and after a match.

*Our expectations are simply our own personal creation, and if they differ from what is, guess which one is erroneous? Despite our expectations, we will play the way we play. Our expectations do not help our physical skills to improve.*

Almost universally, it seems all tennis players think they play better than they actually do. The reason for this

is that players usually play in a certain range; they do not play exactly the same way each day. There are 'good' days and 'bad' days. Amusingly, we identify only with the good days and somehow convince ourselves that the bad days are not really us, but some disease that has befallen us temporarily. Well, I would like to remind tennis players that they are a combination of their best and worst performances. Both are equally real—or unreal. When you are dealing with human beings, there are far too many variables that affect performance. Physically, we know our biorhythms fluctuate on different days, in different ways, and for different reasons. Similarly, psychological variables abound that affect the way we perform. Consequently, it is difficult to predict the way we will play on any given day. Without an accurate assessment of how we play, expectations become useless. Our preconceived image of how we play or how our opponent plays is just that—an image! Our expectations have nothing to do with reality. Ideally, we should strive to understand how expectations impact our life, both on the tennis court and off. Expectations are born from desires and past experiences, often a distorted perception of those past experiences. We should give ourselves the opportunity to experience a wonderful, new present, unrestricted by the chains that bind us to the past.

Anger is sometimes also rooted in ignorance. Players often can become frustrated even in practice because they are unaware of how the learning process happens. They feel that if they can hit one forehand, they should be able to hit every forehand. This simply reveals a lack of understanding of what it takes to execute strokes. To execute a stroke consistently takes mechanics for sure and many people are proficient in that department, but they are unaware that there is a mental component to stroke production also. To bring the racket face to a moving ball at

exactly the right time takes rhythm and timing and in order to make this happen consistently, the player must be present. Regardless of how perfect your technique is or how great your eye-hand coordination is or how great your timing and rhythm are, unless you are present at the very moment the ball is traveling through the air towards you, you will commit an error. In order to be present our mind has to be silent. The conscious mind is forever active so an error often occurs simply because for that split second you just were not there. If we understand how rarely we are present to life as it unfolds before us, we will become more tolerant of our errors. As a result, we will find it easier to let go of errors as soon as they have happened and move on to the next point.

*To execute a stroke consistently takes mechanics for sure and many people are proficient in that department, but they are unaware that there is a mental component to stroke production also.*

Finally, we need to be careful about labeling anger as bad and thus trying to avoid it. Perceiving anger as either good or bad will create an obstacle to seeing it for what it is, which is really what we need to do. Awareness and observation of anger as it truly is will allow us to understand it, not intellectually but experientially at a much deeper level, which will necessarily lead to growth both as a tennis player and as a human being. Once we become sensitive enough to feel the pain that anger brings *to us*, only then, will we be able to drop anger. It cannot be dropped by intellectually understanding my words. Only when we, ourselves, feel that anger is a pin-prick into our own arm will we be able to drop it like a hot coal. Until that existential experience is our own we will continue to struggle with anger and it will come and go as if we have no control over it; and in a way we do not.

### *The Root of Anger*

Ultimately, anger arises from our unfulfilled desires. What are these desires? They are the mistaken belief that their fulfillment will somehow enhance our lives. Only after a lifetime of chasing will it become clear to some of us that this is simply not true and that all accomplishments in the material world bring nothing of any ultimate value. When we realize that the fulfillment of these desires will not bring anything of real value, and that it is the pursuit of these goals and dreams that is the cause of all the tension and unhappiness in our lives in the first place, they will drop automatically. If it were not so tragic, it would be quite comical.

In the same way, the state of *Relaxed Intensity* in tennis is not about bringing something from outside to make it happen, but about taking away those obstacles that prevent our natural state of being from shining through. When we drop anger, frustration, unfulfilled desires, etc., we shed our ego and what remains is our true, natural, relaxed self. Being in touch with this center of our being will allow us to perform at our peak while remaining calm and peaceful regardless of the outcome.

### Choking

Definition:

*'Choking in tennis is a fear-based emotional response to a situation we think defines who we are. We put so much value on the winning, that the fear of losing becomes all-consuming.'*

Anyone who has played any competitive sport has had some experience of what is commonly called 'choking': nerves and tightness, which result in tentative play, way below our best. Where does this choking come from

and why this universal application? Given the fact that it is so pervasive and has been so for such a long period of time, why have we had so little success in eliminating it? Certainly, sports psychologists have identified this problem and a great many have written about the phenomenon of choking, and yet it continues to exist at almost every level of play.

As I have indicated earlier, existential understanding is the cure for all our ills and until we experience a deeper understanding of choking by becoming personally intimate with the fear that arises within us, the phenomenon will continue. This knowing transforms us: change occurs automatically without dogma, methodology, system or plan. At the core of choking is fear. Fear of losing, yes, but we need to delve deeper. Gone are the days of athletic contests where there was no tomorrow for the loser, and the prize for winning was life and the opportunity to fight again. Is there a deeper fear?

For junior players desperately trying to find themselves during adolescence, fear can be a powerful emotion triggered by the need for acceptance. Mistakenly, acceptance is confused with winning and success. I say mistakenly because parents and coaches, on deeper reflection, would not knowingly withhold love or validation because of a 'poor' result, and yet this is the powerful message we are often sending to our young wards at a particularly vulnerable period in their lives. Consequently, fear of losing a tennis match goes beyond the boundaries of a tennis court, for a youngster. The fear of losing strikes at the very core of how he feels about himself since at this age how he feels about himself is defined by how others feel about him.

Similarly, adults who experience fear while playing are struggling to understand who they are and have mistakenly identified with the tennis player. The self-image that

they themselves have created is at risk when losing becomes a possibility and so the choking happens as a response to losing a part of who they think they are. To let go of that self-created image and allow ourselves to be whosoever we are can be an extremely liberating experience. I remember teaching tennis at a country club in the Catskills Mountains of Upstate, New York. As the residential tennis pro for that club, the members and residents in that area considered me unbeatable. An image, I obviously knew was untrue, but one that I was nevertheless acutely aware of. One summer, another visiting pro was brought down from New York City to play an exhibition match against me. I remember playing that match and at times being aware of the 'expectations' upon me; undoubtedly that affected my performance to some degree. An even more difficult situation occurred years later at another club where I was teaching and where I had to play a member in a tournament match. The expectations I put on myself in that situation were extremely burdensome and as a result I was unable to play carefree, relaxed tennis and played well below my capabilities.

We need to understand that we are not a machine or a fixed commodity; we are different things at different times and defy simplistic categorization. We live in an extremely judgmental environment where everything we

*We live in an extremely judgmental environment where everything we do is compared to how the same activity is performed by others.*

do is compared to how the same activity is performed by others. This continuous judgment is so pervasive that we as individuals subject ourselves to the same unsympathetic criticism and are often harder on ourselves than others are. At the root of this self-criticism is the desire to be accepted and loved. Unfortunately, the love and acceptance cannot come from outside. No one can give us the peace

and happiness that results from such nurturing. We can only give it to ourselves; but because we do not give it to ourselves, we seek it from others and this is how the fear enters.

*The Root of Choking*

So why is losing so painful and why are we so afraid of it? Certainly there are material consequences of losing: less money, lower rankings, elimination from a tournament, etc. In addition, it is easy for young players to feel the fear of losing, especially when their family has made such a large investment of time and money. This becomes especially so if the parents continue to remind their child of the 'burden'. Also, there is the added pressure of the desires and expectations of the coach. If the coach's ego is caught up in how his student performs and what her ranking is, the youngster's burden will become a little heavier. The burden becomes unbearable if the parents' desire to live vicariously through their child becomes a reality.

However, beyond these material concerns there are the psychological needs we have alluded to earlier whereby the needs of the individual for love and acceptance become confused in the winning and losing and the sometimes not so distorted conclusions they arrive at concerning the attitude of the authority figures in their lives.

Ultimately, at the root of all of this is the confusion of 'false identification' born out of thinking we are the ego. When this happens the need to build up the ego becomes of paramount importance. Consequently, when such perceived importance is at stake, it becomes impossible to relax, which is a state of being that arises from *knowing*

*When such perceived importance is at stake, it becomes impossible to relax, which is a state of being that arises from knowing that the outcome is irrelevant.*

that the outcome is irrelevant. On a material and psychological level things can be amiss and attempts can be made to correct them, but on a spiritual level all is exactly as it should be. However, it is our inability to accept that all is well in the bigger picture that is the cause of the problems on the lower levels. Thinking that the ego really exists starts the wheel turning and once the vicious cycle starts to spin it is impossible to stop, unless, of course there is a quantum leap and a transcendence happens by falling off and into silence.

### **Pressure**

Definition:

*'Pressure is a self-created illusion that has no independent existence beyond our own mind. There simply is no such thing as pressure, it is a figment of our imagination that can be discarded as easily as a sweaty t-shirt.'*

What is pressure? Is it something that one can see or touch? Can any of our five senses identify it? Obviously not, and yet does that mean it does not exist? Tennis players at all levels have experienced pressure, but is this pressure just a figment of our collective imagination? Yes, because it is not tangible, but no because it possesses a subjective reality that cannot be denied. To understand that it is created solely by our mind empowers us to recognize that it can also be dismissed as soon as our mind becomes silent.

*Pressure comes from our expectations, desires and attachments to a particular situation; it has nothing to do with the situation per se.*

Pressure comes from our expectations, desires and attachments to a particular situation; it has nothing to do with

the situation per se. The proof lies in the fact that individuals handle the 'pressure' of a situation differently. For

example, I am presently coaching a world-class player who loves to perform. Ask him to play a match in front of 15,000 people and he will be completely pumped. Other players would not feel anywhere near as comfortable in such a position. The 'pressure' situation is the same for both players, but one player may feel the pressure, the other may not. So where is the root of the pressure? If it was in the situation both players would feel it automatically. It is obviously not in the situation, but within the individual. No situation dictates an automatic response, because we clearly have a 'choice' as to how we wish to react to each and every situation we find ourselves in. Pressure can only arise if the mind becomes active. The conscious mind starts focusing on the possible outcomes and fear arises. If we are to play our best tennis, a more suitable response is to avoid looking into the past or future and remain squarely in the only reality there is—the present. If we can remain in the present, thoughts about losing and failure will not enter our minds. If these thoughts remain absent, pressure will not be a factor for us. Pressure does not have to be removed; by simply maintaining present focus, no extraneous thoughts can enter the mind. Ultimately, pressure is no more than an extraneous thought.

Too often players are provided with short-term responses that deal with fear on the court at a particular moment in time, but do nothing to remove the source of fear so that it does not arise again. I am referring to the regulation of breathing by taking slow, deep breaths. This is an effective short-term response, but it does not touch the source of our fear, which means fear will visit again and will continue to do so until we bring some understanding of the fear to our consciousness. There is nothing wrong with taking deep breaths; on the contrary, I think correct breathing from our *hara* (stomach) is an

essential part of a wholistic lifestyle. But breathing is symptomatic of a state of being. To manipulate breathing patterns without dealing with the root cause of the emotions that arise within us and actually cause those breathing patterns will bring no real, long-term changes.

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Some praise the value of pressure to motivate themselves to peak performance. Peak performance is rooted in being in the present moment and completely relaxed. This spiritual state of being is best

arrived at through awareness and the understanding that arises from it. However, being present can also happen if I hold a gun to your head and ask you to play. If that gun does not elicit fear to the extent that would render playing tennis impossible, which would be, by far, the most common reaction, then it is possible that the gun and the fear of death would make one so focused that they would forget everything else and become completely present. In both situations, the player becomes focused in the present from where peak performance happens, but one method will always require the gun, while in the other, one is not dependent on any outside force.

In addition, if the magnitude of a situation motivates you to focus, then the absence of that situation will render you lethargic and disinterested and a roller-coaster situation can arise. In the example above of the world-class player, although he loved playing the big 'occasion', he had trouble 'getting up' for practice and sometimes even a match against an unheralded player at a small tournament. This is the flip side of the duality that cannot be avoided.

Paul, from Modesto, California claims to love playing 'pressure situations' because he feels they challenge him

to play flawless tennis; as a result, he seems to play those situations very well. His attitude towards pressure enables him to become increasingly focused, both physically and mentally. Consequently, he plays those points at his very best. Since many of his opponents do not relish these situations as much as he does and therefore do not play their best at these times, he is fairly successful. This success adds to his joy and reinforces his attitude towards those situations. However, the problem in this case is that Paul is saving his best play for certain situations in the mistaken belief that it is these situations that allow him to play his best tennis. Closer observation reveals that he is playing these situations well because he is focused and wholly present and that he is playing these points no differently than any other points he plays with such a focused mind-set. Regardless, Paul is in a significant minority. The fact is that fear and anxiety usually accompany pressure for most people, and the removal of such emotions invariably allows the individual to play better tennis. The key to removing the burden of pressure is to understand that it is something over and beyond the situation. It is our perception of the situation, but it is not the situation itself.

When one is relaxed and calm and sees a ball coming towards him, all that is seen is the ball, its speed, flight, spin and direction. However, when the pressure to win or play well consumes us, it is more difficult to simply see the ball. Our self-created emotional state becomes a barrier that clouds our clear perception of the ball and dulls our motor, coordination and reaction skills. As a result, we are less able to respond in the efficient, relaxed manner that is the key to peak performance. Many players feel pressure before a match, but as soon as play begins they seem to get over it quickly. The reason for this is that when we are waiting to play, the mind is unoccupied

and therefore more susceptible to drifting off to anticipate the 'magnitude' of the situation. However, as soon as the game begins and playing replaces waiting, the player usually becomes focused and occupied and the mind cannot now drift off into the 'what if ...' game.

Parents, players and coaches need to be cognizant of the fact that pressure, although self-created, is a potential pitfall for youngsters. They need to alleviate this feeling by helping the student explore the desire to win or play well through introspection. Introspection and awareness through observation will ultimately lead to a clearer realization of these things. Unfortunately, parents and coaches can often exacerbate the situation through their own ex-

*To place too much emphasis on winning is to create pressure for your child or student. Please understand, by emphasizing victory we probably make it harder for them to achieve it.*

pectations and desires. To place too much emphasis on winning is to create pressure for your child or student. Please understand, by emphasizing victory we probably make it harder for them to achieve it.

The more relaxed players are while performing, the more likely they will be to produce their best play, which is all they can do. Playing our best will maximize our chances of achieving our best results. Ironically, we have to let go of the things we want in order to get those very same things, but in that process the things we want undergo a remarkable transformation!

### *The Root of Pressure*

The root of pressure is also fear, which is itself anchored in false identification. What are we afraid of? Obviously, the worst that can happen is that we will lose a tennis match. What do we lose when we lose a match? If our ego is uninvolved, all we lose is the match; but if our ego is involved, at stake could be our self-esteem or our sense

of who we are. The irony once again is that the fear of losing is what makes winning more difficult and losing most probable. There is no logic to it. Fear is simply the conscious mind wandering away from the present reality and imagining a host of possible outcomes that may or may not happen and then giving an inflated importance to those possible outcomes.

The key is in understanding that there is nothing of value that we can lose. Consequently, fear is unwarranted.

Fear disappears when we realize that nothing bad can happen, this understanding will not happen to any individual whose thinking remains restricted to the material plane because obviously, in the world,

*The key is in understanding that there is nothing of value that we can lose. Consequently, fear is unwarranted. Fear disappears when we realize that nothing bad can happen.*

lots of 'undesirable' things can happen. However, to the individual who has looked into life a little deeper, an understanding dawns that this world is perfect and that we are perfect even in our imperfection.

As a result, it is not possible to lose the sense of who we are. What we do has nothing to do with who we are. Consequently, how well or badly we do these things does not touch us at our core. The identification with ego is ultimately false. Our ego is not who we are. If ego were real, then yes, winning would somehow make us 'better' and losing would detract something from us. But this is obviously not the case. Winning and losing are things that happen to us; they are, at most, a commentary on how we played tennis at a particular moment in time. Winning inflates our ego, the false sense of who we are, while losing deflates the same illusion. There is great freedom when the illusion is dropped completely and then we can experience the pure and simple joy of just playing in perfect equanimity.

### Confidence

#### Definition:

*'Confidence is an opinion, based on past experiences, of ones ability to perform a particular activity. Consequently, performance is affected by the mind, which clings to the past. If the past was successful, we become confident and an expectation arises commensurate with that. Similarly, if we were unsuccessful in the past, a fear of failure surfaces. Either frame of mind draws the mind away from the here-and-now from where peak performance arises. Thus confidence as a state of being is a double-edged sword that is best avoided altogether.'*

The traditional definition of the word 'confidence' leads to temporary mental states that fluctuate depending on external factors. These external factors are constantly changing and as a result, a player's confidence ebbs and flows with alarming regularity. If a point, game or match is won, the competitor feels confident, but following a loss, confidence vanishes. It seems that confidence is a prerequisite to peak performance and a valuable and much sort after commodity by every competitor. Unfortunately, it seems every player suffers from a lack of confidence at various times. Even the most successful professionals, incredible as it may sound to us, can begin to doubt their ability after very little adversity. So fragile is the competitive disposition. The challenge, it would seem, would be to find a way to hold on to this precious commodity. Ironically, players seem to have confidence when they least need it, in other words when they are playing well and seem to lose it when they need it the most, when they are not performing well. What sense does this make? If confidence could be preserved in a bottle, we could use it much more wisely.

*First you see it ... now you don't!*

The case of Agassi in the mid nineties is a typical example. Agassi was playing Becker in the semi-finals of Wimbledon, after having won the event the previous year. He was playing great tennis and had dismantled everyone in his path to get to this stage of the tournament, and had outplayed Becker 6-1 in the first set and was leading 4-1 in the second before he inexplicably lost his 'confidence' after missing a few shots in a row.

How unbelievable is this? Is confidence granted by Grace, given and taken at will at the whim of an unknown and supreme power? Or are we simply building castles in the air by attaching the source of our confidence to erroneous objects? After that match, Agassi explained that after missing a few shots he simply lost his 'feel' for the ball and no longer felt capable of hitting the shots he had been hitting all tournament long. This is how fragile confidence is, he had been undefeated on grass for almost two years and here he was winning a match easily in the semi-finals of the premiere tournament in the world and after a few missed shots he became consumed by fear. His mind became active and having thus fallen out of the present moment, it would be impossible to play decent tennis. In common parlance, 'He started thinking about it!'

*The Trap*

Most people's confidence is based on external factors that relate to a particular situation as opposed to just being present to the situation as it unfolds before us. Once more confidence is extraneous thought that will doom us to vacillating between feeling positive or negative. We cannot have confidence without its counterpart, lack of confidence, or doubt. The only alternative is transcendence and to do that we will have to abandon this whole idea

of confidence. Confidence and doubt are both together one single phenomenon; to try and separate them is an exercise in futility. Try for yourself and see.

An example of the insane nature of how confidence can be created occurred recently when I went to a tournament to watch a student of mine play. Mike was a highly ranked Eastern junior who had

*Confidence and doubt are both together one single phenomenon; to try and separate them is an exercise in futility.*

always displayed match-play symptoms of fear, anxiety and tightness. In his first match he was not at his best, but he pulled the match off more because of his opponent's inconsistency and his persistence rather than any brilliant tennis. In our analysis after the match, I tried to pick out a few key points that I thought might be helpful in the few hours before his next match. Usually in these situations I primarily focus on relaxing the student and removing any self-created psychological obstacles to peak performance. Very rarely do I focus on technique, since I believe this is best worked on in practice as it generally takes time for the student to assimilate technical changes without conscious thought—in other words effortlessly and instinctively. However, Mike was being bothered by and having a particularly hard time with his serve and I shared with him the transgression I had observed. When Mike went out for his second match I could see that he was clearly looser and playing without the anxiety I had seen earlier. In addition, he had made the adjustment on his serve and was now hitting the ball harder and more consistently than before. Mike lost that match and came off the court disappointed. One of the first things he remarked to me was that he had not served well. I asked him why he felt that way, and he replied because he had not won many free points off his serve. In other words, Mike had no independent sense of how he served; his

opponent on this day had returned particularly well and so Mike thought he served poorly. If his opponent had been weaker and not returned as well, Mike would have thought he had served very well. In both cases his serve would have been exactly the same. This was extremely revealing, because it showed that Mike's perception of how he served was based not on what was actually happening but on the ability of his opponent to return the serve, which in turn affected his confidence (the way he felt about himself), which in turn affected his performance. This simple example is an indicator of a plethora of ills and illustrates how out of touch with reality we can become. This is how confidence works, it is based on arbitrary criteria that have really nothing to do with ourselves. Consequently, because the arbitrary criterion is constantly changing, our confidence also rises and falls. We win a match and feel confident, but is the winning an indicator of our ability or our opponent's?

If confidence is that transitory, how can it be a desirable state? If we can tap into that emotional state from which an individual can feel good about himself despite losing a match or playing badly, we will have happy, well-adjusted tennis players, who will be giving themselves the best opportunity to play to their maximum potential all the time.

#### *Pure Presence*

Feeling good about ourselves is a natural state that is lost through the presence of fear. In the ideal competitive state, there is no awareness of either confidence or lack of confidence; there is simply pure presence. On a conscious level, when the competitor is in present focus there is an awareness of the ball and nothing else, and confidence becomes a non-issue. Both the lack of confidence and confidence itself are psychological states to be avoided

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because both are illusory—illusory because they are temporary states and one will necessarily lead to the other. If one surfaces, the other will not be too far behind. Neither has an independent existence: they are inextricably connected. One cannot exist without the other; they both have to be transcended.

Too many people are on emotional roller-coasters, upon which they carry the burdens of the past. If the past was good, their experience will provide them with false bravado—false because it is transitory and will only last until the next error or lost match. An essential feature of true confidence, if it is to be a valuable concept, is a more enduring quality.

### *Avoiding Judgment*

The fact is that confidence is connected to the result, a judgment of how we feel about ourselves. If we can

*If we can avoid judging ourselves, which means not thinking we are good when we win or bad when we lose, we can perhaps avoid the never-ending cycle of ups and downs that judgment is heir to.*

avoid judging ourselves, which means not thinking we are good when we win or bad when we lose, we can perhaps avoid the never-ending cycle of ups and downs that judgment is heir to. How to avoid

judgment? By being so involved or absorbed in the process that judgment simply does not exist. If I miss a shot, I miss a shot; to conclude negative thoughts about myself is beyond the scope of what is! Similarly, if I hit a winner, there is no need to conclude anything more than that the opponent did not return the shot and I won the point. To use that information to feel better about myself is to stretch what is. Reality is what is happening; for an event to boost confidence is my interpretation of that event. It has absolutely nothing to do with the event itself.

*The Root of Confidence*

Finally, I wish to contrast the traditional definition of confidence with the following: *'Confidence is the ability to feel secure within oneself regardless of fluctuating external circumstances. This feeling good about oneself can only manifest when we drop all identifications through an understanding of our essential self.'*<sup>1</sup>

The strength inherent in feeling good about ourselves is an extremely powerful state of being that is probably the most potent factor in determining if we will reach our full potential both on the court and off. Ultimately, it is the power of love. Loving and accepting ourselves for exactly who we are allows us to perform freely and to express ourselves in the purest possible way. This acceptance of who we are facilitates a natural and supremely wise growth process that allows change to manifest effortlessly and perfectly.

*Feeling good about ourselves is an extremely powerful state of being that is probably the most potent factor in determining if we will reach our full potential.*

The fact is that we do not love or accept ourselves and that is why we are so fragile. Consequently, a small thing happens and we feel depressed, something else happens and we feel on top of the world. This fluctuation will continue until we can simply accept ourselves as we are and drop this whole idea of becoming better. It is not that the dropping of ambition will prohibit growth; on the contrary, now real learning can take place and growth will happen in a natural and effortless way.

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<sup>1</sup> Our essential self is that part of us which is eternal and unchanging, sometimes called spirit or soul, although I prefer the term pure Awareness or Consciousness.

## Success

### Definition:

*'Success is a journey of awareness that brings us closer to the realization of our full potential in a spiritual sense. It is in this journey that true peace and happiness lies. It has absolutely nothing to do with achieving, attaining or becoming on the material level.'*

For most of us success and happiness are synonymous, but in *real life* success almost exclusively alludes to the material world, while lasting happiness is an internal happening completely unrelated to any particular external situation. Unless we become totally aware of this phenomenon, we will always strive for and sometimes achieve success, while never ever becoming happy! If our goal in tennis and life is to be the best we can be, to reach our highest potential, then we need to re-examine some of the basic terminology we use. The manner in which we use language is important, because it is generally believed that language shapes thinking and thinking most often determines behavior.

In the present context, winning and losing are very precise terms: whomsoever wins six games first (with a two game margin or tie-breaker at 6-6), wins a set, and whoever wins two out of three sets wins the match. The other person is the loser. However, these terms, winning and losing, are largely inconsequential in the greater scheme of things because they are not only relative, but fail to acknowledge the real value of competition. For example, an 'A' player may defeat a 'C' player in a tournament, but what in fact has she won? She played someone less skillful than herself and may have fallen victim to nerves or suffered from a lack of concentration and played well below her potential. On the other hand the 'C' player may have played the best tennis of her life in

the loss. Can we really call the 'A' player the winner and the 'C' player the loser? Do these terms accurately reflect the match as I have described it? Obviously not! How about, if you play a tournament and beat a higher seeded player because that player has a 'bad' day and all you had to do to win was to basically keep the ball in play. Has that victory in any way improved you as a player? What is the value of that type of victory? Is it a cause for celebration? And yet invariably, celebration or depression is always related to the result; we need to read a book carefully, instead of judging it simply by its title.

Our terminology may accurately describe the outcome, but by ignoring the process, it becomes completely inaccurate and useless. Of course for 'practical' purposes, a winner must be determined so he can move into the next round of a tournament, etc. and the criterion for that is well-known, but for individuals interested in their long-term development, greater care has to be taken in assessing their performance.

### *Winning and Losing as Signposts*

If ones goal is to be the best tennis player that one can be, then it becomes clear that winning and losing are exactly the same. Tennis matches are like signposts that show us in what direction we need to move in order to reach our destination, which is improvement. There are lessons to be learned in both defeat and victory, and since all lessons provide us with an opportunity to improve, how can we say that one lesson is preferable to another? If anything, it could be argued that losses are better teachers than wins, because defeat often provides the competitor with more time and greater impetus for

*There are lessons to be learned in both defeat and victory, and since all lessons provide us with an opportunity to improve, how can we say that one lesson is preferable to another?*

reflection, while victories are taken for granted in a celebratory fashion. For too many players, however, the outcome is all that matters, and those are the players who learn the least from matches.

Far too many times I have consoled dejected youngsters at tournaments, who after a loss sit tearfully in a corner of the locker room struggling to maintain their composure. I ask them why they came to the tournament. Invariably, through the tears they look up at me with a confused look on their face: 'To win, of course,' is the obvious reply. If winning is our goal, then clearly we will be unhappy if we do not achieve it. Winning, however, is the objective of the game; it cannot be our goal, because we have no control over the winning and to make goals beyond our control is to create a blueprint for anger, frustration and unhappiness. Winning, playing well or even improving are things beyond our control, and yet individuals consistently make goals such as these. As a result they feel frustration when their goals are not achieved. This is extremely unfair, because if a student tries his or her very best and has an excellent attitude, what more can they do? The outcome can be determined by a number of factors beyond the student's control.

#### *The Wise Man and the Fool*

What happens at a tournament gives us a checklist of things to 'work on' in our practices. Matches allow us to

*If we can focus on the here-and-now by simply being present, every situation we find ourselves in will offer us an opportunity to learn and therefore grow.*

evaluate our strengths and weaknesses, but most importantly offer us the opportunity to play from a position of being centered. If we can focus on the here-and-now by simply being present, every situation we find ourselves in will offer us an opportunity to learn and therefore grow.

Whenever a student comes off the court I will, at an appropriate time, ask what they learned or observed from their match. This encourages the player to think in a certain manner that has long-term benefits. Sometimes the player may say, 'I learned nothing, coach, the opponent was terrible,' or 'I played so poorly, coach, there was nothing to learn,' in which case I ask them, 'Who learns the most, the wise man or the fool?' The tendency is to say the fool learns the most, but in reality the fool is a fool because he has been unable to learn the lessons of life available to each and every one of us at all times. The wise man has the ability to learn and that is why he is wise.

Wisdom is available to each and every one of us at all times. Wisdom comes to those who are available in the moment because it is in this moment that all we need to know is revealed. The wise have their eyes open to this reality, and the ignorant are sitting next to the same reality, but with their eyes closed. Our lessons are not always obvious, but they are always there; sometimes we simply have to look a little harder.

### *Success and Failure*

Success and failure are also relative terms that are intrinsically related to ones goals. As long as our goals are process-oriented, and therefore within our control, success can be achieved every time we step onto the court. Problems arise when winning and losing are used interchangeably with success and failure. In such cases, success is winning and losing is always associated with failure.

*Problems arise when winning and losing are used interchangeably with success and failure.*

To view our tennis in this way is to miss the essence; it is to eat the core of the apple while throwing away the rest. It is because of this confusion that losing becomes

such a painful experience. It is because of this confusion that, although we all long for success, we sacrifice real success for simply winning. As a result, we fail to gain the long-term benefit that accompanies real success, and instead ride on the emotional roller-coaster that winning and losing provides, and from which there is no reprieve ... ever.

We are constantly striving for success or to improve our status in life, which is inevitably measured in terms of achieving or becoming. The assumption is that if I become a doctor, lawyer or any other such well-paid and well-respected profession, I will have all I want in life. Only those who have achieved their material goals will realize the falsity of this statement. The simple fact is that most of us spend the vast majority of our time pursuing material desires in the false assumption that this will be the panacea for all our dissatisfactions. The conscious thought may not be so clear, but our body language is loud and clear. Observe how you spend your waking hours and you will discover what is important to you. You may not like what your lifestyle reveals about your values, but it is what it is!

Material success will bring us more money, more fame, higher rankings, etc., but these 'joys' will be short-lived. A better-advised course of action would be to consider how the quality of our life can be improved on an essential level. Focusing our energy in the pursuit of that goal may point us in a completely different direction than where we are heading presently! The irony is that this can be done, not by necessarily changing what we do, but changing ourselves and thereby changing *how* we do the very same thing we did before.

### *The Root of Success*

Real success involves growing in life *and* tennis; it entails courageously exploring new paths. It means being able to freely execute strokes without fear of losing or being branded a failure. It means constantly venturing into uncharted waters, working on aspects of our game that are not yet perfect, instead of falling back on the old reliables. This state of being is available to all of us at all times, and is independent of our physical skills or the opponent we are playing.

*Real success involves growing in life and tennis; it entails courageously exploring new paths. It means being able to freely execute strokes without fear of losing or being branded a failure.*

If we can accept and love ourselves regardless of everything that happens in our lives then our success is guaranteed. Problems arise when we understand the word success in its limited, worldly sense and then we have success, but gain nothing of value and our lives remain empty and without meaning.

### **Perfection**

Definition:

*'Perfection is being able to accept what is, secure in the awareness that accepting the here and now has intrinsic value. From this present moment any growth that needs to take place will do so automatically and naturally. Perfection is not a state of being outside of us; it is not about arriving, but about realizing we are already here.'*

A few years back, I recall sitting on a wall surrounded by the scenic beauty of the Costa del Sol in Spain. The mountain peaks were an imposing backdrop on one side, while the Mediterranean beckoned enticingly on the other.

From this wondrous perch I was able to view a number of the tennis courts that were sprinkled throughout the grounds of Lew Hoad's Campo de Tennis, truly one of the most picturesque tennis resorts in the world.

On one court I saw world-class tennis players exchange spirited rallies of high-powered forehands and backhands, the beauty and grace of their facile movement clearly evident to even the untrained eye. However, to the players themselves, the elegance, ease and strength were pushed into oblivion by the all-encompassing desire to be perfect. As a result, errors were followed by angry expletives and sometimes even tossed rackets. The desire for perfection leaves little room for error, and regardless of whether the error occurs on the second or twentieth stroke, anger, frustration and pain are never too far away.

In stark contrast, a short distance away, on another court and seemingly on a different planet, there were two middle-aged couples contorting their bodies into awkward positions while trying somehow to will the ball back over the net in any manner possible. Their strokes were short, choppy and lacked grace of any kind, while the ball bounced around the court slowly, with no method or apparent purpose. Interestingly enough, athletic ability was not the only stark contrast between the two courts, because on the latter court, the end of every point, or so it seemed, signaled a cue upon which all four participants burst out laughing as one or the other passed a good-natured remark.

One would think that, objectively, advanced players would have more fun because they play better, but in this and most scenarios the reverse was true. However, we cannot conversely conclude that the more inept players are, the more fun they will have (although one could understand the mistaken correlation). The only thing we can accurately conclude is that there is no direct relation-

ship between how well you play and how much fun you have; it all depends on the individual and his attitude.

Too many of us are under the illusion that our problems and frustrations spring from our game and the deficiencies therein. Deeper observation will reveal that the key to having fun on the tennis court lies not in how well we play, but in our attitude towards how well we play. Are our expectations too high? Are we unable to appreciate what we *can* do, choosing instead to constantly focus on what we *cannot* do? This realization, if we can see it, is profoundly simple and yet simply profound.

*The only thing we can accurately conclude is that there is no direct relationship between how well you play and how much fun you have.*

Tennis enthusiasts are constantly looking for the perfect shot, the perfect match or to become the perfect player. It will never happen! At times you may achieve the state of *Relaxed Intensity* where you play the very best tennis you are capable of playing, but perfection in ones game does not exist somewhere out there. On one level, there is not one tennis player who is unaware of this fact; and yet, anger and frustration constantly surface at every sign of fallibility.

We need to re-adjust our attitude and focus on the inner journey, which will render the external journey if not useless, certainly less significant. For many of us, the reverse is true: the external goals and achievements are the main focus of our lives, and the internal journey is like a candle in the back of a brightly-lit room, something we are barely aware of. However, the accolades, fame and glory will bring little satisfaction in the long run, although we will all need to experience this personally before we truly understand. Once there is a deep awareness of this, the attraction of the material world will fall away and the barely visible light emanating from the

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candle will shine so brightly that nothing else will be visible.

### *Does Better Tennis Result in a Better Life?*

'I think tennis would be a great way for little Joey to build self-esteem because I feel he has talent,' was the view of one mother.

Another Mom thought, 'Susie is not very coordinated and perhaps improving her tennis could help her feel good about herself.'

'I want to take a few lessons so that I can play tennis well enough so that my husband will want to play with me,' sighed one unhappy but all too typical homemaker.

Competitively-driven George had only one desire: 'If only I could improve my backhand drive enough to beat Dave, I would be happy.'

As a teaching tennis professional for over twenty-nine years, I have heard these and similar statements many times. The feeling of uneasiness that arose from the pit of my stomach at such times stemmed from the fact that I knew that given the traditional view of tennis and competition, these goals could not possibly be achieved.

Playing good tennis will not help Joey or Susie to feel better about themselves. The homemaker's relationship with her spouse will not be improved by playing better tennis, and George, if he improves his backhand drive, will move to a slightly higher level of competition from where he will want to improve another aspect of his game. In other words, he will gain no long-term satisfaction or peace of mind from improving his game; one desire will simply be replaced by another.

### *The Root of Perfection*

On the tennis court, if one experiences anger, frustration or excitement, which draws one away from the feeling of

*Relaxed Intensity*, it is essential to accept these states as a starting point. These so-called 'imperfections' are perfect because they are *what is!* Increasing awareness of *what is* will, by itself, inevitably precipitate change. It is important to accept as perfect that which we are; otherwise there is a danger of suppression of our emotions in the hope of attaining some 'ideal' state.

There is a general assumption that perfection is a goal to be chased outside and independent of ourselves. We are constantly on the look-out for the perfect mate, the perfect job, the perfect apartment or house, the perfect pie, the perfect swing, the perfect match, the perfect serve, etc. Invariably, such seekers are disappointed, and often bitterly so. Perfection cannot be a goal, it does not exist out there. We need do nothing for perfection except just be; all we need do is stop looking and striving and as soon as the search stops, things happen and perfection is there for us to experience. Perfection is an acceptance of all things as they are, to give up the struggle for perfection is to realize perfection.

When we can accept *what is* as perfection, we can allow the journey to unfold. Perfection is this journey, even when it appears to be taking us in the 'wrong' direction. Things are exactly as they should be, all we have to do is to be present so that we can enjoy it all, but often we are too busy in trying to achieve things or become somebody and in that search we miss it.

## 4. Success Is A Journey, Not A Destination

We live in a society that is very result-oriented. The journey or process is considered of little value while achievement is lauded. This is especially true in the sports arena where coaches and athletes feel the immediate and often severe repercussions of repeated poor performances. In sports, especially professional sports, the bottomline is winning and losing and thus there is tremendous pressure, stress and tension with all parties concerned with it.

However, this process of thought has severe limitations for long-term development. Tennis players in particular have to keep an eye on building solid fundamentals at a young age so that their progress will not be stunted at a later stage. I have seen many youngsters who have 'succeeded' at the 12 and under and perhaps even the 14 and under level and completely disappeared from the frontline beyond those age groups. I remember seeing one young man win a National Championship in his country of origin at the tender age of 14. This youngster had phenomenal athletic ability, the likes of which I had not seen from anyone that young for a very long time, if ever. He was a 'can't miss' talent. After an incredibly 'successful' junior career, both Nationally and Internationally, he became a professional tennis player. I had the good fortune to 'bump' into this young man at various times throughout his career. And, although many people would consider his career a success, for me, he never

even scratched the surface of his immense talent simply because he never learned the fundamentals of how to hit a tennis ball. Incredibly, he had achieved all this 'success' purely on his natural athletic ability and his tremendous desire to succeed. I assume that because of his 'success', which he experienced right from the beginning, no one had undertaken the difficult task of taking him off the tournament scene and starting from scratch. Obviously, the later this was left the harder it became to do this.

On another occasion, while coaching at a country club I had the opportunity to coach a young boy ranked #22 in the 12 and under Eastern section of the United States. The first summer I began playing with him, I watched him playing a tournament match against another local boy who was ranked #6 in the same age bracket. The higher ranked boy won the highly competitive match and the tournament, but when his mother asked me my opinion about how her child played, I recommended to her that he take six months off the tournament circuit and work on his strokes because his fundamental stroke production was weak. She was shocked by my comments and walked away, no doubt thinking I was a fool. That may or may not be true, but the fact is that the young man in the next few years dropped out of the top 50 in his age group. He simply did not have the foundation for his game to develop to the next

level. At a certain level consistency will win many matches, but unless the basic swings are in place to allow progress to the next levels, stagnation will inevitably result and the player will soon hit a wall beyond which he will not be able to progress.

*At a certain level consistency will win many matches, but unless the basic swings are in place to allow progress to the next levels, stagnation will inevitably result.*

For the wholistic tennis player, *how* one plays is more important than the result, therefore, it is essential to set process-oriented goals for two reasons:

(1) A house is built brick by brick; similarly you build a game piecemeal and one has to keep an eye on the long-term development rather than only the short-term gains that winning provides. Learning solid technique may be a little tiresome at the beginning, but unless one is committed to doing it, problems will arise.

(2) Only the process is within our control, the result is out of our hands. Regardless of how one plays there is another player on the other side of the court. Surely, winning should take into account who one is playing, but surprisingly that is often not the case. Many players will feel proud about getting to the semi-finals of a tournament, while others will hang their head for losing in the first round. It does not matter how far you go into a tournament because much depends on who you played. I often offer my grandmother for competitive matches for youngsters who just can't seem to see beyond simply looking at the result with the suggestion that they simply play her all the time, if all they want is to win. By

*By focusing on the process we learn to accept an outcome we have no control over, and as a result, we surrender to forces beyond our control.*

focusing on the process we learn to accept an outcome we have no control over, and as a result, we surrender to forces beyond our control and perhaps have imposed on us les-

sons that need to be learned of which we had no conscious knowledge.

Result-oriented goals like winning or playing well, to name the most common, are outcome goals. It is important to realize that we have no direct control over these outcome goals. We may desire to win or play well, and certainly we can try our very best for those eventualities

to materialize, but we cannot guarantee them. Since we cannot, it seems pointless to expend any energy focusing on the result.

### **Effort and Attitude**

Process-oriented goals are related to our effort and attitude, which are the only factors within our control, on or off the tennis court. An example of effort in the process would be that if I was looking to improve my backhand drive, in practice I would want to hit as many of these shots as possible. In other words, I could make a goal that I am going to make the time to hit 20 minutes of backhand drives cross court every time I practice. As I do this, my backhand drive will obviously improve. But if I had made a goal to improve my backhand, I would feel frustration and disappointment every time I missed a ball. In short, effort relates to the sincere and total commitment applied to the task at hand.

Attitude in the process is about acceptance of oneself and the situation without judgment. Acceptance of the outcome allows us to focus all our energy on the task at hand without fear of the consequences. The ability to accept victory and defeat, winner and error, in exactly the same way, secure in the knowledge that the effort in both circumstances was sincere, will result in an attitude which will allow us to perform at our very best. When players make errors there is an inevitable negativity in the form of a grimace, an angry word or two, scream, thrown racket, etc. This all comes from an inability to simply accept things there are. The perfect attitude ultimately revolves around unconditional acceptance and is based on the understanding that

*Acceptance of the outcome allows us to focus all our energy on the task at hand without fear of the consequences.*

becoming a tennis player is a journey and as long as we are total and sincere in our efforts and practice hard, we will be progressing along the path to being the best tennis player we can possibly be, at our own pace.

### **Observing**

Judgment, by drawing us out of present focus, simply retards our ability to learn these skills in a natural and effective manner. Observation, on the other hand, is crucial in determining what is happening on the court. Only if we are able to recognize where our game breaks down in a match will we be armed with the information necessary to return home and practice. Judgment often interferes with our ability to see things in a detached manner. For example, after playing a match, I need to have some sense of my first serve percentage or of what shots I was missing. Was there any pattern? If I was making errors on the forehand side, did I miss high forehands or low forehands? When I was trying to hit down the line or cross court? Did I miss when I was trying to go for a winner or were they simply unforced errors? There is a great deal of information that a centered player can access. An angry, judgmental player will miss most of the necessary information. He will often come off the court and simply say, 'I played terribly'. It may sound complex to observe such details about our match, but for a player who is present and playing calmly from a place of centeredness these things will be obvious.

In addition, if I believe that I have a 'horrible' volley, while the ball is traveling towards me and as I prepare to hit the ball, that judgment will distract me from volleying to the best of my ability. Perhaps this judgment is difficult to avoid if I have missed the five previous balls at the net, but we need to understand that my chances of success

are maximized only if all of me is wholly in the present. The past has no bearing whatsoever on this new opportunity in front of me; I need to leave it behind. Judgment, not only renders us less prepared for the next point, but is also inherently painful.

*The past has no bearing whatsoever on this new opportunity in front of me; I need to leave it behind.*

Observation in the here-and-now allows appropriate responses to emerge spontaneously from a place much deeper than the conscious human mind.

### Daily Chores

Being process-oriented also has value in the mundane activities in our daily schedule. If we do tasks in our daily life simply to accomplish them, we will feel unfulfilled. For example, exercising simply to get fit or to look good can be boring, laborious or simply another tedious duty to fulfill in a day filled with 'things to get done'. However, to wholly focus on the exercising as we are doing it, by experiencing each moment of the activity, we will achieve similar results—becoming fit and looking good—and in the process transform our experience of the activity.

Many people go to work every day motivated by the thought of receiving a paycheck every Friday. Certainly, this will get them up each morning, but it is different from focusing totally on the work and on how to do it the best way we possibly can—by being in the here-and-now and joyfully experiencing each moment as it unfolds. Both scenarios will result in the same paycheck at the end of the week, but the latter experience will transform our life and allow you to really live, while the former is simply going through the motions.

We can even apply this principle to simple tasks such as washing dishes or vacuuming the house. If we do these tasks just to have clean dishes or a tidy home we are being result-oriented and the work invariably becomes a chore, but if we focus on the task itself we can transform the experience. To become completely absorbed in washing dishes or vacuuming a carpet, with the mind completely silent, is totally different from doing these tasks as something to get done and out of the way so you can move to something 'better'.

*Being in the here-and-now while performing our daily tasks will not only transform the task by making it more pleasurable, but it will also enable us to be more efficient and proficient in the activity itself.*

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## Transcendence Through Meditation

### *Concentration*

Concentration, or the ability to focus, is a key ingredient in the ultimate success of any aspect of life, and tennis is no exception. I define concentration as 'the absence of external stimuli'. In tennis this means a total focusing on the ball while it is in play, no conscious awareness of the score, strategy, the importance of the point being played, the crowd or anything else but the ball.

The nature of the mind is such that it is pulled in many different directions at the same time. Our restlessness is reflected in the 'monkey mind' moving from one thought to the next making it almost impossible to focus on any one thing for any length of time. There exist too many tempting choices; to focus on one to the exclusion

of all others is simply beyond the scope of the average person who was raised in this fast-paced, achievement-oriented, technologically-driven society.

However, for tennis, concentration is not the end of the road, although it is part of the journey. Concentration narrows our focus to the ball, but we need a broader focus than just the ball because the ball is always in some context. It is traveling at a certain speed, with a certain spin and direction, etc. In addition, we need to know the whereabouts of our opponent and also have an awareness of where we are on the court. There is a host of information we need to be able to access in order to play this game successfully. However, all this data cannot be accessed by the conscious mind, which is too slow to give us all this information in the short space between when the ball is hit and when we are ready to reply. So how is this information processed?

### *Meditation*

Meditation is quite different from concentration. Whereas concentration is a narrowing of focus, meditation is a widening. In concentration you have an object of focus, the ball, but in meditation or in the state of *Relaxed Intensity* (also known as the 'zone state', although the ball remains the object of focus, the focus is 'softer' thus allowing the individual to become aware of numerous other things happening on the court simultaneously and instinctively.

Concentration is a function of the mind, but meditation arises from the center of our being; it is pure consciousness. In concentration you block out everything but the ball and there is much effort involved; the mind has to work hard to be concentrated. A sure sign of this is the tiredness that arises from long periods of concentration. The 'softer' focus in meditation is an opening up, not a

narrowing down, this allows us to become more aware by being totally present to this very moment; this process is completely effortless. It is only in such a pure present state that one can be truly responsive to situations as they

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arise. There can be no rehearsal because no one quite knows where, when or how the ball is coming. In a state of concentration much can be missed because ones focus is so narrow, but in meditation the sheer openness and lack of expectation allows the individual

to be so receptive to all that occurs that response is effortless, efficient and graceful. In meditation the mind is completely silent which allows us to be totally present. An active mind draws us into the future or drags us back to the past, either way the present moment is missed and peak performance can never occur.

*Concentration is part of seeking; when you seek something you become concentrated. When you don't seek anything you become relaxed. When you seek something and you are concentrated, you are going away from yourself. Your object will be the goal; you forget yourself. Your arrow of consciousness goes only to the object. When you are not going anywhere, where will you be? When you are not going anywhere you will be where you are, you will be whoever you are. You will be simply relaxing and resting into oneself.*

—Osho

### *Just Playing*

Perhaps it is just semantics, but we need to understand that our goal as competitors cannot be just to win. The

objective of the game is to win (get to six games first), but the goal is to 'play'. At the risk of splitting hairs, which is not my intention, I think the differentiation bears elaboration.

The objective of a marathon runner is to complete 26.2 miles as quickly as possible, and it is important for all potential marathoners to understand this objective as the outer shell of the game. An

objective defines the broad parameters of the sport in question, and includes the rules of the game and the laws they are governed by. How-

*To have a goal not within ones control invites frustration, anger and a host of other emotions, none of which are pleasant, desirable or productive.*

ever, the goal of the participant relates to how the objective will be attained, and that is by *playing*. To have a goal not within ones control invites frustration, anger and a host of other emotions, none of which are pleasant, desirable or productive. In addition, it draws the individual into the past or future; places from where these emotions can arise and from where peak performance can never happen. Consequently, it becomes obvious that a participant cannot have as a goal to win the match, because that goal, or any goal for that matter, will not allow him to be present and peak performance can only happen to us when we are wholly present. Great trust is required to allow this to happen. 'Winning' or 'losing' is something that occurs in the future, but playing is about being in the here-and-now.

What does it mean to simply play? It is to be consumed in the moment, to have an increased awareness of the ball coming towards you or going away from you at a certain height, speed, direction and spin; to be so aware of all that is necessary for the task at hand that decision-making becomes effortless and instinctive. To be aware, to any degree whatsoever, of winning or losing; of being

embarrassed, angry or frustrated; of not playing well or looking bad, or anything else that is not happening at that moment in time, will detract from optimum performance.

### The Zone State

Our society places a premium on the powers of the intellect, and as a result we have become heavily focused in the mind. However, the conscious mind is only a part of the brain. This leads us to question the role of the mind

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in sports, in particular while playing tennis. The major pitfall to avoid is seeing the mind and body as two separate entities. They are intimately connected. Consequently, when

the conscious mind is active, as it usually is, the body's free flow is affected. Conversely, when the conscious mind falls silent, we are able to access a higher intelligence through the brain and the cells of the body are able to function more smoothly, gracefully and instinctively.

Many prominent coaches—Brad Gilbert and Allen Fox come to mind immediately—laud the value of an active mind while playing: a mind that is constantly analyzing information and is aware of a host of stimuli. It is amazing how involved and universally accepted some of these elaborate systems are. This despite the accolades received by Tim Gallwey for his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, which argued against too much involvement of the mind while playing, and had an entire chapter dedicated to 'trusting your body' through silencing the mind. The simple fact is that the conscious mind simply does not have the capability to process this information at the speed that it needs to. Consequently, regardless of what anyone says, this information is being processed by another source.

Where or what that source is, is more difficult to fathom. However, the one thing that is certain is that this source that is processing this information is able to do its task much more efficiently when the conscious mind is silent. This silence happens to players whether they realize it or not and it happens more often to the 'successful' players. For many players this happens accidentally and at those times they have 'good' days, while at other times the silence is not there and they have 'bad' days. Is there a way we can control our destiny a little more?

More recent medical research brings into mainstream the concept that mind and body are intimately connected, and that every cell of the body has innate intelligence. However, what Gallwey introduced to our sport almost 25 years ago has not really endured or seeped into our collective consciousness. What is now becoming mainstream medical thought has long since been abandoned by the tennis industry. The only way to access this natural intelligence of the human organism is to silence the rational mind and allow this intelligence to manifest in an effortless manner.

The ideal competitive state is generally recognized as being in the 'zone'. What we have discovered this to be is a state where the individual is calm, relaxed and extremely focused, and this can only occur when the mind is completely silent. It is not a state we are comfortable with, simply because we like to feel we are controlling a situation, and in such a state, since the mind (ego) is not in control, we feel we are not.

*The 'zone state' is a state where the individual is calm, relaxed and extremely focused, and this can only occur when the mind is completely silent.*

It is impossible to realize this state of being when we are actively thinking about strategy, technique or results, and yet this does not mean we have to abandon all

tactical plans. I feel athletes can reach this state when they are most tuned into their own game. In other words, I feel it would be better for players to focus on what they do best, rather than trying to devise elaborate and complex game plans around the weaknesses of their opponent.

Jimmy Connors seemed to instinctively understand this. He played *his* game against everybody. He had a very simple game plan: hit the ball hard, and if it comes back, hit it harder. It worked against everybody except Bjorn Borg, but even then he stubbornly refused to change because he felt that this style had brought him tremendous success against everyone else and to risk jeopardizing that success just to beat Borg would not be wise. Besides, despite his dismal record against him, he never stopped believing that he could beat him and so focused on better execution rather than a change in strategy.

Borg was another player who was amazingly successful while adopting a very simple game plan: get the ball over one more time than your opponent. Players will generally play best when they impose their own particular style on a match, and obviously employing the style which is most naturally suited to the individual will require less conscious thought.

One apparent exception to this rule was Arthur Ashe's performance against Jimmy Connors in the Wimbledon final of 1975. Ashe was a natural serve and volleyer who thrived on the power game. But realizing that playing his natural game would result in inevitable defeat against an opponent who was the greatest power player of that era, he shocked all the 'experts' by resorting to a touch game. He clinically dissected Connors on that memorable

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summer afternoon with chips, dinks and other assorted 'junk' that left Connors utterly frustrated and soundly defeated. However, I think that Ashe's achievement on that day was consistent with this theory because he came in with a specific game plan and remained focused on it throughout the match. Consequently, no thought was required because he had pre-determined how he was going to play before coming on court. He was completely in the zone that day, even though he did not play his normal style. Even during changeovers he was seen with a towel draped over his head. Later, he explained that he was simply relaxing: no thoughts, no elaborate strategies (he was already very clear on how he was going to play), no pumping fists or extreme displays of emotion. In fact, he showed no emotion at all.

Our 'natural' uneasiness with the zone state is directly related to our inability to let go, because fear holds us back, as does our desire to be in control as defined by the conscious mind, also known as the ego. As a result, although almost every athlete has at some point in his or her life experienced the zone state, on the whole it is an elusive spiritual state. The teaching industry does at times talk about playing each point one at a time, or being in present focus, but how it is possible to be in present focus when we are thinking of so many things is an incongruity that has never been addressed. All thought draws us into the past or pushes us into the future. There can be no conscious thought when we are in the present. I am especially amused by tennis players who, when losing a match, will advise themselves or others to 'Forget the score and play each point, one at a time.' This strategy is good enough to be employed at our darkest moments, because there is an implicit understanding that this will allow us to play our very best and get back into the match. If this

is true, then why not employ the very same philosophy at the beginning of the match and all the way through it?

The process of silence happens to the conscious mind as the individual becomes a 'watcher', an alert witness to

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all that is happening with himself, the inner dialogue, the anger, frustration, fear, and all the other host of emotions that may arise. Through watching all this 'noise', more and more silence happens. When the conscious mind is silent, the body becomes a tremendous

piece of machinery. It moves instinctively without the awkwardness that arises when the conscious mind is giving instructions. Silence does not necessarily signify inactivity, since activity can transcend to a level beyond the conscious mind. There is an in-born intelligence in the human organism that goes beyond the gross, conscious mind, and if we can tap into that powerful resource we will develop tremendous power, strength and wisdom. We will be able to enter the highly focused zone state that results in peak competitive performance. Optimum performance is about the individual attaining a level of peace and tranquility; an active mind is a major hindrance.

During changeovers or after a set, the conscious mind can organize the observations it has made non-

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judgmentally to some extent. Observations of ones game, what is working and what is not, and identification of the opponent's strengths and weaknesses may have some

place in peak performance. However, simple observation is all that is necessary and then, when the ball is in play,

there should be no conscious attempt to analyze or to impose. The body will assimilate the necessary information and do the needful. To think while playing is to lose rhythm, to become mechanical, but most of all it is to be drawn away from the here and now, which is crucial to peak athletic performance.

### **Equanimity in All Things and at All Times**

*In the Middle Ages an old man lived in a small village in ancient China, where he owned some land. He had a favorite horse, which was as powerful as it was beautiful, which roamed freely across his property. One day the horse ran away and his neighbor sympathetically remarked, 'Your beautiful horse ran away—what bad luck.' The old man calmly replied, 'Why bad luck? How do you know that it is not good luck?' The neighbor was puzzled by the remark, but said nothing.*

*A few days later, the stallion returned and brought with him a magnificent mare. The neighbor went to the man and said, 'You were right! How lucky you are to have two attractive horses now.' The old man quietly replied, 'But how do you know that it is not bad luck?' The neighbor walked away shaking his head.*

*Later that week, the old man's son fell off the new mare and broke his leg. The neighbor wailed in sympathy at the old man's misfortune and said, 'This time you must agree, that the mare has brought misfortune to your household.' The old man simply replied, 'But how do you know it is not good fortune?' The neighbor went away infuriated, secure in the knowledge that the old man had finally gone mad.*

*Soon after that, another feudal war broke out in that area of China, and the local warlord's men came around to the village to conscript all able-bodied men into the military. Due to his injury, the old man's son remained home.*

We create our own reality. Our attitude shapes the world we live in. Much of our attitude is given shape without our awareness through social, religious, cultural and familial conditioning. Through awareness and understanding we can change even those attitudes, which we think are so essentially a part of us. Awareness comes to us through observation and acceptance. Observation is only possible if there is no judgment, no good or bad, liking or disliking, etc. Clear observation is made possible only through an inner silence when the mind is completely silent, which allows us to see things as they really are. Acceptance of all things just as they are arises when there is no desire.

The simple fact is that we have no idea of the great design. We have our own petty agendas and we measure

*The simple fact is that we have no idea of the great design. We have our own petty agendas and we measure good and bad against these selfish, short-term desires.*

good and bad against these selfish, short-term desires. And yet, as somewhat introspective beings, we are aware of the existence of a greater reality. If we can accept our own ignorance of the bigger picture, it

will be easier to surrender to the events in our lives as they occur without judgment. And if we can accept all such events—life, death, victory or defeat—in a celebratory fashion, we will be able to live life to the fullest without fear or apprehension and in constant joy.

### **Lessons to be Learned from Winning and Losing**

The movie *The Mighty Ducks* was a powerful example of the hypocrisy that is often present in the message, that process is more important than result—a message that is now ‘fashionable’, especially among sports psychologists. The main theme of this movie concerned a down-and-out

hockey coach lifting the spirits of a group of undisciplined and not-very-talented youngsters with poor self-esteem and even less confidence, and transforming these kids into a cohesive team unit. This was done by a process-oriented methodology of working hard and focusing only on those things under their control, with a de-emphasis on result and an acceptance of themselves. The message that winning and losing are the same and that we should not judge ourselves by the outcome of a hockey match helped transform these young misfits into a disciplined and very good hockey team. This would have been a powerful and effective message had not the final scene destroyed all the credibility built during the team's transformation. At the end of the movie the transformed team beat their nemesis and main rival in the championship game, and this was followed by tremendous celebration, which begs the question: if winning and losing are the same, why the wild celebration? Surely defeat would not have brought a similar reaction?

There is a major lesson for us all in this example. Often as parents, coaches and players we tell our players or ourselves that winning and losing do not really matter, but the simple fact is that we do not believe it, and this is evident in our behavior (how is your mood after a loss or a victory?). Consequently, we send conflicting messages that are confusing for all concerned. The verbal message will often be relegated to insignificance by the more powerful non-verbal communication. The consequence of these conflicting messages confuses the parents of many tournament-playing juniors who cannot understand why their children feel so much pressure when they have repeatedly been told that it does not matter if they win or lose as long as they try their best.

In my twenty-nine years as a teaching professional, the parents or coaches whom I have met that are completely

and sincerely calm and composed after their child's match regardless of the result can be counted on one hand. The object of making this observation is not to chastise or condemn parents or coaches, but simply to make them aware of how they can help their children become happy individuals and better tennis players. If coaches and parents can remain the same after a win or a loss, then it will be easier for their child also; but beware, our behavior can only be the same if we truly *feel* the same. If we do not feel the same, then we need to examine our own needs and desires in a spirit of honest inquiry and introspection.

I often find that it is easier to teach my students equanimity and encourage them to focus only on those things they can control, after they win a match. When a tennis player loses a match and feels sad or depressed, he or she is usually consoled by words of encouragement that downplay the significance of losing. They are often told that this is not the end of the world or that it is no big deal to lose since all players experience defeat from time to time. Often and to some degree, the player can gain some perspective from such comments and ease some of the pain. However, to say the same things when a player wins a match is extremely important, especially, but not only, in the face of excessive celebration. The simple fact

*The simple fact is that the 'joy of winning' and the 'agony of defeat' are inextricably connected: the greater the joy, the greater the agony.*

is that the 'joy of winning' and the 'agony of defeat' are inextricably connected: the greater the joy, the greater the agony. By understanding the joy, we will indirectly be understand-

ing and therefore transforming the agony after losses. In addition, we will be giving our players a consistent message that will not only earn their respect, but what is

more important make them better human beings through an understanding of what winning and losing really mean.

For players who have made a commitment to make the process their goal, lessons are everywhere, and every match, regardless of the outcome, offers us an opportunity to learn. This is the value of experience. If we have played numerous matches but failed to learn from them, then what is the value of that experience? We must grasp the lessons of match play with both hands and cannot allow the distractions, disappointment or joy, to cloud our thinking, which will make the lessons harder to see.

#### **Perfect Competitive Attitude**

In his book, *If I'm the better player, why can't I win?*, Allen Fox defined competition as 'a violent psychological struggle where both antagonists are fighting for their egos, seeking ways to strengthen their sense of power and enhance their self-images.' This is certainly an accurate reflection of the prevailing perspective of competition, albeit at the most basic level. However, since ego is essentially not real and therefore not who we are, I feel a more accurate and healthy alternative understanding of competition exists. It is important that we provide future and present generations with a more inspiring and accurate definition of the concept, the attainment of which will lead to spiritually enriching and fulfilling lives for them.

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playing on that day. Winning is not guaranteed in such a situation, because there are numerous other factors be-

yond the individual's control involved in determining the outcome of a match. In this society, with most of us having been raised on the old Protestant work ethic, it is difficult for us to accept that winning and/or losing are

*In this society, with most of us having been raised on the old Protestant work ethic, it is difficult for us to accept that winning and/or losing are not simply a matter of 'will'.*

not simply a matter of 'will'. People do not choose to play badly or to lose, and yet invariably these things happen because they are beyond our control. Undoubtedly, 'will' is

a factor in peak performance, but it is not the sole determining factor of the outcome of a sporting event.

What is 'will'? 'Will' can be defined as the effort and attitude put forth by a competitor, which are the only things within our control when we play a match and as such, extremely important objects of focus. As important as 'will' is, we as coaches, parents and players need to understand that it is not sufficient by itself, and that there are other factors outside our control that can also determine the outcome of a match. The understanding of some of these other factors will greatly reduce the pressure placed on many players.

We need to accept that we cannot guarantee a victory; all we can do is be in a state of being that will allow us the opportunity to perform at our optimum level. If that results in victory, fine, and if it results in defeat, also fine. Either way we have done all we could possibly do on that particular day. Real success can take place in either eventuality.

Attitude is our reaction to the way we play. It is the ability to accept all things that arise without judgment. A good attitude is essential if peak performance is to happen. We cannot guarantee to win a particular point, game or match, but we can guarantee maximum effort and a healthy and self-supportive attitude.

The perfect attitude is equanimity: the ability to remain emotionally balanced and spiritually centered regardless of the fluctuating circumstances. The celebration of winning, to the wise, is tempered, because after all what is winning? What value does it have and what does it really mean? Is it something that should somehow make us feel better about ourselves? Why?

How about losing? Why is losing so universally painful? Chapter 3 on false identification explored both the pain and the joy. Transcending both extremes by finding the mid-point will lead to equanimity, the ability to simply see things as they are without judgment. Once we understand that the real joy is in the playing, then the result becomes less significant.

*Once we understand that the real joy is in the playing, then the result becomes less significant.*

This ideal attitude leads to the perfect state of *Relaxed Intensity*, which sounds like an oxymoron, but closer examination reveals its subtle wholistic nature. *Intensity* refers to the maximum effort (a focused letting go and allowing to happen may be more accurate) that an individual puts forth, a total commitment to the task at hand. This intensity provides purposeful focus to the individual and a total unwillingness to give up or despair in any situation—a mind so empty that the individual becomes present and therefore unaware of everything, except what is happening at that moment in his immediate vicinity.

*When we desire something very much it becomes extremely difficult to be calm and face loss, and yet when we play almost as if we do not care, we will play our best tennis.*

The *Relaxed* part arises from a complete detachment from the result of the match. When we desire something very much it becomes extremely difficult to be calm and face loss, and yet when we play almost as if we do not care, we will play our best tennis. Choking,

anger, frustration and nervousness are universal problems rooted in fear amongst all competitors in all sports, and tennis is no exception. There is not one tennis player I know of who has not experienced any of those emotions at some point in their playing career. The root cause is our desire to win and our attachment to this desire because of what we think the winning represents.

### Detached Action

In certain philosophical traditions there is a concept known as detached action, which is extremely difficult for the material mind to grasp. How is it possible to act and yet not desire a particular outcome? It stems from a deep understanding that true victory lies not in the result, but in a commitment to the process. It is only possible to reach this state by being so absorbed in the present moment that you lose track of all other things, especially the result. When that happens you are in the zone.

This phenomenon of ‘caring’ as opposed to ‘not caring’ is often in evidence in tennis matches. Watch how players return first serves that are clearly out: they rip them boldly for outright winners, and yet very often the subsequent weaker second serve elicits a much more tentative reply. In addition, why do players play better in practice matches than in tournaments? The undeniable fact is that players perform less well when they really care. Notice how tentatively players play a ‘big point’.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, if we can achieve a mental state in which we believe the outcome is unimportant, we will be totally

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<sup>1</sup>The Big Point theory is discussed in my other book, *Instinctive Tennis*. Basically I believe every point is equally significant and that the entire concept of the big point is not only false but an obstacle to peak performance.

relaxed and calm, which in turn will allow us to play our best tennis.

Many players tell me, 'I do not care if I win or lose, I just want to play well.' All desire, regardless of what that desire is, will cause tension and so become a hindrance to peak performance. No one can guarantee that you play well, but if you can let go of even the desire to play well, you can experience this state of *Relaxed Intensity* and then you will be giving yourself the best possible opportunity to play the best tennis you are capable of. What other options do you have?

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## 5. The Goal Of All Goals Is To Be Happy

Regardless of whatever goals we choose for ourselves in our lives, the underlying assumption behind these goals is that if we achieve them, we will be happy. Therefore, we could say that the goal of all goals is to be happy. If my goal is to be the number one player in the world, a little thought would reveal that simply being number one in the world has no absolute value; it is only valuable if it brings me the lasting peace and joy that I crave.

A few years back, John McEnroe, after announcing that he would retire at the conclusion of that year, was asked by a reporter in Australia what he wanted from this, his last year on the circuit. Keep in mind that he had won all the major titles, had been ranked number one in the world, and had helped his country win the Davis Cup. Without hesitation, McEnroe replied that he would like to have *fun* in this, his last year of competition. Obviously, for John McEnroe there was no intrinsic joy in being the best player in the world.

Similarly, many people choose goals that are based on financial rewards and material abundance, and as a result, although their goals may be achieved, they remain unfulfilled on a deeper spiritual level. There are many individuals who spend the greater part of their total energy pursuing success in numerous ways, all assuming that the attainment of that success will bring happiness and peace. Only those who achieve their worldly goals

are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to see that happiness and material success are two completely different phenomena.

So, if we accept that the goal of all goals is to be happy, the next question to arise is: how can we be happy? Perhaps we need to identify what happiness is?

### What is Happiness?

By happiness, I am not referring to the roller-coaster of joy and misery that is the hallmark of most of our lives.

Happiness, if it is to be enduring, needs to transcend the fluctuations of the world around us. For example, we win a match and we feel happy. A few hours or days later we lose a match and we feel miserable. These transient emotions, that are wholly dependent on external factors beyond our control, render us vulnerable and constantly vacillating between emotional peaks and valleys.

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Instead, is there a happiness that can be identified, which is more enduring, more internal and therefore not a victim to the whims and fancies of life's little nuances? Perhaps a working definition of happiness could be *joy without reason*: an internal glow that is untouched by life's fluctuations; a joy that colors all of our experiences, one that travels with us through every peak and every valley, and allows us to accept each experience exactly as it is.

This internal light of bliss is our life-long partner; it shines its light on every situation that arises in our lives, on every relationship that we pass through; all we need to do is open our eyes and see. Perhaps this light emanates from an understanding that there will be no peace in our lives unless we transcend the duality, which is a hallmark of everyday existence. The dualities of right and wrong,

good and evil, positive and negative, etc., are not really two, but intertwined into one whole. Simply put, if we have an object of happiness that is external, then our happiness is illusory—illusory because it will be short-lived. We will remain happy as long as our object is present, but if it is lost, for whatever reason, then we will become unhappy.

Happiness and joy are part of our natural, healthful state of being. Just as we lose health because some reason or other causes disease, similarly unhappiness is caused by some occurrence that upsets our natural, delicate spir-

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itual balance. If we can follow the laws of nature and avoid the causes of disease, we will remain healthy. Similarly, if we avoid the psychological apprehensions, fears, attachments,

desires and anxieties that cause unhappiness we can remain in our natural state of bliss. Happiness is not a state of mind; it is a state of being that occurs when the conscious mind is no more.

Having identified that happiness is the goal of all goals and having defined happiness in some simplistic way, the next logical step would be to determine how we can achieve this happiness and if there is a role for tennis in this objective.

### The Value of Playing Tennis

Our natural state is like a perfectly clear and clean windshield in our car, through which we can see where we are going. Unfortunately, most of our windshields are cluttered with a host of 'problems', all of which are self-created. The situations may be real, but the value judgments that render these situations 'good' or 'bad', a

'blessing' or a 'tragedy', all emanate from us. We need to keep our windshield clean so that we can see where we are going if we are to avoid accidents. Awareness, perspective, present focus, observation, introspection and detachment through a process-oriented lifestyle are some of the tools by which cleaning (understanding) can take place. We can stop at any time to clean our windshield. Once it is clean we will not only see this present road we are traveling along more clearly, but also all subsequent roads on our journey through life.

Tennis is one road where we can stop to clean the windshield, and if we are successful here, the benefit will be transposed to other aspects of our life. Tennis is not the only road where cleaning can take place; in fact it is no better than any other, but it is also no worse. It is simply one language to communicate in. For those of us who love tennis or for some reason have chosen tennis (or is it tennis that has chosen us?), this is our language. The spiritual message, which holds out the promise of everlasting happiness and peace, can be as clear in this language, or even clearer for some, than the language of religion that scares so many people away.

### **What is the Purpose of Life?**

If ultimate truth is a soccer field, there are very few of us who are able to see the entire field. In fact, the wisest among us can, perhaps, see only half the field. Seeing half the field, we see goal posts at one end of the field and nothing at the other end. This makes us uncomfortable and so we place another set of goal posts opposite the first set. We become satisfied that we have brought order into our lives, when in reality a broader perspective reveals the absurdity of a set of goal posts on the halfway line. The problem lies in not realizing that our

understanding is incomplete. Consequently, because we live in a world where rational thought is held in high esteem, we try and make logical sense of the little we know. This is an impossible task, because incomplete awareness, by definition, can never bring us an understanding of the whole. We are rational beings who wish to live our lives with a sense of direction and purpose. However, because we do not know the grand design, it becomes impossible for us to determine this direction and purpose; a situation we seem to have tremendous difficulty with. As a result we create a direction and purpose and because this creation is ours and emanates from our ego, it is not in tune with the universal harmony and a struggle ensues between our will and the natural flow of the universe. This battle can be 'won' easily by 'letting go', but to do this, we would have to live our lives without goals, without ambitions and in a sense of not-knowing. Is it possible for us to do that?

Philosophers and religious practitioners have speculated through the ages on why we are born and for what purpose. Different faiths supply their followers with varied but definitive answers, which in turn provide some solace and allow us to continue living our lives secure in the belief that there is some rational purpose to this existence. For many of us, however, there is little personal or direct experience of these religious or philosophical explanations; rather there is total acceptance of an external authority we choose to empower.

For me, the purpose of life did not remain a burning issue for long. The fire was extinguished not because divine purpose was clearly elucidated in some miraculous fashion, but because I became comfortable with not having to know. Certainly, I have a sense that our purpose here on earth is divine, but beyond that and

concerning the details of that purpose I have no more clarity than when I began this journey some 26 years ago. The transcendence of this question came about for me through the commonsense understanding of the Truth as being process-oriented. Over the years, this has come to mean different things as my increased awareness began to transform me from the inside out. Presently, it allows me to live with some awareness, but without conscious purpose, with the realization, false or otherwise, that by focusing on the process, I am in the reality of the present moment, which is the only reality there is and wherever it takes me will be where I am 'supposed' to be.

This can be applied to all aspects of our lives as I have tried to demonstrate in the pages of this book. Actions performed in present focus and for their intrinsic value alone are completely different from actions done for an ulterior motive, especially when those motives are selfish at the core, as nearly all motives are. Applied to tennis, this means that the real value in playing tennis lies not in the winning, the ranking, the trophies, the money, the recognition, etc., but in the actual playing. Consequently, the need is to focus less on the outcome and more on how we play. To play mindfully has intrinsic value that far exceeds the aforementioned glory whose fire provides little sustained warmth because it subsides all too quickly.

'God's will alone matters, not my personal wants or needs. When I played tennis I never prayed for victory in a match. I will not pray now to be cured.'

—Arthur Ashe

The above words were courageously spoken by Arthur Ashe after being diagnosed with AIDS, and reflect the ultimate understanding of process over result. I understand that this will be an extremely difficult concept to

accept, since the short-term gains are obvious and enticing. One needs a great deal of sensitivity and inner silence to appreciate the greater value of pure presence.

On a more basic level, I think we can all understand that life is not always what it appears to be. Tragedy sometimes leads us to understanding and greater peace,

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while good fortune can destroy us. If one feels one has all the answers, then there is no road to be traveled. However, if we

can admit even to ourselves that we have no clear idea of the great design, then does it not make sense to remain in the here-and-now, trusting that whatever arises from such a state of being is a step along the spiritual journey we need to travel to ultimately find the balance, which will bring us the inner peace and contentment we all seek.

Unfortunately, the greatest obstacle to this process is our intellect, which wants to calculate, plan and project. It does these things to fulfill desires—desires that may be material, religious or spiritual, etc. To drop such desires in the understanding that all desires emanate from our ego (our conscious mind), which has no idea of the grand design, will free us to be totally present to this moment, which in turn will allow us to be in tune with the universe and its grand plan for us.

## 6. Final Thought

Many people may have picked up this book in the hope that it would help them win more tennis matches. And undoubtedly it will. Hopefully however, the reader now realizes that there are greater goals to be experienced than the temporary joy that winning brings. There is the peace and contentment that arises from simply relaxing and 'letting go' of all the tension we create in the name of competition. To play this game, or do any activity, to enhance ones ego, which is by far the most common motivator for action, is a painful experience.

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The journey that leads us towards discovering that we are not this ego comes through awareness, which arises from observation without judgment, in the here-and-now. This is a process that is more valuable than any goal we could possibly conceive of or achieve. There is intrinsic value in this process that will certainly result in us becoming better tennis players and winning more matches, simply because we will play more to our potential. But once we project a certain value onto winning and the winning becomes a desire, then we will lose the spiritual state that makes peak performance possible. There is no way out: it is a classic Catch-22 situation! You will win more when you cease to recognize any value in the winning. Once the winning becomes important, it becomes harder to achieve. Real joy, however, can only be achieved

by transcending the duality that recognizes winning as more valuable than losing.

The goal of living life fully and the desire to play the best tennis we are capable of playing are both rooted in our awareness. As our awareness increases we will become happier people and better tennis players. Unhappiness, fear, anxiety, frustration, anger, etc. are all indicators of spiritual ignorance or a lack of awareness. Our natural state is one of complete happiness, and incomplete understanding is what takes us away from this state of being. By increasing awareness, understanding dawns, which in turn brings peace and joy for no particular reason. Look into happiness and you will find that it has no causes; it cannot because it is a natural and integral part of our *real* selves. However, when we look into unhappiness, we see that it always has a cause; consequently, when we remove those causes, or more accurately, discover that they don't really exist, the unhappiness, not so magically, disappears.

The outcome is completely irrelevant because the real journey is about going within and finding the peace and contentment there because it does not exist anywhere else. So one can only lose if one is not total and the winners are those who can give their all, who can stay in the here-and-now, who can remain centered and in touch with the center of their own being.

*The outcome is completely irrelevant because the real journey is about going within and finding the peace and contentment there because it does not exist anywhere else.*

### **Silence is the Real Goal**

A major theme of the entire book is that false identification, this identification with our ego, is the source of most of our problems. How does this false identification

manifest? It manifests through activity of the mind. The mind and the ego are one. The mind is constantly planning and scheming to build itself up and it is this activity that makes peak performance difficult because of the numerous emotional states that arise. Fear, anger, frustration, choking, pressure, etc., are all states of being that arise through the mind and there are two ways to deal with them. One is through rational thought. For example, I may fear losing, but argue with myself that this fear is baseless since I have beaten this opponent before and I can do it again. The other way to deal with the emotional states that arise is by falling into silence and cutting them off at their very root. When the mind is silent, fear, anger and frustration cannot surface because they are products of the mind. When the mind dies, these emotions die with it. We can play tennis out of this silence; in fact, we can only play our best tennis when this silence happens. So, we need not deal with all these emotions separately, they can all be dismissed at once!

The first way will be temporary because the mind can never be total in its action since for every pro there is a con and uncertainty, that small ray of doubt, will always exist when the rational mind is active in decision-making. On the other hand, when the mind falls silent there is no uncertainty, there is no judgment, and there is no pain. There is simply an acceptance of things as they are and in that acceptance there is great peace and contentment. However, there is no choice to accept or not to accept; there is only what Jiddhu Krishnamurti calls *choiceless awareness*. To fall into this 'let go' state is the aspiration, the goal and the objective. When we can simply see things as they are without the mind's commentary on top of what we see,

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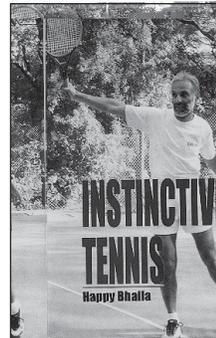
our whole lives will change, what to say of our tennis. Out of this silence peak performance happens all by itself on the court. And, off the court, to live from this silence is to live in harmony with life itself, and when we live in harmony with life, nothing can possibly go 'wrong'. A much more powerful and all-knowing force will be directing our lives than our petty-thinking, conditioned mind. For us to allow this to happen, great trust is required. Are we ready to trust?

*Also by this Author*

## **Instinctive Tennis**

*Happy Bhalla*

264 pages Softcover  
145 × 225 mm ISBN 81-901297-8-3



The author's understanding is that tennis is a microcosm of life; consequently, he believes it is possible to transform both our lives and ourselves by changing the way we play tennis. He calls this style of play, *instinctive tennis*. *Instinctive tennis* happens to you through bringing a greater awareness both into the way we play tennis and the reason why we play tennis. The journey towards being the best tennis player you can be and being happy and contented in your life do not go in different directions. The road is exactly the same! The author's awareness of this has transformed the way he teaches and plays tennis and the objective of this book is to provide the same opportunity to others.

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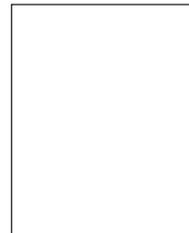
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tennis commentator, analyst and teacher

**Happy Bhalla** was born and raised in London, England. From an early age, sports became a solace and eventually a passion. The author lives six months of the year in the Hamptons of Long Island, NY where he runs a Tennis Academy for both juniors and adults. In his early twenties, the greater questions concerning the meaning of life consumed him and a journey of self-discovery began in earnest. Sports, and tennis in particular, has become the preferred vehicle of choice upon which Happy Bhalla has decided to reflect his spiritual journey.



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