

SPORTuality

by Mat Dickie



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*For my brother, Stuart,
whose reluctance to believe
inspired me to explain...*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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FOREWORD

“What is dark in me illumine, what is low raise and support – that to the height of this great argument I may justify the ways of God to men.”

- John Milton (*Paradise Lost*)

While church attendances dwindle, tens of thousands of people in cities all over the world can be found flocking to their local stadium of a weekend. Here they enjoy a sense of camaraderie, sing in chorus, and pray for the desired result. Rather predictably, this trend has caused many to refer to sport as a ‘religion’ in itself – giving the masses a new outlet for the reverence they would have once shown to God. Indeed, the leading stars of any given sport are often hailed as such! One glance at the TV reveals banners at a football match that state “Robbie Fowler is God,” while similar signs in the audience of a wrestling show reveal that “Foley is God.” Like the stained glass windows within a church, these sentiments are accompanied by recognizable symbols and artistic renderings of the saints in question.

Although any sensible person would reject these comparisons as inappropriate, there are enough similarities to give us food for thought. As a religious educator, I often find myself drawing on popular culture to make spiritual principles easier to understand. My thoughts turn to sport more often than not, and I’ve gradually built up an arsenal of analogies that could fill a whole book – which is what we have here! Over the following pages, I will use sport as a springboard to talk about religious ideas in a new way – which hopefully brings us to a better understanding of both fields.

Since the dawn of time, spiritual principles have been articulated most successfully in the form of stories and analogies. Most famously, Jesus rarely opened his mouth without linking what he was saying back to the conventions of his time. He tapped into what people valued and how they saw the world, and gave them a handle on concepts that they would have never even considered otherwise – let alone understood. That’s my intention with this book. As far removed as sport may seem from religion, I will highlight the similarities and reveal new ways of understanding old concepts. You may think you’ve seen it all in the world of sport, but if I’ve done my job correctly you’ll never see it in quite the same way again! You may not see religion itself in the same light either.

What follows isn’t an attempt to ‘preach’ or ‘convert’. I belong to no one religion in particular and therefore have no such agenda. It’s not my place to offer definitive answers to the big questions that we all have a right to explore for ourselves. I’m not here to tell you WHAT to think so much as HOW to think. I will challenge preconceptions and stimulate new ways of thinking – empowering you to arrive at your own informed conclusions. What you believe is of no consequence to me so long as you know WHY you believe it. As I say to my students, there are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers in this subject – you can only ever fail to have an intelligent opinion! Even if you end up rejecting religious views, you will at least understand what you are rejecting (which is more than can be said for the average sceptic).

Nothing so moves me to grief like the misunderstandings that surround religion. Like a minority sport that nobody else is familiar with, it irks me to see something derided when I know for a fact that it

has value. We all encounter it on a daily basis, and yet the average person has a slender grasp of where it comes from and what it entails. Even the most sincere religious believer is prone to misunderstand the ancient texts they study so reverently – developing a dogmatic train of thought that cannot endure criticism and manifests itself dangerously. This in turn fuels an opposing army of atheists who become annoyed, and know no better way of expressing that annoyance than to reject everything and tar everybody with the same brush. They themselves are misled by the dogmatic belief that science has an answer for everything, and their egos delight at belittling the values that others hold dear. Neither party can claim to be entirely ‘rational’.

It seems the world is waking up to the realization that there’s something not quite right about religion. There are two ways to react to that revelation. One is to reject religion entirely, as many are doing. The other is to explore it even more deeply and uncover the backbone of truth that made it so appealing in the first place. That’s what we’ll be doing in this book, and the gems we unearth will make you the wisest sports fan in the bar! Man’s favourite topic of conversation is about to get even more interesting...

Mat Dickie
Grimsby, England
Summer 2009



The author of this book, Mat Dickie.

1. A GAME OF TWO HALVES

“How do you tell the dancer from the dance?”

- *W.B. Yeats*

It's May 24th, the hottest day of 2009 so far, and it's in this climate that clubs up and down the country will fight to steer their season to a favourable conclusion. Everton and Aston Villa are working to secure their places in Europe, Hull and Newcastle are engaged in a scrap to avoid relegation, while Scunthorpe lock horns with Millwall to establish who deserves to be promoted. Heroes will be made and hearts will be broken.

While the players sweat it out on the pitch, I'm soaking up the sun in my back garden on a lazy summer's afternoon. The radio competes with birds chirping and trees rustling as the story of the Scunthorpe game is written on the airwaves. I'm paying particular attention to the action because I went to school with one of Scunthorpe United's most celebrated players – Matthew Sparrow, who takes to the field in his 'testimonial' year after a decade of service.

My vicarious support is rewarded after just 6 minutes when the man himself finds the back of the net to put our local side in front! I contemplate taking the credit since I bothered to pay attention, but my sunbathing isn't exactly the most arduous activity taking place this afternoon. I'm filled with civic pride nonetheless. I knew heroes would be made this day, but I didn't think a random name from my past would be one of them!

Disaster strikes towards the end of the first half as Scunthorpe go 2-1 down to Millwall, and I'm left contemplating the 'heartbreak' side of my prediction. But deep into the second half, Scunthorpe finally draw level – and the name 'Sparrow' once again rings out from my radio. This time I really do consider taking credit for the power of my well-wishing! Once is a pleasant coincidence, twice is fate. Shortly afterwards, in the closing minutes of the game, Scunthorpe find the back of the net for a third time and secure the victory at 3-2 – along with promotion to the next tier of English football.

The stakes couldn't have been higher, but they did the business in front of tens of thousands of fans at the most prestigious stadium in the country – and I knew the hometown hero at the heart of it. It gave me cause to reflect how it must feel to be that individual on that day. To perform well under that spotlight AND have it propel your team on to greater things is the potent combination that dreams are made of. Very few professions can offer that experience, squeezed into such a narrow passage of time. Far from being abstract characters on a screen, these sportsmen were suddenly real human beings that had intense emotions running through their veins.

Make no mistake about it – therein lies the much vaunted 'meaning of life'. Every sports fan can appreciate the difference between playing on the field and watching at home. There's a difference between cheering a goal on from a distance and being the lucky individual that scored one. The spectator would invariably give anything to be the player at that moment – regardless of how many bumps and bruises they're taking! It occurs to me that this is a good analogy for the difference between the physical world and the spiritual world. If there's

such a thing as a ‘soul’, we wonder why it would flee the sanctuary of heaven to slum it in the real world. If there’s such an entity as ‘God’, we wonder why he would bother creating an inferior world to his own. Sport hints at the answer.

The spirit ‘knows’ everything in theory – as surely as the spectator enjoys a zoomed out view of the whole pitch and has access to all manner of statistics as the game unfolds. Such knowledge is secondary to experience though. Playing on the pitch may require more effort and comes with its risks, but the soul finds itself drawn to the physical so that it can at least taste something real. And so it deliberately narrows its view and assumes the limitations of a solitary player, exposing itself to the risk of pain and failure so that it might win.

Nothing exists in any meaningful way without its opposite. As Neale Donald Walsch muses, “In the absence of that which you are not, that which you are... is not!” If it was impossible to ‘lose’ then Scunthorpe winning that match wouldn’t have meant anything. It would have been a formality, as unremarkable as breathing. If it was ‘easy’ to score, there would have been no celebration from the players as each goal went in (hence the lack of fanfare as each point is clocked up in basketball!). If a match was played every day, they would cease to be special occasions and victories would mean very little. Ask yourself why you get excited about the World Cup and the fact that it only comes around once every 4 years will spring to mind!

And so it goes, from the trivialities of sport to the fundamentals of life. If it was impossible to ‘die’ (or otherwise suffer) then life would mean nothing. There would be no finish line to inspire you to make the most of the race; no hurdles to make it an impressive accomplishment.

Perhaps the current recession is a more pertinent example. As rueful as it may be, there can be no doubt that it makes us appreciate what we had, what we still have, and what we may have again. Both light and dark shades are required to paint a meaningful picture. This is the significance of the 2 semi-circles that form the Chinese symbol of “Yin & Yang”. They represent opposing forces (passion and reason respectively) that reconcile themselves to form a whole.

Ironically, the same is also true of religion and the science that purports to discredit it. It’s very fashionable at the moment to assume that they’re in competition, which is odd because science is purely mechanical and has no philosophical dimension. Saying you believe in ‘science’ and not ‘religion’ is like saying you believe in ‘red’ and not ‘car’! They’re not mutually exclusive. It’s perfectly possible to have a ‘red car’ (although the idea may not appeal to you). Likewise, ‘religion’ and ‘science’ are two acceptable impulses towards the same thing. One is preoccupied with the mechanics of life, whereas the other explores why it exists in the first place and what that means.

If we were to stand underneath the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and gaze up at the work of Michelangelo, the empiricist might dismiss it as a mess of paint whereas a sensitive soul proclaims it to be a work of art. They’re BOTH right. There can be no doubt that the painting is a smattering of colour, but we quite literally “fail to see the bigger picture” when we cling to that perspective alone. If religion and science are opposed at all, it is in the same way that our thumbs ‘oppose’ our fingers and our fork ‘opposes’ our knife – it’s an opposition that allows us to GRASP things! To separate them would be like insisting that only

a piano manufacturer gets to play the instrument. Sometimes the material product must be brought to life by an artistic touch.

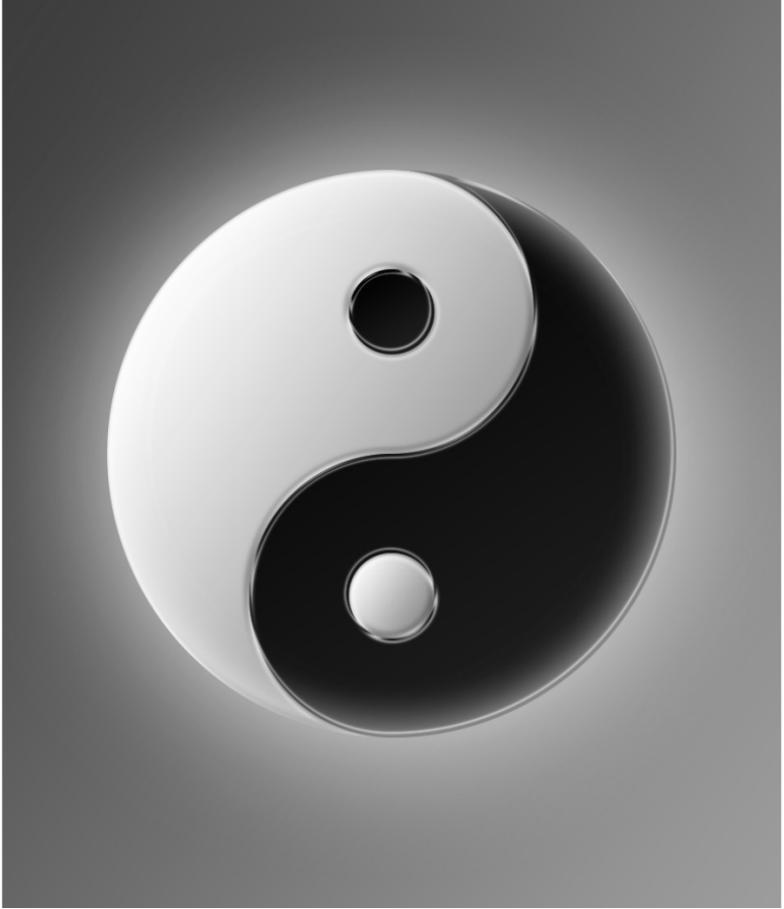
In all things, the universe seeks to strike a balance. It's what keeps planets in orbit – and what keeps the life on them thriving. The 'Big Bang' would have been of no consequence if the explosive push was not reined in by the pull of gravity. The lover seeks to leave, but is held by the hand and turns to lock eyes with the stars. If their dance was out of step by so much as one in a billion then life as we know it would not have been their offspring.

The same is true from a spiritual perspective. The OPPOSITE of supreme consciousness must exist in order to make it mean anything in the first place. And with that thought, physical matter bursts into life and sparks of intelligence race to inhabit the atoms so as to feel alive for the first time. This is what the Jewish *Torah* and Christian *Bible* seek to convey with the immortal introduction, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The first step towards life as we know it was an energy dividing itself into that which is physical and that which isn't, so that each might bring out the best in the other and create an opportunity for meaningful experiences to take place.

We may resent the world we inhabit from time to time, as surely as the sportsman resents losing a match or getting injured, but ask him how he feels when the ball hits the back of the net and he'll tell you it was all worthwhile...



Scunthorpe United's man of the moment, Matthew Sparrow.



‘Yin’ and ‘Yang’ represent opposing forces that form a whole.

2. GAME OVER

“The wise do not mourn for those who are dead.”

- *Bhagavad Gita 2:12*

Exploring the analogy more deeply, the duration of a sporting contest is a good metaphor for the human lifespan. And not just in the sense that half-time can be cause for a ‘mid-life crisis’ if you’re on the losing team! Admittedly, the soul doesn’t inhabit the body for a mere 90 minutes... or does it? Creationists are often ridiculed for getting the numbers wrong when clinging to the belief that the world was literally made in 6 ‘days’, but the sentiment may hold up when we consider that *Genesis* was written from the perspective of a deity. Chapter 2 of the document goes on to clarify that “these were the GENERATIONS of the creation of the earth.” And St Peter later writes that “one day is a thousand years by the Lord’s reckoning” (a sentiment shared by the scriptures of Hinduism and Islam among others).

Time is relative, after all. The evolutionary process seems to span millions of years to us because we’re so close to it – part of it in fact. It would no doubt be an insignificant passage of time from the perspective of a deity. Harry Potter probably believes that his fictitious life took 16 years to come to fruition. If he ever came face to face with J. K. Rowling, she would nonchalantly inform him that his entire universe was knocked up in 16 minutes! Try to tell him that his life is a ‘creation’ and he’ll probably protest to the contrary as well, such is the limited understanding of the creature.

What's true for God is no doubt true for the soul too. A 90-year lifespan probably does fly by like 90 minutes from a spiritual perspective! But I digress. As rigid as match times may be, the point I wanted to make here was that some forays still end sooner than others. The most blatant example is that of injury, which brings an abrupt end to a player's game (or career). My friend, Adam, fondly recalls that he was responsible for retiring the English legend Tony Dorigo with an ill-timed challenge in a friendly they played for charity! That would be the 'death' of the physical body (or some other debilitating state) as far as this analogy is concerned. The end of your time trotting around in good health. But remember it was a risk the soul was prepared to take to experience physical life. An immortal, pain-free existence is what the soul comes FROM – not what it comes here FOR. It knew full well that the physical body wasn't promised to last the duration of the match without incident. Nor would it have it any other way, because then staying in good shape would have meant nothing.

That said, retaining the use of your legs doesn't guarantee that your presence will be required. The team's infinitely wise manager may CHOOSE to bring a player off the pitch and substitute him with another. From his vantage point on the sidelines, the manager may have spied a poor performance or a failing formation and has the power to make amends. This may help to explain the premature departure of some souls. No matter how good they are or how hard they try, they simply reach the point where they're worth more to the team on the bench than on the field. This needn't be a negative reflection on their performance. On the contrary, perhaps the manager deems the player so

valuable that he wishes to rest him! Especially after his work is done and victory seems assured.

The finest Biblical example of this is, of course, Jesus – who voluntarily died the most horrific death the Romans could muster at the age of 33 (which, coincidentally enough, is the age that most sportsmen tend to draw their careers to a close). It's for this reason that his life has gone on to have such profound significance. His premature and undignified death shocked people at the time, who associated success with living a long and prosperous life. Jesus' message was that there was more to life than that, and that a life lived well was the kind that could never be buried. Whether you believe he rose from the dead or not, there can be little doubt that his spirit lives on some 2'000 years later. Caesar's materialistic empire crumbled a long time ago!

It's true what they say about the good dying young. True in the sense that a premature death gives you reason to cherish a person's good qualities, and forever removes the risk of them exhibiting bad ones. I speak from experience because I once had a cousin, Henry, who was the same age as me but died by the time we were teenagers. Our parallel tracks haunted me as I grew older without him. Like sperm competing for the right to fertilize an egg, I was humbled by the notion that two seeds could grow in the same place at the same time and suffer such utterly different fates. Especially since I would go on to enjoy a certain amount of success in my chosen field. One of us was living the life of his dreams whereas the other wasn't living at all. It was a stark reminder of how precious my opportunities were, and I needed no greater motivation to seize them and work hard.

It occurs to me that life is like an elastic band becoming increasingly taught. Pull it back too little and it doesn't go far enough. Hold on to it too long and it falls apart in your hands. But release it at just the right moment and it soars as far as it can possibly go. Whether it's a public figure or your most beloved family member, some souls just reach the point where they're worth more to you dead than alive – and they selflessly lay down their lives for the greater good.

Not all departures from the game of life are quite so honourable though. Some players find themselves being marched off the pitch by the referee after being shown a red card! Whether they're downright wicked or just misunderstood, the referee has the power to remove people that aren't playing by the rules. One can faintly imagine Hitler being “shown the red card” before accepting the referee's decision and putting a gun to his head!

We might ask why he wasn't shown it sooner and was left to cause havoc for much of that particular game. Before we blame the referee, it may be more magnanimous to look at ourselves. The tragedy of the Holocaust wasn't that a Hitler ‘came along’ – it was that so many people WENT along. Not that millions of Jews died, but that so many Jews HAD to die before we paid attention. It says as much about us as any one individual.

And that's perhaps the purpose of that ugly episode in human history. We were exposed to Hitler's ideology and saw it limp to a pathetic conclusion – never to be entertained by civilized society again. It may have been a long time coming, but he was shown a red card so bright that you could see it from space! I'm reminded of the little girl from the movie *Schindler's List*, whose red coat stands out amidst a

backdrop of black and white. It signalled the beginning of Oscar Schindler's transformation and the end of Hitler's hold on a nation's sensibilities. No greater 'red card' has ever been shown.

In his own book about football, *Articles Of Faith*, Russell Brand recounts how he once sat near a man and his severely disabled son at a West Ham game. The anxious father could regularly be heard protesting to the referee that "it's not fair!" As Brand speculates, this seems to reflect the man's inner feelings about the plight of his son. Football had become an excuse to vent his frustration, as God (or life itself) is personified as some sort of cosmic referee that can hear his petition. It was the man's belief that his circumstances were not 'fair'. But as we shall see, in both sport and life all outcomes are deserved and serve a necessary purpose...



A player's time on the field can come to an abrupt end!

3. POST-MATCH ANALYSIS

“Be sure to live a good, honourable life.
Then when you look back you’ll enjoy it all over again.”

- Dalai Lama

Regardless of how a player’s time on the pitch comes to an end, they all retreat into the tunnel of darkness from whence they emerged. After recuperating for a short time in the locker room, they cease to be a focused player and enjoy becoming a humble spectator once more. They feel clean and relaxed as they look back over the match they just played in and analyze it from a different perspective. They beam with pride at their achievements, laugh at the fun moments, regret their misdeeds, and hide their faces from their errors. What seemed important at the time is no longer quite so important after all.

What I’ve just described is, of course, a metaphor for the state of the soul once it departs from the body. That crucial moment haunts every human being – believers and unbelievers alike. If you doubt the existence of the soul then our view fades to black once we enter that tunnel – never to be illuminated again. Whereas others feel convinced that the tunnel leads out of the stadium where a whole new experience awaits, free from the confines of a pitch and the pressure of performing on it. Exactly what that experience entails and how it pans out, even the most fervent believers cannot agree on.

One of the most misunderstood theories is that of a ‘Heaven’ that rewards the virtuous and a ‘Hell’ that punishes the wicked. Both tend to be explained in physical terms, which is ironic because a ‘soul’ surely wouldn’t dwell anywhere that resembles the world it just came from!

That would be like pouring steam into a cup instead of water or ice cubes. It's the steam's intent to escape. It's in no position to stay.

The term 'Heaven' comes from the sailing term 'haven' – referring to the respite that sailors seek from the turbulent seas. In that view, the afterlife is a much-needed break from the choppy waves of physical life. Fluffy clouds and angelic music are only invoked to communicate that feeling of serene relaxation. Likewise, the Islamic concept of 'Paradise' is a fruitful garden nourished by flowing rivers. In other words, the exact opposite of what people were enduring in the harsh deserts and dusty plains of Arabia!

Incidentally, it's a myth that Muslim men expect to find 'virgins' satisfying their every desire in the afterlife (just like it's a myth that 'terrorism' would yield such a reward). Such a lustful and self-centred world view goes against everything religion stands for. The term taken to mean 'virgin' actually means 'companion' – referring to the 'good company' that a virtuous soul can expect to be surrounded by. We're talking about 'pure souls' of any gender – not 'pure women' to be ravaged! Again, that idea merely takes root because it's the 'opposite' of the average man's sexually frustrated experience on earth – not because it's particularly true.

As we discussed in the first chapter, nothing exists without its opposite – and so it's there that we find the most productive explanations of a life beyond the physical. This is especially true of 'Hell', where we are doomed to experience the opposite of everything we consider desirable. Flames torment our aching bodies as we dwell in cavernous darkness with the worst of company. And that's just being in the away stand at Millwall! The Biblical hell is meant to be even worse.

The classic ‘fire and brimstone’ concept can actually be traced back to a real place in ancient Palestine called ‘Gehenna’, which became a dumping ground for dead bodies that were duly burnt. Both the stench and the view conspired to make sure it wasn’t the most desirable destination to end up at. It still managed to attract more visitors than the average British seaside resort though! At least Gehenna promised a bit of warmth.

These are, of course, worldly references that help us make sense of what will no doubt be an intellectual experience. Even Pope John Paul II conceded that “Hell is not a place so much as a state of separation from God.” Indeed, some people prefer to think that heaven and hell are states of mind that already exist on this earth – in the fulfilment of a life lived well or the misery of a life wasted.

A housemate of mine once caught me watching Mel Gibson’s *Passion Of The Christ* and ridiculed Jesus as he was being tortured, before mockingly enquiring as to whether he would be “going to hell” for doing so. I nonchalantly told him that he was already IN hell. Hell was the ignorance that made him say such a thing, the insecurity that made him feel the need to mock religion so as to appear ‘cool’, and the discomfort of being chastened by me. When the same footage inspires compassion in him, and he has the courage to express it, he might just find himself in ‘Heaven’ (although I fear such a transformation is a long way off!).

If hell exists at all then it is surely that pang of regret that torments a man who wasted his big chance and failed to do himself justice. We’re looking for a change of perspective that brings that realization home, and that’s what our sporting analogy does for us at this juncture.

When a player walks off the pitch, he judges himself based on his performance. His life flashes before his eyes (quite literally if he chooses to watch the match back on TV!), and the overall flavour of what he sees determines how he feels about it for the foreseeable future. If the good moments outweigh the bad then he has procured a pleasant afterlife for himself and walks out of the stadium with a spring in his step. Whereas if the bad outweighs the good, he must toil in a self-inflicted hell – moping around for the rest of the week, having nightmares about the mistakes he made.

The score at the final whistle exacerbates this appraisal of the self. If the player is on the winning team then he rejoices with thousands of fans, and whiles away the evening celebrating with his team-mates. He beholds himself to be in good company and high spirits, whereas the losers are jeered as they traipse into the tunnel and begin blaming one another. Notice how these are largely self-inflicted experiences – not the work of a vindictive ‘God’. God is like a fire that offers light and warmth – it only ever burns us if we abuse it. That great mind merely defined the rules and invited you onto the pitch – whether you get anything out of it or not is down to you. And for all the jeering fans, newspaper reports, and TV pundits, no one will be harder on you than yourself. It turns out the judge on ‘Judgment Day’ is YOU!

Further to success and failure, another way of looking at ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’ is as states of disorientation. This is one that I personally subscribe to. If you look at the previous analogy, you’ll notice that the pain and joy are two completely different reactions to the same thing – the end of a match. How the players experience that exact same moment in the exact same place depends on their character. A party (or

any other occasion) might be ‘Heaven’ to somebody that wants to be there, but ‘Hell’ to somebody that can’t wait to leave! I speak from experience because I once found myself at an outrageous house party in London, where depraved, drug-addled minds stalked the vomit-stained corridors like zombies. To me it was the most sinister place I had ever been, whereas the revellers within deemed it to be entirely pleasurable (for the moment at least!). I decided to sit out the last few hours outside, at which point a snarling wretch hovered over the door and enquired as to whether I was “in or out?”

“Out!” I confirmed, as the door slammed on me and forged a divide between two very different worlds.

It occurs to me that there is only ONE post-death state and we label it ‘Heaven’ or ‘Hell’ based on whether we are comfortable there or not. My favourite Indian teacher, Paramahansa Yogananda, once said that hell is “needing a body and not having one.” If all you’ve ever known is the material, and all you’ve ever derived pleasure from is the sensual, then losing the bodily vehicle can be a cause of great distress. Whereas if you’re used to thinking in spiritual terms and have an intellectual dimension to your life, losing the body is of no consequence. It may even be a favourable development in your progress! Once you know you’re a soul, you delight to be freed from the shackles of the body. If you’re convinced you’re nothing more than a body, you literally don’t know how to live without one.

Our sporting analogy helps us articulate this sense of disorientation. Imagine suddenly being asked to compete in a sport that you’ve never seen before or taken the time to learn about. People told you there was such a thing as the sport, but you didn’t pay much attention. You were

shown books that document the rules, but you never got round to reading them. You even walked past the stadium where the sport is played, but never went inside. The frustration and embarrassment of suddenly having to play the sport (and inevitably losing) could be considered ‘Hell’, whereas a keen practitioner would consider it ‘Heaven’ to have the opportunity to play. Two completely different responses to the exact same situation. The only difference is that one was prepared and the other was ignorant. As Milton’s *Paradise Lost* intones, “The mind is its own place and in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven.”

This line of thinking is reminiscent of ‘Pascal’s Wager’, which dictates that it’s better to assume that God does exist and there is an afterlife – because there’s nothing to lose by doing so and everything gain. That’s not to say that people should be ‘blackmailed’ into respecting religious belief so as to avoid some sort of divine retribution. On the contrary, the point is that that all rewards and punishments lie within ourselves and our own conduct. Nobody ever bettered themselves by knowing LESS about life and limiting their range of skills! An open-minded exploration of the possibilities ensures that we’re equipped to participate in any activity at the highest level...



The light at the end of the tunnel.

4. EXTRA TIME

“Thou shalt become a pillar in my temple and go out no more.”

- *Revelation 3:12*

Regardless of how a player is judged to have performed, he invariably has another chance to play all over again. Thousands in fact! A whole season of matches lay scheduled before him, and many such seasons constitute a career.

Naturally, the player returns to the pitch having learnt much from his respite on the sidelines. In addition to drawing upon the experience of playing in the previous match, he is also haunted by the way he felt afterwards. If he was fortunate enough to glimpse ‘Heaven’, he seeks to go there again and build on the sensation. Whereas if he was dismayed to find himself in ‘Hell’, he plays with renewed determination to avoid enduring it again. Either way, the player is subconsciously sculpting the perfect character to achieve his goals and gets better and better with each outing. Unless, of course, he is so ignorant that he takes nothing from each lesson and proceeds to run his career into the ground with the same mistakes!

This is reminiscent of the Indian religions that believe the soul reincarnates time and time again, inhabiting increasingly complex life forms as it evolves towards perfection. Even within the human species, the soul is thought to attract the right circumstances to achieve whatever it needs to achieve – whether those circumstances are favourable or harsh. As in our analogy, this is influenced by their ‘karma’ – the overall flavour of their actions. The soul keeps

negotiating this cycle of life (known as ‘samsara’) until it is has been perfectly shaped and no longer needs to (which is the sought-after liberation known as ‘moksha’). This is rather like a soiled garment spinning around in a washing machine until it emerges perfectly clean and can be worn once more. Perhaps there’s a sporting metaphor there too! No other endeavour muddies the body and clothes to such an extent.

It is often assumed that other faiths don’t acknowledge reincarnation, but this wasn’t always the case. At the time of Christ, it was common to assume that great men were reincarnated prophets from the past. Both John The Baptist and Jesus himself were hailed as such by their followers, which means the Jews of the time at least considered it a possibility. Jewish mystics even have a term for it – ‘Gilgul Ha-Nefesh’, which means “recycling the soul”.

The Gospels portray John The Baptist as the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah, who was promised to accompany “the coming of the Lord” according to the prophecies of Micah. There’s also a good case for casting Jesus as the reincarnation of the prophet Elisha – Elijah’s protégé who could look forward to “swapping places” with his master. This is why Jesus bows before John The Baptist and often seems strangely subservient – despite having returned in a superior role. As he explains himself, “Let it be this way so as to fulfil all righteousness (i.e. to honour the past).”

Another revealing episode has people asking Jesus whether a man was born blind because of “something he did” (presumably in a previous life). Jesus suggests that is not the case in this instance, but nor does he deny that such a thing is possible. Again, it’s clear that the

people of the time felt a connection between their actions in previous lives and their fate in this one.

The most enchanting reference to reincarnation in the *New Testament* can be found in *Revelation* – where we’re assured, “Thou shalt become a pillar in my temple and go out no more.” This harks back to the Indian concept of reuniting with God after breaking the life cycle (“become a pillar in my temple”) and no longer being compelled to incarnate on earth (“go out no more”).

The concept of reincarnation wasn’t at all foreign to late Jews or early Christians. In fact, it only became forbidden when Emperor Justinian forcefully demanded as much to suit his own personal views on the subject. Perhaps it was felt that people wouldn’t cherish this life if they were promised another? On the contrary, reincarnation provides a means of perfecting the soul with sustained effort. The sportsman doesn’t play badly just because he knows he has another match next week! He uses every performance as a stepping stone towards his goals.

It is often argued that reincarnation is either nonsensical or pointless because we can’t actually remember the ‘past lives’ we are supposed to have had. Even when people do claim to have caught glimpses in dreams or by hypnosis, there’s very little value in experiences that are so vague and sporadic. It’s not hard to understand why past lives are forbidden to infringe on this one. Once again, our sporting analogy hints at the answer. While a player is embroiled in a new contest, he doesn’t wander the pitch like a poet – fondly recalling every detail of the previous match! His actions are not based on what was happening last time – tackling opponents that are no longer in front

of him and swinging at balls that are no longer there. Rather, he focuses entirely on the task at hand.

I doubt he could even remember those previous battles if he wanted to. They may have been important at the time, but become less so as they're replaced by other intense experiences. I was once talking to a famous wrestler I had idolized as a child and quizzed him as to how he felt at various matches – iconic moments that had taken place on national television in front of tens of thousands of screaming fans. The kind of thing you expect to remember for the rest of your life. He didn't remember any of them. He didn't even have a clue what I was talking about! What seemed extraordinary to me was literally just another day at the office for him.

Perhaps the world of acting provides the best analogy (I can feel a whole other book coming on!). An actor dons many costumes and plays many different roles throughout his career, but underneath he remains the same person – as surely as the soul remains the same within each body it inhabits. However, he must completely forget about the role he played last time. Not only is it inevitable because his attention has been drawn elsewhere, but it's essential if he is to play his new role properly. Suppose the actor started reciting old lines on a new project, or wore old costumes to a new set? Imagine if Tom Cruise went into *The Last Samurai* shouting “Show me the money,” or turned up on the set of *Jerry Maguire* wearing the outfit of a fighter pilot! No, he must try to put the past behind him as much as possible. The performer may make a concerted effort to revisit his past on tape, but for the most part he must focus on the task at hand.

Further to his personal feelings about each performance, the player will also look back over his entire career and taste the overall flavour of that – which is the real ‘Judgment Day’! Religions do tend to speak of two distinct moments of ‘judgment’ – a personal one at the end of each life and a general one that affects humanity as a whole. The latter is often assumed to be some sort of frightful moment where the world ‘ends’ and certain people are ‘resurrected’ to live again. Personally, I think all talk of the ‘end of days’ refers to the end of YOUR days and ‘resurrection’ simply refers to living on in a different form. They’re basically dramatic ways of talking about death and the afterlife. As evidenced by the fact that Jesus promised, “This generation will not pass away until these things have come to pass.” The ‘last day’ was something every person was guaranteed to witness because it was quite simply ‘death’!

In any case, our analogy has turned its attention to judging a whole sequence of lives rather than one in particular – a whole career instead of one match. But the general principles remain the same – even if the consequences are more significant! Again, if the impression the player is left with is a positive one then he beholds himself to be in ‘Heaven’. Ideally, he will have scored a lot of goals, won a lot of matches, remained in good health, and amassed enough wealth to retire in comfort. ‘Hell’ torments the player if he looks back in bitterness – having lost more matches than he won, cringing at the errors he made, limping in a broken down body, and scraping by with no money.

These are, of course, long-term versions of ‘Heaven’ and ‘Hell’ that the soul must endure for a considerable time. He’s had his numerous chances and is now too old to change the trajectory of his

fate. This is perhaps what religions mean by ‘eternal life’ and ‘eternal damnation’. Or going back to the concept of reincarnation, ‘eternal life’ may refer to breaking free of the cycle and dwelling with God forever as a ‘pillar’ in his ‘temple’ – never having to ‘go out’ again unless you choose to do so on your own terms. In that case, ‘eternal damnation’ would be the endless cycle of miserable incarnations that you haven’t taken the initiative to avoid. It’s not ‘eternal damnation’ in the sense that it’s a permanent punishment – it’s ‘eternal’ in the sense that it keeps going round until you break the cycle. But break it you most certainly can! Indeed, it’s the destiny of all souls to evolve to that point and return to the pure energy from whence they came...



The same player returns to the field numerous times.

5. THE FATHER OF ALL THINGS

“Before the world was created, the Torah had already been written.

God looked into the Torah and created the world.”

- *The Zohar*

Before we take this sporting analogy any further, we might want to cast the greatest role of all – that of ‘God’. Inspired by Renaissance art, popular culture portrays God as a wizened old man with a beard – a human being writ large. We are, after all, “made in his image.” Contrary to popular belief, none of the world’s major faiths consider God to be a tangible entity like ourselves. The God Michelangelo gave us was quite literally an “artist’s impression”!

The Jewish concept of God (as seen in the *Old Testament*) veers in that direction with talk of meeting him “face to face” and being “guided by his hand”, but these are largely metaphorical terms that help to make sense of the experiences that people were having. Even when ‘The Lord’ is thought to dwell among us in human form, we are inclined to think of a ‘representative’ of God as distinct from God in his entirety. As for the classic “made in his image” line, this is open to interpretation and tends to mean that we are made of the same SUBSTANCE (a part of God in other words). Cast your mind back to that analogy of an energy dividing itself into “heaven and earth” and you can appreciate that we may be a product of something bigger.

In fact, both Judaism and Islam forbid depicting God precisely because he has no physical form. The famed ‘Ten Commandments’ begin by insisting “Thou shalt have no other Gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make any likeness of that which is in heaven above” –

largely because it isn't possible! The fact that it's distasteful is secondary. Even Hindus concede that their images of various gods are merely 'aspects' of something greater. Their *Bhagavad Gita* scripture reminds us that "no form can contain God."

The *Old Testament* gives us a more useful description of God when Moses gets him to reveal, "I AM THAT I AM." Again this is open to interpretation, but the enigmatic response seems to warn us against assuming that God is any one thing that a human being can comprehend. Rather, he "is what he is" – the sum total of everything that exists, however it happens to be showing up at any given moment. Who he is and what he looks like is a symbiotic relationship that depends on what we wish to mirror back at him. He's more of a 'concept' than an entity – a flowing process that can't be grasped any more than running water can.

Perhaps William Shakespeare put it best when he observed that "All the world's a stage. There are no small parts – only small actors." In that analogy, the world is the stage, humans are the cast, and life is the play. God is the intelligence that presides over all three. He wrote the script, built the set, and directed the actors! In other words, he IS the play – no one part of it does his role justice.

So with our sporting analogy, it may be tempting to assume that God is the 'inventor' of the sport in question – a great mind that had an idea and brought it to fruition. But this is inadequate because it assumes that 'creation' is the sole purpose of a God. Indian religions, such as Hinduism, put it better when they reduce creation to just one of THREE key roles played by a deity. 'The Creator' (*Brahma*) is accompanied by 'The Sustainer' (*Vishnu*) and 'The Destroyer' (*Shiva*) – all representing

facets of ONE supreme intelligence (*Brahman*). What this invites us to consider is that God is not exclusively a ‘creator’ who kick-started life, so much as an intelligence that works within it and steers it to a conclusion.

This puts paid to the fashionable assumption that the ‘theory of evolution’ disproves the existence of God. On the contrary, God planted the seed, guides its progress, and is the perfection towards which it aspires. God IS evolution – there’s no part of the process that doesn’t involve him! It’s a ‘genetic fallacy’ to assume that something doesn’t have a creator just because we know how it works. Observing that a plant grows from a seed does not preclude the gardener that planted it and cultivated it, nor the sun towards which it grows.

Going back to our analogy, then, we might say that the very CONCEPT of a sport is ‘God’ – an idea that doesn’t ‘exist’ in the tangible sense, but which nonetheless gives rise to a game that will eventually take place. You might bring forth rulebooks that document the sport (as surely as religious scriptures document God), but these are merely by-products of something that already existed. The sport is neither ‘born’ nor does it ‘die’ – it has always been there waiting to be called upon by those wishing to play. The inventor merely manifests an opportunity that was always there – chiselling away a sculpture that already existed within the stone, as Michelangelo would have it.

Indeed, it’s hard to identify a founder for the sport of football as we know it now. A detailed search could take you as far back as ancient China, where a ball-game called ‘Cuju’ was played by foot. Similar ball games also pop up in ancient Greece and Rome, before gradually materializing throughout medieval Europe. As recently as the 19th

century, football was in the process of parting ways with rugby to become an exclusively hands-free sport. Only then could it become codified as the sport we know today. It's a good example of how ideas evolve as surely as organisms and defy categorization.

People often ponder “Who created God?” and “What existed before the Big Bang?” The answer is that everything always has and always will exist! It's a myth that things ‘begin’ or ‘end’. These are merely illusions that we buy into as humans. When did you ‘begin’? When you came out of a woman or when you went into one? Didn't part of you exist in the body of your father as well as your mother? And were those bodies not fashioned by the food and drink they consumed elsewhere? On and on it goes until you trace your heritage back to the first gaseous matter to emerge from the Big Bang.

The same is true of death. When do you ‘die’? When the soul departs from the body or when the corpse deteriorates beyond recognition? Doesn't that energy live on in the soil and sustain the food chain all over again? Technically, you've already ‘died’ a few dozen times already. As the scientist Steve Grand points out, every single atom in your body has died and been replaced within the past 12 months. You're literally not the same person you were last year! You're constantly being rebuilt with new components. People should consider that when they deem the ‘resurrection’ of Christ to be so unlikely. You've already performed that particular miracle yourself.

Einstein wasn't joking when he suggested that “energy never dies”. Everything always has and always will exist – just not in the same form. ‘Birth’ and ‘death’ are simply bookmarks that we place on an endless flow of energy in order to make it mean something. That “endless flow

of energy” is best described as God. He’s not a wave in the physical world like we are – he’s the ocean from which a wave emerges and into which it returns. As *Malachi 3:6* states, “I am the Lord, I DO NOT CHANGE.” Only physical things change. There’s a reason God is often referred to as ‘infinite’! A supreme intelligence lurks BEHIND the laws of physics – it isn’t circumscribed by them.

This is what I find so odd about the empiricist’s cry for ‘proof’ of the existence of God. How do you ‘prove’ the existence of something that you’re a part of? It’s as silly and counterproductive as a dog chasing its tail! You ARE the proof you seek. It’s like one hand asking the other hand whether it ‘believes’ in the body. They ARE the body, lacking only the realization. As the *Book Of Job* states, “In my flesh I see God.” All that’s required is a sense of perspective, and that’s what religions have been trying to offer us for the last few thousand years. They’ve been “giving sight to the blind” in more ways than one!

All the world’s major faiths endorse this idea that God is a primordial presence that always has and always will exist, defying the conventions of physical life. The Jewish *Zohar* cryptically reveals that the *Torah* was written “before the world was created.” God is even credited with using the scripture to create the world in the first place! We’re obviously not talking about literal pages of a book so much as concepts that always existed and were documented by humans later.

Likewise, Christ lays claim to having always existed with the enigmatic line, “Before Abraham was, I AM.” He obviously wasn’t claiming to have existed as Jesus since time began, as his bewildered audience speculated. Rather, he meant to imply that he embodied a concept that has always been at work. Muslims chime in at this point

with their belief that ‘Muslims’ existed prior to the Prophet Muhammad and anyone could be one. In fact, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are credited as being among the greatest of Muslims! This is because a ‘Muslim’ is simply one who surrenders to the will of God, and that has been a possibility for as long as there has been a God to obey. In other words, Islam – like Christianity and Judaism – is a concept that has always existed and just so happened to come to fruition in the hands of Muhammad in the 7th century. In this manner, sport itself has always existed – waiting only to be played...



Sports as they were originally conceived.



6. THE SUN OF GOD

“There are two ways of spreading light – to be
the candle or the mirror that reflects it.”

- *Edith Wharton*

The single biggest stumbling block inside and outside of religion is the Christian doctrine that Jesus was the biological ‘son’ of God. It moves atheists to conclude that God’s son is as ‘fictitious’ as God himself, and causes them to overlook one of the greatest philosophers that ever lived. Meanwhile, Jews and Muslims find it downright inappropriate that anything or anyone could be comparable to God. Even open-minded Hindus bristle at the implication that there could only be ONE such individual! Evidently, we need a little clarity on what the term actually means.

It’s important to appreciate that ‘Christ’ is a TITLE – not necessarily the name of an individual. What’s more, it’s a quality – a quality that anybody can possess (though very few do). Imagine a full-lit moon being reflected into a lake. If the water is murky and the surface is restless with ripples, the reflection of the moon is similarly distorted and doesn’t do it justice. But if the water is pure and calm, the reflection of the moon is perfect and represents it well. God is the moon and ‘Christ’ is the perfect reflection. What better way to describe something that embodies the qualities of ‘The Father’ than ‘The Son’? As *Hebrews 1:3* puts it, “The son is the radiance of God’s glory – an exact representation of his being.”

Jesus of Nazareth just so happened to serve this purpose well (although it could be argued that he was predisposed to do so). While

everyone else around him was filthy and restless, he cultivated purity and calm – making himself a blank canvas onto which a masterpiece could be painted. Anybody can aspire to this state, and he actively encouraged people to do so. When he said, “I am the way... nobody comes to the Father but by me,” he didn’t mean “I, the human being called Jesus, am the way.” He meant, “The qualities I possess are the ones that put you in tune with God.” There is only one God and there can only ever be one reflection of that God (the “only begotten son”), but that one reflected image can be seen in a great many mirrors! As the prologue of John’s Gospel assures us, “To as many as received him, he gave them power to become sons of God.”

Jesus himself went to great pains to point out that the ‘Messiah’ could not be a biological ‘son of David’, as some Jews had come to expect. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke even include genealogies that trace Jesus’ origins back to King David to make good on this prophecy. But at *Mark 12:35*, Jesus calls on *Psalms 110* to point out that it’s not necessary. In that *Psalms*, David refers to a divine presence as ‘My Lord’ – which Jesus argues is no way to address a biological son, over whom you would retain a certain amount of superiority! The answer to this semantic conundrum (which Jesus leaves unsaid) is that David’s ‘Lord’ is his SOUL – a purified soul that was in tune with God and served him well. Anyone that cultivated such a soul in the future would be a ‘son of God’ comparable to David – one of many that has adorned the pages of history.

Even the Prophet Muhammad was inspired to think in these terms. God revealed to him, “My servant draws near until I love him, and when I love him I become him.” In other words, God is able to shine

through a suitably pure vessel – as surely as the sun shines through a clear window and illuminates the room. The very name of Muhammad’s movement embodies this principle. The word ‘Islam’ denotes ‘submission’ – in this case a submission to the guidance of God above fallible human instincts.

The *Old Testament* tells us that God was most pleased when Moses came to this profound realization. Upon hearing his name called out on Mount Sinai, Moses dutifully responds “Here I am”. Ever a lover of language, God thrills at this choice of words – knowing full well that wherever Moses IS God IS! God looked down at the pool of purity known as Moses and heard it reflect back “Here I am”. There God is indeed. Divinity resides in anyone who has realized their true identity. Moses’ humble statement becomes a declaration of profound significance. This is why God declares the scene to be ‘holy ground’ at *Exodus 3:5*. It’s not because the mountain or the land itself is inherently ‘holy’. Rather, the ‘holy ground’ is the bundle of energy called Moses that embodied divinity so well. A land is MADE ‘holy’ by virtue of him being there!

This finally brings us to how the idea factors into our sporting analogy. We’ve already established that the ‘Father’ is the ‘concept’ of any given sport, which means the ‘Son’ is the ‘reflection’ of that concept. The sport as it is played in real life, perhaps. All the theories of the rulebook coming to life as two sides take to the field in the flesh. More specifically, it could be a particularly talented player who executes the manager’s tactics perfectly! An infinitely wise voice can be heard from the sidelines, but he is forbidden to stray onto the pitch. An obedient and skilful player listens for this guidance and follows it

well – doing the manager’s bidding, rather like God works through his prophets.

The most appropriate metaphor for the reflected ‘Son’ is the televised version of the game that most people are exposed to. This is the ‘channel’ that brings the ‘Father’ to the masses! The television screen is not the actual game, as surely as Christ is not actually God, but it is a fine ‘representation’ of it. There might be several different broadcasters and many different brands of television set, but the footage being broadcast remains of the same game – and nobody sees the game without being exposed to it. As Jesus boldly put it, “Whoever sees me sees the Father.” Not because the Son IS the Father, but because he serves as the perfect ambassador for it...



‘The Son’ is best understood as a reflection of ‘The Father’.

7. GOOD VIBRATIONS

“He who knows the method of change and transformation
may be said to know what is done by that spiritual power.”

- *Confucius*

To complete the ‘Holy Trinity’ we have to speculate as to where the ‘Holy Spirit’ fits in. More pertinently, we might also want to clarify what the ‘Holy Spirit’ actually is! Christians recognize it as the term Jesus uses for a mysterious force that empowers him and his disciples. However, it makes more sense when we look at the Hindu version of the trinity: “Sat, Tat, Aum”. Here, the ‘Holy Spirit’ is characterized by the sound ‘Aum’ – a humming vibration that is thought to underpin the whole of creation.

This perhaps informs the use of the term ‘Word’ (‘Logos’ in Greek), which is synonymous with God’s ‘wisdom’ and the ‘Holy Spirit’. When we hear the term ‘Word of God’, we assume it refers to literal ‘words’ that are spoken or written at his behest. This is seldom the intention, as it originally referred to a nondescript ‘vibration’ – an energy that God uses to accomplish things in the physical world. This is made clear in the prologue of John’s Gospel, which reveals “the Word was with God and the Word WAS God... nothing was made without it.”

The idea that a ‘vibration’ is at work in the world is actually quite scientific. Quantum physics dictates that everything in the universe is a product of energy in one form or another, and ‘String Theory’ suggests that energy is influenced by various vibrations (such as those that elicit different sounds from a violin string). Everything we see, hear, and

touch is quite literally energy vibrating at various frequencies. When we consider that ‘thoughts’ are manifestations of energy (as surely as radio waves are), it’s easy to appreciate how the world could be a product of one divine thought – moulded into shape by those of our own. This is what *Star Wars* famously refers to as ‘The Force’. As the wise old Obi Wan Kenobi character explains, “The force is a presence created by all living things. It surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the universe together.”

Genesis hints at this phenomenon with the immortal line, “Let there be light.” We assume it refers to the illuminating ‘light’ we get from the sun or a bulb, but it’s actually a reference to ‘light’ in its purest form. Neither a wave nor a particle, ‘light’ is more of a building block than an entity in its own right. It becomes a catch-all term for an intangible ‘energy’ out of which all other things are made. Replace the word ‘light’ with ‘energy’ in the story of creation and it suddenly begins to make more sense!

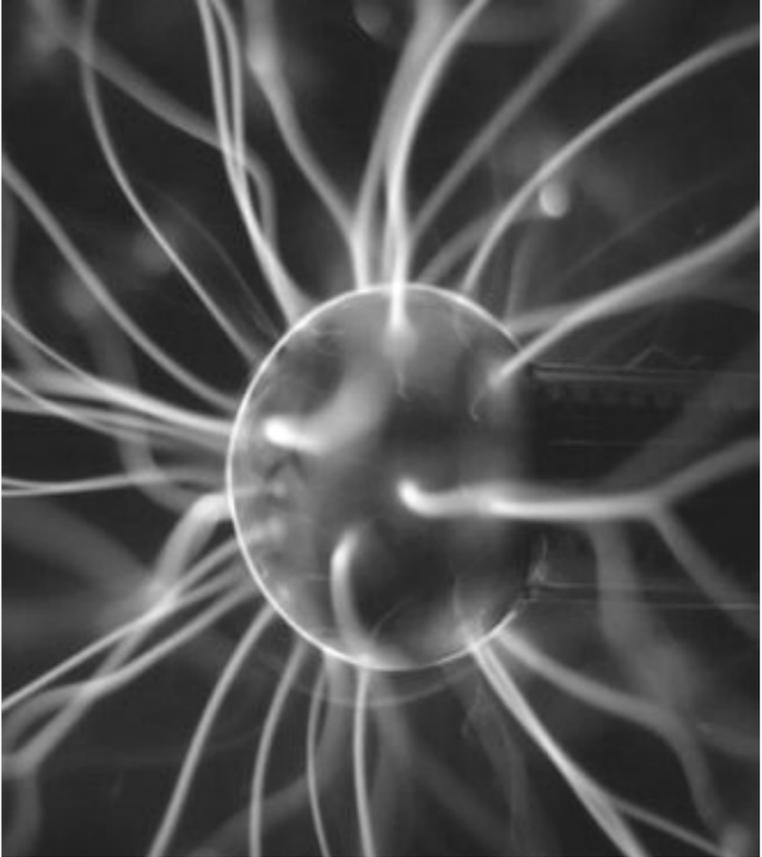
This is why Jesus is often credited with achieving things “by the Holy Spirit”, etc. It simply refers to his ability to manipulate the building blocks of life in ways that astound the average person. As Confucius observed, “He who knows the method of change and transformation may be said to know what is done by that spiritual power.”

So to communicate this idea in our sporting analogy, we need to think in terms of ‘energy’ – an energy that makes things happen in a meaningful way. Going back to the idea of the ‘Son’ being a reflection of the ‘Father’, the ‘Holy Spirit’ there would be the LIGHT that makes such a thing viable. When we see ourselves in a mirror, it is light (of

the conventional kind) that is making everything happen. It illuminates the room and ourselves, and then relays that information to the mirror and our eyeballs.

We're spoilt for choice when applying this theory to a sporting contest! Most noticeably, there's the kinetic energy of the athletes themselves as they exert themselves on the field. Similarly, the ball itself might be considered the conduit that absorbs that energy and translates it into a meaningful experience – creating winners and losers as it rattles from one side to the other. Going back to our TV metaphor though, the real 'Holy Spirit' might just be the television signal that captures the whole match and delivers it to the 'Son' where it can be reflected. Then we have all 3 components working in unison to create a truly 'Holy Trinity'!

The role of the individual, then, is to 'tune in' to the broadcast and fall in love with the sport on offer. To develop a relationship with it, if you like, and to put aside time to nurture that relationship. But the first step is to contemplate that there might just be such a thing as the sport. Only then can you begin searching for a decent broadcast of it. But having found one, the individual must take care not to be led astray by rival broadcasts! Violent movies, pornographic music videos, and materialistic gameshows compete to lure your attention away from the true broadcast. The viewer must learn to be a discerning one with good taste...



The 'Holy Spirit' refers to an energy that underpins all of life.

8. THE ENEMY WITHIN

“Fighting on the battlefield is the lesser Jihad.

The battle within is the greater Jihad.”

- *Prophet Muhammad*

Every chapter so far has been setting the scene. My main reason for writing this book was to use sport as a metaphor for the contest that takes place inside every human mind! People often wonder why otherwise peaceful religions seem to be so pre-occupied with ‘war’. The reason is that war was originally a metaphor for the ‘battle’ that goes on within our own lives. It was the best way of describing the challenge our consciences faced as they sought to fend off irrational desires and reclaim the bodily kingdom.

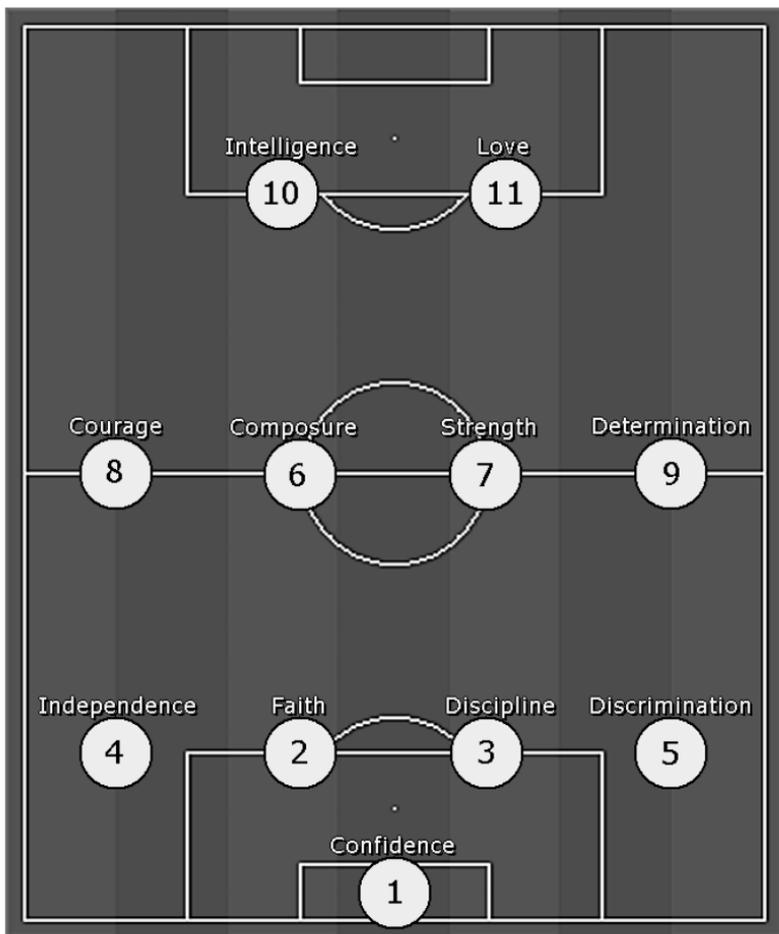
As the above quote reminds us, the Muslim concept of this is ‘Jihad’. The term has become erroneously linked with terrorism in recent years, but nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, Jihad is the act of fighting your INNER demons so as to never conduct yourself so badly! Upon returning from a real war, fought with a heavy heart, the Prophet Muhammad dismissed it as the ‘lesser Jihad’ and implored his comrades to take up the ‘greater Jihad’ of purifying their souls. Having to vanquish their enemies was something they had to come to terms with and deal with as graciously as possible. It wasn’t something to celebrate.

The *Qur’an* is like the ‘Geneva Convention’ a thousand years in advance. Although it acknowledges that war is necessary (or at least was at the time), it cautions that it shouldn’t be fuelled by hate, should never harm the innocent (including the environment), and should end at

the first possible opportunity. Terrorism fails on every single count and cannot accurately be described as ‘religious’ in motive. Very few real wars can.

The greatest example of warfare as a metaphor for self-improvement is the Indian scripture, *Mahabharata*, which chronicles a legendary battle between the virtuous ‘Pandavas’ and the wayward ‘Kurus’. They both seek to gain control of a territory known as ‘Kuruksheetra’ – which literally means “field of activity” and refers to the human body. Every soldier that does battle there represents a quality or emotion (such as ‘Calmness’ or ‘Anger’), which either fights for the cause of spiritual positivity or worldly negativity. Their fluctuating fortunes obviously reflect how a human life is panning out, as we will the armies of the soul to reclaim the kingdom instead of letting it be savaged by primitive desires.

In this day and age, a sporting analogy might be an even more effective method of communicating this wisdom. The consequences of misunderstanding it are certainly less fatal! It’s plain to see that the two opposing sides in a contest (or even two individuals) serve the same purpose as warring armies, as they seek to outdo each other and secure victory on the battlefield. In our case, the battlefield is a football pitch and the soldiers are two squads of players – strategically deployed by a manager. The pitch represents the human body (or mind) and each player represents a quality that will be hoping to secure victory for its chosen cause.



Positive Team, as managed by the pure soul.

Let us first introduce the ‘Positive’ team, as managed by the infinitely wise ‘Soul’. In goal we have **Confidence**, which is the starting point of any assault on the hordes of negativity. And yet it is also very vulnerable as the last line of defence, and the consequences of it being defeated are dire. Sitting in front of the goal to prevent that from happening are the defensive qualities of **Independence**, **Faith**, **Discipline**, and **Discrimination**.

Faith (in both the cause and one’s own abilities) enjoys a close working relationship with **Confidence** as it takes the team’s ambitions into the outside world – and also cements the goalkeeper’s resolve to keep a clean sheet. It stands strong against the relentless attacks of negativity and boosts the morale of the whole team as captain.

Discipline is the quality of self-control that sits in the danger zone alongside **Faith** and prevents the forces of negativity from registering a victory. It cannot be led astray by the devious tactics of the enemy, and remains steadfast to what the team requires – working hard until the final whistle. **Discipline** finds himself in a thankless role, and isn’t the most popular member of the team, but disaster would ensue if he wasn’t there.

Discrimination doesn’t refer to prejudice so much as the ability to separate the good from the bad. It works alongside **Discipline**, and demonstrates impeccable judgment when cutting out enemy moves. It can effortlessly relieve the enemy of possession without incurring a foul, and then seeks to move the ball upfield after identifying the best possible course of action.

On the other side of the defence, **Independence** frustrates his opponents by moving unpredictably in a free role. Encouraged by the

support of **Faith**, it breaks away from the main line of defence and pre-empt the incoming attacks. It places enormous value on its own judgment and cannot be tricked by the enemy. This also causes it to take plenty of risks, which pay off more often than not and create opportunities to turn the game around.

In midfield, the 'Positive' team has 4 additional qualities which hover halfway between attack and defence and can contribute to either endeavour. These are **Courage**, **Composure**, **Strength**, and **Determination**. **Composure** spreads a state of serene calmness throughout the team, refusing to be flustered by the attacks of the enemy or the score of the game. It can often be found dropping back into defence to prevent clumsy mistakes being made. It enjoys a good relationship with both **Faith** and **Confidence** as the ball is confidently worked up the pitch. In moments of attack, **Composure** excels in front of goal where it remains unfazed by the defence and never fails to make the most of an opportunity to score.

Strength works alongside **Composure** and muscles the enemy backwards as they seek to make progress down the field. It achieves whatever it sets out to do, and can often be found assisting the defence to seize possession back. Once it has the ball, **Strength** holds it for as long as necessary before releasing it to another player. When assisting the attack, it marches through the defence and puts itself in a position to score. Any shots it takes are extremely powerful and test the enemy goalkeeper.

Determination matches **Strength** in terms of enthusiasm, but is lighter on its feet and surges up and down the wing. Though it seldom gets to score itself, it is a very optimistic player that passes the ball well

and helps others to score. The determination to win also draws its attention back towards defence, where it is keen to prevent the enemy from making any progress – and doesn't stop until the ball has been retrieved. Even when all seems lost, **Determination** does everything it can to improve the score until the final whistle blows.

On the other side of midfield, **Courage** makes equally bold attempts to cut through the enemy. It feeds off the risks taken by **Independence** and continues to put the enemy under pressure. It also enjoys a good relationship with **Composure**, who will always be there to assist when ambitious moves come unstuck. **Courage** doesn't mind going it alone though, and will throw itself towards the enemy goal to score at any cost! It is just as happy to throw itself into defensive situations too, and will confront even the most formidable of opponents.

Up front, the attacking qualities of **Intelligence** and **Love** are waiting to score goals for the 'Positive' team. **Intelligence** doesn't refer to academic intelligence so much as clear thinking. It is the product of all the other qualities working in unison and can be trusted to make the most of any opportunities they create. It excels at outwitting the enemy defence and can pick out the perfect angle to score, exposing the weaknesses of negativity. It enjoys a good relationship with the manager and executes his tactics perfectly.

Love is also the pinnacle of the 'Positive' team's efforts. It isn't as methodical as **Intelligence**, but it has an instinct for goal and can often be found in the right place at the right time. The other members of the team always have an eye towards **Love** and never miss an opportunity to pass control to it. Even the forces of negativity find it hard to resist and struggle to suppress it once it has possession! **Love** is inevitably

the team's top scorer, and is cherished by the fans of positivity and the soul that deploys it.

In addition to the starting 11, the 'Positive' team also have 5 substitutes on the bench – which can replace qualities that aren't working and give rise to new possibilities. These are **Hope**, **Compassion**, **Loyalty**, **Generosity**, and **Intuition**.

Hope is the replacement goalkeeper, which is called upon when **Confidence** is shattered. It literally gives 'new hope' to the team and assures them that all is not lost! **Compassion** puts things in perspective as the game progresses and reminds the team of the consequences of losing. It also prevents the team from taking pleasure in the destruction of the enemy and leaves the door open to reconciliation. **Loyalty** is especially proud to be playing for the cause of positivity and can never be pulled out of position by negativity. It can always be trusted to do what's right for the team. **Generosity** is an extremely popular member of the team who puts others first and makes perfect passes when they are needed most. Finally, **Intuition** is the spark of genius that has an instinct for creating opportunities out of nowhere and can score the most spectacular goals. He is the ultimate impact sub that can turn a game around.



Negative Team, as managed by irrational instinct.

Lining up to thwart the forces of positivity are the players of the ‘Negative’ team, managed by irrational ‘Instinct’. They reject the agenda of the soul and seek to secure victory for a worldly life, driven by self-destructive desires. Their goalkeeper is **Arrogance**, which you’ll notice is the negative equivalent of **Confidence**! The ego is always the last thing to be overcome, and the consequences of it happening are significant. Here, **Arrogance** fuels the folly of the ‘Negative’ team and it must be humbled if the forces of positivity are to make an impact.

Rallying around this source of false confidence are the defensive qualities of **Jealousy**, **Attachment**, **Habit**, and **Selfishness**. **Attachment** is the heart of the negative agenda and refers to an unhealthy addiction to worldly things. It clings to pleasure at any cost, and fights bitterly to prevent the advances of positivity from making it go without. It is especially riled by **Independence**, which flaunts the benefits of being in control.

Attachment is joined in defence by **Habit**, which captains the ‘Negative’ team and marshals them into a routine. It stealthily ensures that negative tactics will take root and become increasingly hard to thwart. It convinces the bodily kingdom that negative actions are inevitable and cannot be defeated. But defeat it the ‘Positive’ team must if they are to pave the way for GOOD habits! **Habit** is shaken by the advances of **Intelligence** and **Strength**.

Habit is flanked by **Selfishness** on the wing, which ensures the irrational desires of the ‘Negative’ team are satisfied at the expense of others. It is particularly effective at seizing possession from the advancing qualities of positivity, and then refuses to give up possession

as it runs as far as it can into the opposing half. The shortcomings of **Selfishness** are often exposed by **Love**, but **Selfishness** has the unique ability to tie **Love** up in knots and turn it into ‘self love’!

Jealousy lingers on the opposite wing, where it supports the agenda of **Attachment**. It cannot bear to see its opponents in possession and will do everything in its power to reclaim the ball – even if it means breaking the rules. **Jealousy** gets intimidated by **Composure**, which refuses to rise to the bait.

The ‘Negative’ team’s midfield consists of **Lust**, **Fear**, **Ignorance**, and **Greed**. **Lust** feeds off the advances of **Jealousy** and **Attachment**, as it joins the attack and strikes a blow against common sense. It is particularly light on its feet as it races down the wing once in possession, which means it can be hard to suppress. But it struggles to get the ball past the defensive qualities of **Faith** and **Discipline**, which remind the bodily kingdom that there’s more to life than gratification.

Fear lies at the heart of the midfield and can often be found retreating into defence, where it supports the insecure qualities of **Jealousy** and **Attachment**. It is petrified of the consequences of losing and will do whatever is required to ensure that **Arrogance** does not concede. But it also has the ability to strike ‘fear’ into the hearts of its enemies, and will assist the attack to crush positivity. **Fear** is especially good at scoring goals out of nowhere from long range, but **Faith** can usually counter these pot-shots.

Assisting **Fear** at the centre of midfield is **Ignorance**, which encourages the team to despise the opposition. It fights particularly hard against positivity and usually finds a way through the defence. It holds up the ball with confidence and convinces the team that they’re

better than they are. It enjoys a good relationship with **Arrogance**, who can pick **Ignorance** out with long passes and put the ‘Negative’ team on the attack all of a sudden.

Greed stalks the remaining wing, and is often encouraged to get involved by **Ignorance**. It is also fed by **Selfishness** in defence, who makes it a priority to give the ball to **Greed**. Like **Lust**, it gets carried away once it has possession and races towards goal to create opportunities to score. It doesn’t back off regardless of how many goals have been scored and always wants one more! But it can be stopped in its tracks by **Discrimination**, which is wise enough to seize on any mistakes it makes. **Discipline** also stands strong against **Greed** and can’t be fooled by its tactics.

Up front, the ‘Negative’ team rely on **Anger** and **Hate** to put the ball in the back of the net. **Hate** often receives calculated passes from **Ignorance**, and strikes with such venom that **Confidence** is often defeated. It asserts itself in the penalty box and needs to be marked by multiple defenders – which often pulls **Faith** out of position. **Strength** and **Composure** are often called back to deal with **Hate**.

Anger feeds off **Fear**, and is the recipient of the work that **Jealousy** and **Attachment** do. It is also good at getting on the end of advances made by **Lust** and **Greed**. Once they see an opening to pass control to **Anger**, it fires off a ferocious shot that invariably goes in if on target. **Anger** lacks the precision of **Intelligence** though, which means it often amounts to nothing.

Sitting on the bench for the ‘Negative’ team are the 5 substitutes of **Pride**, **Distaste**, **Disease**, **Deception**, and **Cynicism**. **Pride** is the replacement goalkeeper, which steps in when **Arrogance** isn’t working.

It continues to spread false confidence throughout the team and assures them that the cause is worth fighting for.

Distaste is a reliable defender that brings the advances of positivity to an abrupt halt and returns control to negativity. Like a child spitting out vegetables, it convinces the bodily kingdom that pleasure must come before virtue and good health. Similarly, **Disease** seeks to immobilize the body so that it can no longer indulge in positive activities and must give in to negativity. It is a particularly violent player that seeks to deliberately injure the opposition. **Deception** is an extraordinarily skilful player that knows every trick in the book. Once it has possession, it is almost impossible to tackle and pulls a lot of rival players out of position.

Finally, **Cynicism** is an alternative attacker that can be relied upon to snatch a goal for negativity. Just when positivity seems to be making progress, **Cynicism** can even the scores at the last minute. It is a more intelligent attacker than either **Anger** or **Hate** and takes shots at **Confidence** with pinpoint precision. It's one of the few negative qualities that isn't intimidated by **Faith**, whom it rather enjoys competing against!

I can't leave this particular analogy without mentioning the Jewish tradition 'Kabbalah', which uses a similar system to convey the 'Tree Of Life'. That also breaks the human experience down into a network of 11 qualities, which are arranged in a 3-3-3-1 formation. In this view, God stands in goal as the **Source** of all that will follow (it is more commonly known to Jews as *Keter* – the 'Crown'). We then have a trio of mental qualities that begin to shape the human mind. **Intuition** (*Chochmah*) is the instinctive ability to know what is right, which is represented by the wisdom of King Solomon from the *Old Testament*. Its opposite number is **Understanding** (*Binah*), which is a more logical way to deduce information. It is represented by Leah – the calculating first wife of Jacob, who mothered most of his many children (the 12 tribes of Israel). The product of these mental faculties, working from the **Source**, is **Knowledge** (*Da'at*) itself – which sits in the middle of our defence.

We then have a trio of emotional qualities occupying the midfield. **Generosity** (*Chesed*) is the loving desire to reach out and expand, which is represented by the nomadic patriarch Abraham. Its opposite number is **Discipline** (*Gevurah*), which reins in these ambitions sensibly – as represented by Abraham's successor, Isaac. The product of this push and pull is then **Harmony** (*Tiferet*), which sits between the two emotional impulses. It is represented by Isaac's favoured son, Jacob – thus completing the trinity of Judaism's founding fathers.

As the human experience begins to take shape, we start to see some physical qualities further down the field. **Will** (*Netzach*) is the enthusiasm to get things done, which is the starting point of any human endeavour and is represented by Moses (who was compelled to lead his

people out of slavery in Egypt). Its opposite number is **Determination** (*Hod*), which sees an idea through once it has been initiated by **Will**. This is represented by Moses' supportive brother, Aaron. The product of these active impulses is then **Creation** (*Yesod*), which refers to a joint effort coming to fruition. It sometimes has sexual connotations, but relationships of all kinds fall into this category – such as the empathy shown to a friend or the guidance offered to a child. It is represented by Jacob's favoured son, Joseph (he of “Techni-coloured Dreamcoat” fame!) – who developed good relationships with the people of Egypt and safeguarded the future of his Jewish brethren.

The end product of all this intellectual and emotional posturing is best described as **Expression** (*Malchut*). This lone striker is the recipient of the ball that started rolling from the **Source**, and the success he achieves by scoring is what the team was put together for. This is represented by King David's triumphant reign in the *Old Testament*. The fact that these characters are symbolic of something deeper needn't compromise their historical significance. However, it is food for thought for those that dismiss religious figures as 'fictitious'. There's always more to religion than meets the eye...



The 'Tree Of Life' as understood by Kabbalists.

9. END TO END STUFF

“The life which is unexamined is not worth living.”

- *Plato*

It's no coincidence that the emotional qualities we've just identified are ones that ALL players have. No one person truly embodies 'Anger' or 'Courage' at the expense of all other attributes. The match we just described is symbolic of what goes through the mind of our real 'player' from earlier chapters. And those emotions, in turn, each have a battle of their own playing out within them like a microcosm! 'Anger' itself has several components raging within it that decide whether it is being expressed or not. And on and on it goes, as we peel back the layers like the sub-atomic particles that make up our own bodies.

Focusing on the contest that takes place within the human mind, it's important to establish what the analogy actually means to our lives. The ball at their feet is 'consciousness' – a thought that rattles around the nervous system and becomes dominated by a particular impulse. When 'Anger' is in possession, we 'feel' angry. If 'Composure' manages to reclaim possession, we 'feel' calm. This is also true of real contests, whereby a sense of dread or optimism grips the onlooker when he sees a certain player surging forward with the ball!

Those feelings are secondary to the confirmation that comes when a goal is scored though. In real life, a goal turns anticipation into celebration or foreboding into misery. As far as our analogy is concerned, an emotion that scores (or so much as assists a goal) has put

itself at the forefront of the human experience. As surely as the TV cameras zoom in on the scoring player, our mind's eye gives credence to an emotion that has hit the back of the net. The feeling of 'Anger' becomes an EXPRESSION of 'Anger'. It manifests in real terms and is permitted to do as it pleases, as surely as the scoring player strays outside of the confines of the pitch and rejoices with his supporters. The chance to suppress it has gone. But by the same token, a feeling of 'Love' can turn into an expression of 'Love' if it scores at the other end – resulting in a compassionate act that shows the human mind at its best. Back and forth it goes until one side has been expressed considerably more than the other. A convincing victory for either positivity or negativity will influence the individual's behaviour for the foreseeable future.

We cannot overlook the role of the referee in this outcome. As far as our analogy is concerned, the referee represents our 'reason' – a faculty that each side is trying to win the approval of! Contrary to what atheists claim, reason is neither good nor bad and is open to persuasion. We can 'reason' that a positive course of action is correct, or we can just as easily 'reason' that it isn't worthwhile and a little negativity will do no harm. Those with vices, such as drug addicts and alcoholics, do this on a daily basis. They convince themselves that it's the best way they could possibly spend their time and money. Similarly, some people 'reason' that there's no God whereas others 'reason' that there is. Reason is a vehicle that we use to arrive at a chosen destination – not a lofty perch from which we see the truth.

As far as our referee is concerned, most goals cannot be disputed – but the players can still influence the decisions that lead to scoring

opportunities. The most insidious example of this is ‘diving’, where the player feigns injury so as to win a lucrative free-kick or penalty! This is symbolic of the way reason can be deceived by a negative agenda. On a more subtle level, the players can often be found protesting their innocence, challenging decisions, or campaigning for a rival to be sent off. When something untoward happens, they throw their arms up in the air and beg the support of the referee. The fallible judge then rules one way or the other, slowly chipping away at the prospects of either side. A good example of this is the ‘offside’ rule – where a player is deemed to be out of position (either through negligence or strategy) and can no longer serve his purpose properly. Both teams calculate their movements to stay within the confines of reason.

I suppose lucrative penalty kicks are symbolic of the conclusions that reason comes to. Upon being convinced that an advancing side has been unfairly compromised by the other, the referee points to the penalty spot and practically guarantees an easy goal. This is symbolic of reason being sold on an idea – for better or worse. It is possible for the penalty taker to miss – as surely as it is possible for the conclusions of reason to be wrong – but this is unlikely to be the case. Instead of scoring a goal legitimately, the individual has jumped to a conclusion that may or may not be justified. As in real life, a battle lost in this manner leaves a very bitter taste in the mouth!

The most powerful weapon at the referee’s disposal is the ability to administer either a yellow or red card and have players sent off. This is symbolic of the way that qualities from either side can be disapproved of by reason. A yellow card indicates that they are on thin ice and must not push their luck, whereas a red card means they are eliminated from

the contest altogether and are rendered useless. Again, this is neither exclusively positive nor exclusively negative. Sound reasoning may remove genuinely negative influences, but bad judgment can also see positive qualities rejected unfairly! In Hinduism, this is known as 'vikarna' – a distaste for that which is good for you. It's rather like a petulant child spitting out vegetables. A more pertinent example is when sinful adults reject the morality of religion, etc.

You may think this is an elaborate way of perceiving inner battles that will be won and lost whether we like it or not. The point of this metaphor is that paying attention is the first step towards affecting the outcome! As silly as it sounds, the next time you feel 'Anger' or 'Greed' imagine they are mere players advancing with the ball and will them to be tackled by the staunch defence of 'Discrimination' and 'Discipline'. Then have them feed the ball to 'Strength' or 'Intelligence', as those qualities loom over the opposing goal and strike a blow for positivity. In one simple sequence of thought, you can quite literally turn a negative into a positive! This is perhaps what Jesus meant when he cryptically remarked, "To him that hath shall more be added. To him that hath not shall even that which he hath be taken away." A man that clocks up positive thoughts 'adds' to his life, whereas negative thoughts 'take away' from his tally and result in a loss.

This is the kind of clarity that 'meditation' helps us to achieve. The simple act of being still and silent gives the mind nothing to ponder but itself. It's appropriate that the practice originates in India, where the *Mahabharata* speaks of a war between good and evil taking place on the battlefield of the human body. This 'war' is what the individual is

checking in on when he takes time to meditate. The famed *Bhagavad Gita* part of the story even begins with the ‘blind’ king, Dhritarashtra, asking his insightful aide, Sanjaya, to describe how the battle is unfolding. This is symbolic of the introspection that meditation requires of us.

The first step to removing negative character traits is to identify them in the first place. In one of the most shamefully misunderstood verses in the *New Testament*, Jesus actually advises us to do as much. *Luke 11:34* in the time-honoured *King James* version reads, “The eye is the lamp of the body. If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.” Modern translations have recklessly assumed that the line refers to one’s vision being ‘healthy’, but LIGHT is actually the key term here. What Jesus is saying is that the two physical eyes are like spotlights that shine out into the world and give the brain something to think about. If one CLOSES the eyes and turns those spotlights inward to form ONE light (“thine eye be single”), we can then explore our psychological make-up and weigh up the balance of positive character traits versus negative ones. And the beauty of the saying is that with the very same ‘light’ we can incinerate any negative tendencies that are exposed – thus allowing positive qualities to prevail (“thy whole body shall be full of light”).

This is also the subtext of one of the more infamous episodes of Jesus’ story, where he chases the merchants out of the temple. It’s significant that he goes on to liken the ‘temple’ to the human body. The implication is that he’s chasing negative qualities (specifically materialism) out of the human experience! He declares, “This is my Father’s house (this is where positivity is supposed to reign), but you

have turned it into a den of thieves (you have allowed negative tendencies to prevail).” The dramatic events of his life were designed to mirror the transformation that people were being asked to go through. His life was quite literally his message.

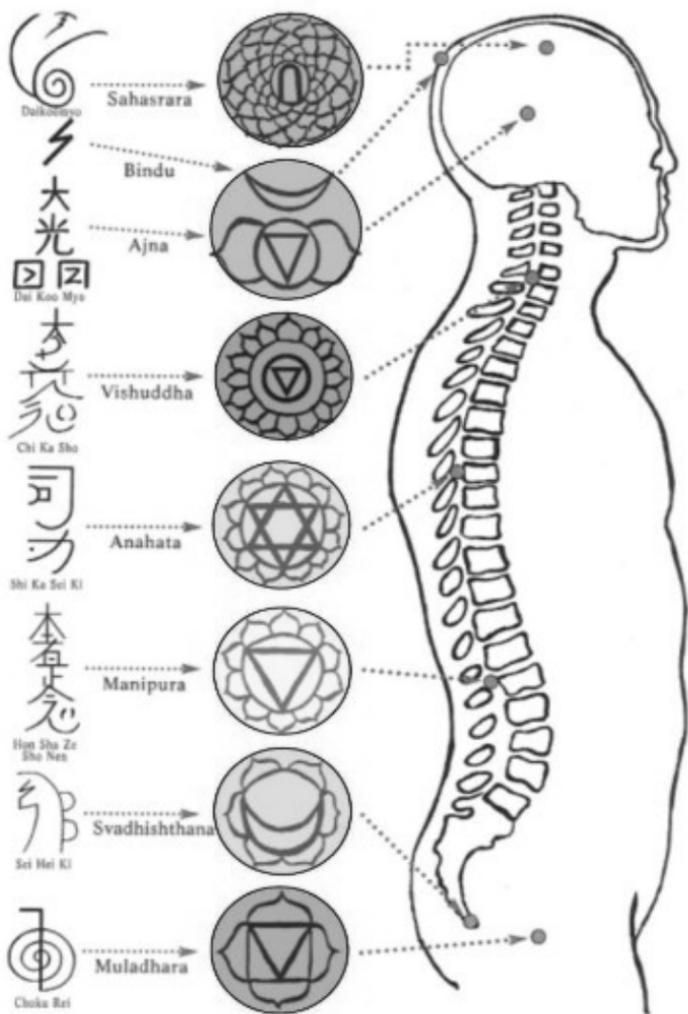
In addition to symbolizing the emotions rattling around the human brain, our sporting analogy also helps us grasp another important aspect of meditation. Indian philosophy posits that there are 7 hubs of energy (known as ‘chakras’) running from the base of the spinal cord to the top of the brain. A spiritual energy (known as ‘prana’) is thought to travel up and down this route – like a train on a track, stopping off at various stations. It lies neglected in the average person, lingering on the bottom rung and limiting the individual to the unenlightened life of an animal. But those that stimulate it with introspection and virtuous living are thought to enrich their lives with better health and clearer thinking. This was perhaps the significance of Jesus turning “water into wine” – a substance flows into a pot and is transformed into something fruitful! It’s no coincidence that there were 6 such pots.

Our hypothetical ball-game is a perfect example of this process. The ball represents energy and starts in the hands of the goalkeeper, where it is of no avail and scoring seems a long way off. It is then gradually worked up the pitch in several key stages, before hitting the back of the net and resulting in a ‘goal’. For spiritual practitioners, this is a state of blissful enlightenment that grips the brain when divine energy is located there.

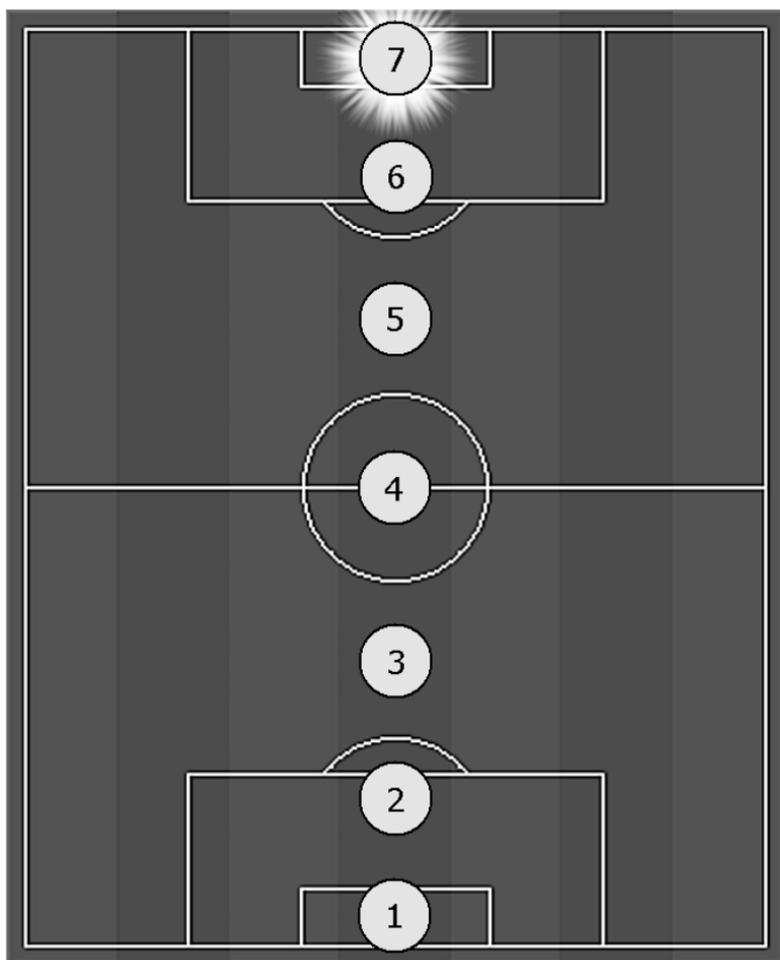
The process becomes increasingly difficult as the ball is worked further and further up the pitch. It’s easy to pass the ball around the lower stages in defence, but formidable challengers await in the

opposing half! This represents how the spiritual life becomes increasingly difficult as the individual progresses. The barrage of worldly temptations becomes more frequent and more persistent, resorting to evermore devious tactics to reclaim possession. The individual's efforts must improve accordingly, as strength and discipline force the ball into a goal-scoring position. This is the significance of the 'penalty spots' on our hypothetical playing field. As in real life, the one closest to the opposing goal represents the best possible opportunity to score. Whereas the one closest to your own goal represents the highest risk of conceding and having one's efforts amount to nothing.

Metaphorically, this contest is taking place in our lives on a daily basis and paying attention to it is the first step towards affecting the outcome...



The 7 'chakras' that are thought to occupy the spinal cord.



The way the 7 'chakras' correspond to a football pitch.

10. YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE

“A man must trust his team-mates always.

Without them we are lost.”

- *Eric Cantona*

The idea of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts is key to spiritual thinking, and we should explore it now in greater detail. Quantum physics has revealed that it's scientifically true that everything in the universe is really made up of ONE thing – energy. Our bodies (along with everything else in the physical world) are made up of atoms, which are in turn comprised of sub-atomic particles like protons, neutrons, and electrons. And on and on it goes until we're left with nothing but an intangible 'energy' that gives rise to all of the above depending on how it is arranged. This is the profound truth that *Hebrews 11:3* hints at when it proclaims, “The things which are seen are made of things which cannot be seen.”

Like models made out of clay, we appear different and separate but we are all products of the same substance. Even the perceived 'spaces' in between us are occupied by energy of some description! The whole universe is one ocean that we are ripples in.

This simple premise lends weight to what religions have been hinting at for thousands of years. The sentiment that “we're all one” sounds like a cliché until we consider that it's literally true! As surely as billions of atoms conspire to make a body, billions of bodies conspire to make a world, and billions of worlds conspire to make a universe. Whether you realize it or not, we are all individual stitches that are weaving a rich tapestry. Or as Judaism puts it, we are all letters

in a holy book that is being written. If nothing else, we can conceive of God as being the sum total of these elements – a masterpiece being painted by our individual actions.

Far from rendering us ‘insignificant’, this world view actually enriches the human experience. As small as our contributions may be, they are essential to the bigger picture. One stray stroke of paint can ruin a work of art, one bum note can ruin a symphony, and one word out of place can ruin a message. That’s why it’s imperative to synchronize with the artist and play our parts well. Being advised to “love thy neighbour as thyself” sounds counterintuitive until you realize that your neighbour IS yourself! Then it not only makes sense but becomes essential. If you dishonour yourself or those in your vicinity then you create a blemish in the very masterpiece you’re a part of – as surely as a few inconspicuous molecules can spread disease throughout the body.

We see this sentiment in the movie *It’s A Wonderful Life* – where a man deems his life to be of no consequence, only to find that chaos ensues in the wake of his hypothetical suicide. Unbeknownst to him, his humble existence was secretly underpinning the lives of everyone else in his community. When we see chaos in the world today, we often wonder what purpose religion is supposed to serve if it has not managed to deliver peace at any point in the last few thousand years. This is to miss the point, because religion was never meant to magically transform every human being on the planet. It only ever promised to change the lives of those that embraced it whole-heartedly (of whom there are very few).

The Hindu *Bhagavad Gita* cautions that only “one in a thousand” people even take up this task – and of those only a further “one in a thousand” actually succeed. Likewise, Jesus observed that “the road is narrow” and “very few people walk it”. He also went on to concede that he “didn’t come to bring peace.” The reason being that it’s a contradiction in terms to ‘force’ people to be moral, and that they were therefore just as likely to reject his message as accept it. It was his intention to give people the tools to change themselves. What we do with that information is a matter of personal choice. We also see this in the *Qur’an*, where Allah assures the Prophet Muhammad that he is not there to “sort out the affairs of men.”

As Margaret Thatcher famously declared, “There’s no such thing as society.” A civilization is a product of responsible individuals – they either play their part or they don’t. The implications for our analogy are plain to see. We’ve already seen how the individual player is a product of many competing emotions, and it’s also true that a team is the product of several such players. There are many subtle factors that influence how the team ends up performing – rather like the inconspicuous movements of a butterfly affect the weather elsewhere in the world! If so much as one cylinder is misfiring then it can have repercussions that are felt throughout the whole machine. That’s why religions seem so pedantic in their pursuit of perfection. What one eats or wears may seem irrelevant, but it’s all part of a lifestyle that cultivates virtue and eliminates vice. Little decisions can have far-reaching consequences – for better or worse.

Our metaphorical pitch is a good example of this attention to detail. We established that the ball rattling around the field represents

‘consciousness’ being harnessed by competing emotions. As surely as we are able to identify the ball anywhere on the pitch, our nervous system is capable of drawing attention to any part of our body. From head to toe, inside and out, we are acutely aware of everything that is happening to us at any given time. This helps us to understand why believers ascribe that omniscient quality to God. Jesus and Muhammad assured us that a mere leaf does not fall to the ground without God’s knowledge, and that he is even able to “count the hairs on your head”. We find this hard to believe when we assume that God is some sort of entity watching from a distance. A nice sentiment and nothing more. But here we see how it could literally be true! If everything in the universe is one thing and we are all part of one body, then every minute detail of that body can be felt as surely as in our own. You feel the elements that are a part of you – just like a pitch bears the stud marks of every player that tramples on it.

Sport is also a fine example of the ‘brotherly love’ that this philosophy entails. The members of a team need no encouragement to feel they are part of something bigger. The faces of the entire squad light up with vicarious joy whenever one of their number scores, and they run to embrace their triumphant comrade. Even going so far as to plant a kiss on them, which wouldn’t have been so welcome in any other circumstance! Indeed, it’s hard to imagine any other profession where success is celebrated with such enthusiasm. In all my years of making computer games and writing books, I was never hugged or kissed by the publishers for delivering a good piece of work!

We even see a certain amount of respect for the opposition in sport. Though they may be pitted against each other, one side rarely ‘hates’

the other. Adversity is merely an illusion that the sportsman buys into for a short time. This is especially true of professional wrestling, where the supposed enmity between two fighters is entirely fictitious (in theory!). Regardless of what happens during a contest, each side can often be found hugging and shaking hands with the other by the end – even in boxing where the conflict is particularly intense. Perhaps especially so in that case, because each fighter respects what the other has been put through. Both are glad to have survived a gruelling ordeal.

This is once again a very spiritual idea. In addition to “loving your neighbour”, one of the most famous Christian doctrines is loving your ENEMIES. This is what Christ embodied so well, and yet it’s what most of us find so hard to understand – let alone emulate. Even when suffering the most horrific death possible, he famously declared “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” That pretty much sums up the philosophy. A love for one’s enemies is an acknowledgement that they are spiritually inferior to you. Jesus didn’t hate humans any more than you ‘hate’ a kitten that scratches you or a baby that spills something on you. It’s almost a case of ‘pity’ your enemies rather than love! The spiritual master perceives lesser men to be in such a wretched state that he can’t possibly hold it against them.

It’s rather like the unrequited hatred that Scottish fans have for the English team. The inferior side heap scorn on their superior neighbours, but all the while English fans wish Scotland well. I certainly find myself supporting their national team wherever possible, along with all the other British teams. A secure individual is generous with his affections. It’s only insecurity that prevents a man from being so magnanimous. Indeed, all irrational hatred is born of fear. As Master

Yoda sagely observed in *Star Wars*, “Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.” Spiritual masters don’t dignify any negative emotion lest it lead to others.

Sport also teaches us that loving your enemies is a question of side-stepping an illusion. Even the most dedicated athlete concedes that his sport is less important than life itself. So too does a spiritual man behold this life to be a sort of ‘game’ of limited importance. That’s perhaps why Christ was able to sacrifice his mortal life so brazenly, and to forgive those that wronged him during it. Like a movie unfolding, none of it was particularly real to him. It was all an illusion that he had risen above. He was looking at the bigger picture and was able to genuinely ‘love’ the characters that were helping him paint it...



Both religion and sport encourage us to think beyond ourselves.





Even opposing fighters teach us to “love our enemies”.

11. FAIR TRADE

“A chain is no stronger than its weakest link.”

- *William James*

It's the manager's job to put together such a close-knit band of brothers. In our analogy, the 'Positive' team was managed by the wise 'Soul' whereas the 'Negative' team was managed by irrational 'Instinct'. In addition to fielding the right players in the right formation on match day, the manager spends the intervening weeks making changes to the roster itself. You'll notice that most of the hypothetical players are two different sides of the same coin. This is because one basic emotion can have a positive or negative spin depending on who it is recruited by.

We saw how the ego was a good example of this. There's nothing wrong with the ego in and of itself. It's essential for our sense of self and allows us to function as an individual. However, under the influence of negativity harmless 'Confidence' becomes venomous 'Arrogance'. Likewise, it's possible for 'Habit' to refer to either good habits or bad habits. One might reinforce positive actions whereas the other allows negative tendencies to take root. The managers are constantly battling behind the scenes to recruit players for their cause. If 'Intelligence' was to sign up for the 'Negative' team, it would become 'Foolishness' and would proceed to score goals AGAINST positivity – enslaved by the logic of instinct. Whereas if 'Ignorance' was lured away from negativity it would become 'Enlightenment' and would respond to the sound tactics of the soul.

This idea is reminiscent of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* once again, where several of the older warriors have allegiances to both sides. A good example is Sage Drona, who taught both armies how to use weapons. This represents ‘Habit’, which is what both armies draw upon to further their own agenda – albeit in different ways. Likewise, Grandsire Bishma represents the ‘Ego’ and is constantly swayed from one side to the other – symbolizing how its effect can either be positive or negative.

This throws up an interesting dilemma where one of the positive warriors (the hero of the piece, ‘Arjuna’) is reluctant to wage war against his former allies and family members. We often see this in sport, when a player switches sides and refuses to celebrate scoring against his old team-mates. As in the Indian philosophy, this has profound significance. It is symbolic of the fact that a man is often reluctant to abandon his old way of life – no matter how wretched it may have been. He looks upon the negative qualities of ‘Lust’ and ‘Greed’ and fondly recalls how much pleasure they gave him. “They weren’t always bad,” he protests! The brutal truth is that they were. They promised happiness but only ever delivered more misery in the long-run. They were never truly on his side and he must dispose of them like any other opponent.

This does not mean that the spiritual individual never again experiences such pleasures and must live a life of self-denial. On the contrary, it means he develops a good relationship with the senses and finds himself enjoying them even more than before! Instead of wolfing down endless amounts of trashy foods, the healthy individual finds himself savouring every bite of fine foods. Instead of being used and abused by an endless string of promiscuous lovers, the romantic

individual finds himself falling deeply in love with one soul mate. He learns to discriminate and finds himself fishing out nuggets of gold instead of being deceived by every stone that comes his way.

It's like a garden full of weeds. Even though they're ugly and destructive, the gardener reasons that it's preferable to a desolate plain. But if he were to root the weeds out, the dishevelled soil would only be temporary. Soon enough, beautiful flowers would emerge from it and he would wonder why he didn't take action sooner! Likewise, when a worldly man comes face to face with spiritual principles he panics and imagines life is about to become significantly worse. In fact, he may not even believe it's 'possible' to live a virtuous life. The spiritual master sees it the other way around. He considers it impossible to live a life dictated by irrational desires that promise much and deliver little. Indeed, a life you have no control over ceases to be a 'life' at all.

We often associate freedom with "doing what we want." But that's not 'freedom' at all because you're enslaved by "what you want" – which might very well be irrational or misguided! As we shall see, true freedom is 'wanting' nothing...



**A spiritual man is often thought to be “missing out”,
but he’s actually sewing the seeds for a future harvest.**

12. THE MEASURE OF A MAN

“If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those
two impostors just the same... you’ll be a man, my son!”

- Rudyard Kipling

As I write this, Manchester United have just succumbed to Barcelona in the *Champions League* final. The faces that were jubilant at having won the league just last week are now contorted with anger and resentment, such are the fickle emotions of sportsmen. So far we’ve taken courage from what sport has to teach us, but this is one instance where it shows us how NOT to behave!

At the close of the previous chapter, we touched on how a man must come to terms with his desires to make true progress. They must be guided by enlightened thinking rather than irrational instinct. This is because ‘desire’ is the root cause of ALL human misery (as exemplified by Buddhist philosophy). Cast your mind back to the last time you were angry or upset and you can bet a ‘desire’ of some description went unfulfilled – even if it was the perfectly natural desire to avoid death or harm. Even when our desires seem valid and are bringing us happiness, we’re only increasing the chances of unhappiness visiting us when those sources are taken away.

This is not to say that a man should become a robot that feels nothing. All that’s called for is a sense of perspective. A friend of mine once became deeply upset when I removed the cellophane wrapper from a DVD he had bought for us to watch. Although I apologized for being presumptuous, I warned him that he had brought the situation on himself by attaching importance to something so insignificant. Millions

of things fall into the category of a cellophane wrapper being removed. If your pain threshold is that low then there are literally MILLIONS of things that can happen each day that will make you unhappy! Attachments and requirements are like nerve-endings that we deliberately plant into the world. It should come as no surprise that we experience constant pain when they are trampled on. A man should aim to REDUCE the number of these nerve-endings (or at least deploy them more wisely) – not increase them with irrational desires.

This is why Jesus said, “Give no thought to what you will wear or what you will eat.” He wasn’t advising us to live the lives of vagrants, starving as we stagger around naked. He was simply pointing out that it shouldn’t be such a big deal. We should be able to take things or leave them. We should own our possessions – not be owned BY them! That is true freedom.

This way of thinking will become more important than ever as we head into a 21st century fraught with self-inflicted problems. As resources dwindle and populations expand, it will become increasingly hard to live a luxurious, molly-coddled existence. We’re already getting a taste of it as the worldwide economic crisis bites. Far from being an admirable lifestyle choice, it is becoming essential to live modestly. As the saying goes, “We must live simply so that others may simply live.”

As with turning their backs on a dysfunctional way of life, people often bristle at the thought of living a life of detachment. I once told a woman that I “don’t need anyone or anything.” She found it remarkable and denounced me as some sort of savage who didn’t HAVE anyone or anything! In fact, the opposite is true. There’s a difference between not ‘needing’ something and not ‘having’ something. I don’t ‘need’ to eat a

pizza for dinner, but that doesn't mean I won't 'have' one. On the contrary, it means I will CHOOSE to have one – and my choice will be more considered than an insatiable 'need'. When we free ourselves from need, we start to operate from a place of choice and do things because we genuinely want to. You inherently have everything you want – because you 'want' nothing! As King David's much loved 23rd *Psalm* intones, "The Lord is my shepherd, I SHALL NOT WANT."

I've always maintained that the most romantic thing you can say to somebody is that you DON'T need them. As offensive as it sounds, it's a nice sentiment because it means you're with them because you CHOOSE to be – not because you're compelled by some sort of ulterior motive. Of sound mind and body, you gravitate towards that person for sincere reasons. The relationship becomes an empty vessel into which you pour the fullness of who you already are – not a pool from which you take what you're lacking.

It's like a mother's relationship with her baby. The baby is no longer 'attached' to the mother by an umbilical cord, but that doesn't mean it doesn't 'have' a mother. On the contrary, being separate entities means that they come together of their own volition – choosing to without being forced. That is true love. Nothing good ever comes of coercion.

This brings us to our hypothetical sportsmen. In the heat of battle, we often see their faces contorted with rage. In every single case we can trace their apparent unhappiness back to an unhealthy attachment to something. It's invariably the desire to win, but within that bracket we also have the desire to score, to have decisions go their way, to avoid injury or embarrassment, etc. They are sometimes reduced to the level

of animals in pursuit of these goals – braying and lashing out at competitors as they chase the prize; their eyes dancing with adrenaline.

Sport can reduce otherwise friendly people to pushing and shoving and foul-mouthed taunts. Even ‘soccer moms’ on the sidelines can’t control themselves nowadays! I’ll never forget seeing England’s Wayne Rooney cross swords with Portugal’s Cristiano Ronaldo in a 2006 *World Cup* tie, after Ronaldo conspired to get Rooney sent off. “They’ll never work together at Manchester United again,” we all reasoned! A couple of weeks later they were the best of friends again at their home club. The explosive events of one match were of no consequence by the time the next one rolled around. What once seemed worth coming to blows over was no longer quite so important after all. They probably even look back on it and laugh.

This inconsistency proves that the emotion at the time isn’t entirely valid. The insatiable desire to succeed is quite irrational and needs to be reined in on some level. Obviously not to the extent that the individual doesn’t care whether he wins or loses, but he must at least maintain his dignity. When England failed to qualify for the 2008 *European Championships* after a miserable loss to Croatia, most of the players were cursing their luck like spoiled children. But the seasoned veteran David Beckham could be found circling the sidelines, applauding the fans in attendance and imploring all concerned to stand tall. Those are the virtues we’re talking about here – the desire to win coupled with the strength to handle defeat.

In Hindu philosophy, it explicitly states that “one must not be attached to RESULTS.” This is especially relevant to a sporting metaphor, because ‘results’ are exactly what each team or player is

chasing. To be ‘detached’ from results is not the same as not GETTING results. On the contrary, it might end up helping! When I first started making computer games for a living, I didn’t care who played them or not. I simply did it for the fun of it. Towards the end, all I ever worried about was how many people were playing my games and what they thought of them. It drove me to distraction, and ceased to be anything but ‘fun’. I can honestly say that I was happier in the first instance – and somewhat more successful too! The process of making games had barely changed at all, but my attitude towards it had. Our perception as to whether or not something is worthwhile is directly linked to what we expect to get out of it. You can’t ‘fail’ to play a sport – you can only fail to WIN! It’s literally impossible to lose once you have things in perspective. And the irony is that true success is likely to come out of that attitude anyway. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all else will be added unto you.”

I once took to playing football every Sunday afternoon to get some fresh air and have some fun. But I always marvelled at how seriously some of the others took it. Even though it wasn’t remotely competitive, the people I knew less well would snarl at my mistakes (of which there were plenty!) as if it made me a bad person. They were the kind of judgments you wouldn’t dare make in any other walk of life. I had to remind one particularly petulant specimen that I might have been crap at football but I wasn’t crap at boxing! As he would have found out to his detriment if he insisted on pursuing his irrational impulses. He was quite prepared to be knocked out by a man twice his size in order to express disappointment at a goal being conceded.

We also see this in ‘road rage’ incidents, where people are willing to kill themselves and others in order to get somewhere a few minutes faster – and will wage war on anyone perceived to get in their way. Once again, it’s a matter of desires going unfulfilled – and the response is as irrational as the desire itself! In the heat of the moment, people find themselves acting in ways they would never dream of usually. If you shoved someone in the back because they were walking too slowly in front of you, I suspect the consequences would be more keenly felt! After taking an unscheduled detour in an ambulance, I doubt you’d get to your destination any quicker.

That’s the point I’m trying to make here. Players that are so easily ruffled and quick to anger don’t do themselves any favours. Yes, it’s disappointing when a move doesn’t pan out or a goal is conceded – but tantrums aren’t the answer. All that does is compromise your performance and that of those around you. Passion is one thing, but an inability to think straight never achieved anything. As *Rocky* inspires us to think, it’s a ‘fire’ that can either be channelled to achieve something or left to incinerate ourselves and everything around us.

The same is even true of success. We may think we’re entitled to celebrate our achievements with abandon, but that invites the very same lack of clarity. It invariably manifests itself as complacency, which opens the door to failure and can leave us worse off than we were before! The player quite literally becomes a victim of his own success. I often see a player who has just scored an impressive goal and wonder how he can keep a smile from his lips. It only happened a few minutes ago, and the happiness must still be coursing through his body, but his facial expression doesn’t reveal it. He’s still trotting around as if it was

nothing. This is, of course, because he's focused – and that's what will ensure his goal is one that wins a match instead of making up the numbers.

We also see this when a losing team scores and neglects to celebrate, preferring to hurry the ball back to the spot so that the match can resume and a win can be chased. That's the winning mentality – composed through success and failure, in order to either safeguard one or transform the other. As Rudyard Kipling's timeless poem reminds us, "If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same, yours in the earth and everything that is in it. And which is more, you'll be a MAN, my son!"



Losing your head is the first step to losing the game.



13. FOOTBALLERS' WIVES

“Think not that you can direct the course of love.

Love directs YOUR course.”

- *Kahlil Gibran*

The strongest desire a human being must struggle with is the sex instinct. Like a drug, something that brings so much pleasure must also be responsible for its fair share of misery. Both genders are at their most irrational when they're responding to sexual impulses. We say things we wouldn't normally say and do things we wouldn't normally do in a more sober state of mind. Indeed, that sense of regret or shame can often define the difference between love and lust. You regret 'having sex' – you don't regret 'making love'! After 'making love', you want the person to stay. After 'having sex', you want the person to leave. As with any other appetite, once satisfied the lustful individual finds himself wondering what all the fuss was about in the first place. The prevailing sentiment is that you've fallen for some sort of trick (in this case, the primitive instinct to procreate for no apparent reason).

Both love and sex can seem quite irrational when we intellectualize them in this manner. Sexual intercourse is obviously the animalistic desire to reproduce and further the species. Likewise, the emotion of love could be seen as a device to bond people together tightly enough to raise that offspring (and perhaps safeguard their own welfare in old age). There's certainly no logical reason why one person would behold another to be so much better than the rest! Love is indeed 'blind' in that sense.

It's strange how empiricists are so very quick to discredit God in scientific terms, but neglect to apply the same scrutiny to the mystery of love. One can scarcely imagine a scientist returning home to his wife with a Valentine's card that reads, "I'm sufficiently drawn to you so as to procreate effectively." As we've already established, it's not always appropriate to analyze things scientifically. Ironically, though, religion does favour such a cynical view of human love – lest our desire for the physical keeps us from the spiritual.

Sport once again gives us a good handle on this controversial subject, because the rich and famous sportsman is propositioned more than most! Envy aside, that's not necessarily a good thing. One suspects that real love is hard to find amidst a sea of fawning females, hypnotized by your bank balance and your image on TV – neither of which are the real you. Indeed, those attributes may not even be there a few years down the line. And once they're gone, the insatiable appetite of an egotistical spouse remains to be fed!

Even if a celebrity is lucky enough to find real love, the chances of him hanging onto it are slim in that climate of temptation. One glance at a showbiz magazine reveals tales of acrimonious divorces, and superficial unions that can look forward to the same fate a few years hence. Indeed, modern-day marriages are brittle at the best of times. The added ingredients of shallowness and temptation must make it even more of an uphill struggle.

If nothing else, as with other high profile professions the sportsman's love life risks distracting him from the task at hand. During the 2006 *World Cup*, the England team were famously led astray by their glamorous wives – who saw the whole thing as more of

a publicity campaign than a sporting campaign! The players were exposed to be shallow celebrities compared to their professional rivals who left home to wage war. For the England team, it was more of a family holiday than a business trip. If the families were left at home, Daddy might have brought back a trophy as a souvenir! At least that was the inevitable perception in the media. I doubt it made that much difference to what took place on the field, but it certainly didn't 'enhance' their performance.

Of course, the ultimate example of a man being led astray by his wife is the story of Adam and Eve. Like the England team, they too found themselves banished from a paradise after failing to do their duty! They had a blissful existence until a 'serpent' convinced Eve to eat the 'forbidden fruit' – and the rest is history. It may not be factual 'history', but it certainly captures the essence of human civilization. The 'serpent' obviously represents a negative influence that lurked in the mind of early man, encouraging him to forfeit his divine inheritance to chase material desires. Specifically, Eve represents the passionate, emotional side of us whereas Adam represents our reason. The implication is that our 'passion' was led astray and overpowered our 'reason' – resulting in a confused creature that looked outside of itself for happiness and never quite found it again.

My favourite line from this saga is actually the most misunderstood. At *Genesis 3:16*, God tells Eve, "Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." The misogynistic people of the time took this to mean that women were to be "ruled over" by men. The profound truth is that "he" doesn't refer to "thy husband" – it refers to DESIRE! Throughout *The Bible*, 'desire' is personified as a

formidable entity that ‘rules’ us if we don’t rule it. It harks back to what we discussed in the previous chapter about putting irrational desires into perspective.

This brings us to the religious view as to what role – if any – love and marriage should play in our lives. Religious figures themselves don’t tend to be sexual. After Dan Brown’s scurrilous *Da Vinci Code* novel, it has become fashionable to claim that Jesus was a family man – which is laughable on a number of levels. If nothing else, it would have been inconvenient for a wanderer who travelled constantly with no ties to anyone or anything. Similarly, it would have been irresponsible for him to welcome death so brazenly if he was leaving a widow and orphans behind. We’re talking about a man so committed to his cause that he disowned his own mother! He was hardly likely to start a family of his own.

Above all else, he simply wouldn’t have felt the irrational desire to procreate in the first place. Worldly people find this hard to believe, but spiritual masters really do reach a point where sex and other impulses are beneath them. They don’t feel the need to play with the body any more than you feel the need to play with the toys you had as a child! Sometimes we simply grow out of things – no matter how fun they were – and set our sights higher. As St Paul notes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “I became a man and put away childish things.”

Even secular philosophers such as John Stuart Mill acknowledge a difference between ‘lower’ pleasures of the body and ‘higher’ pleasures of the mind. He argued that a man would always choose the latter once he was “competently acquainted with both.” The problem is that the average man isn’t properly ‘acquainted’ with both and mistakenly

believes the virtuous individual to be missing out on something. On the contrary, the reverse is true! The spiritual man isn't enduring a life of "self denial" so much as self FULFILMENT. It is the sense-enslaved individual that 'denies' his true self by burying it under a tangled web of irrational desires. You're not your true self until you have control of your self.

Of course, this is not to say that we should ALL be celibate. The human species would obviously struggle to survive if that was the case! Although we do well to aspire to religious role models as much as possible, they often stray into territory that the average man simply isn't prepared for. One of the greatest fallacies surrounding religion is that it is for everybody. Although anybody can take inspiration from the basics, the reality is that spiritual mastery is an elite pursuit. As the *Bhagavad Gita* cautions, only "one in a thousand" people even attempt it – and of those only a further "one in a thousand" actually succeed.

This is what I find so odd about the penchant for 'preaching' in the Christian faith. It can be traced back to Jesus' famous 'Great Commission', where he told his disciples to "preach to all nations." What we have to bear in mind is that Jesus' original disciples were uniquely qualified to do that job! "The force was strong with them," as *Star Wars* would put it. The 'force' isn't quite so strong with people who peruse religious books a couple of thousand years later and assume it qualifies them to teach others (myself excluded of course!). As St Paul himself warns at *Romans 15:14*, aspiring teachers should be "complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another." When a man gets to preaching, he's essentially claiming to be as advanced as Jesus' closest disciples were – and most people have got a LONG way

to go before that starts to ring true. We often end up with a case of the blind leading the blind, which is why organized religion is falling increasingly out of favour with the public as time goes on.

Indeed, self-proclaimed priests and monks often come unstuck when they try to shoehorn spiritual ideals into their worldly lives. The most sinister example of this is when celibate Catholic priests find themselves becoming inappropriately sexual with young members of their congregations. Only in a few isolated incidents, of course, but the fact that it can happen so much as once means that something isn't right. People are laying claim to a spiritual stature that they clearly do not possess. A spiritual man's celibacy is supposed to flow naturally from the conviction that there are greater pleasures than those of the senses, and a greater affection than that of humans. He shouldn't need to 'suppress' the desire to have sex – the desire shouldn't be there in the first place! As long as such desires are there, the individual must concede that he is still worldly and falls short of spiritual mastery. It's not sex they should 'refrain' from – it's the priesthood!

Even this issue of celibacy has its parallels in sport – at least where men are concerned. Both religion and sport ascribe strength to the “vital essence” of sperm, and resent it being wasted or invoked at the wrong time. There's a subtle scene in the first *Rocky* movie, where the eccentric boxer rejects the advances of his wife, Adrian, protesting that he needs to “stay strong” ahead of a big fight. Even in less macho sports than boxing, many coaches can be found advising their players to refrain from sex the night before a big performance. Whether it's superstitious or biological, there's a sense that semen is of more use inside the body than outside of it. If nothing else, there can be no doubt

that a man that exercises such restraint has his mind focused on the task at hand!

Of course, it's still possible to be a perfectly virtuous individual AND a sexual one. Even though Jesus led a sexless existence, he acknowledged that it wasn't possible (or even necessary) for everyone. The Buddha had a family before attaining enlightenment (although he slyly named his son 'Rahula', which translates as 'fetter'!), and both Jews and Muslims expect their religious leaders to be sexually active. In fact, being a virile father is practically a virtue.

The religious argument has always been against LUST rather than love. Even the most ardent hedonist would have to concede that lust isn't exactly a 'positive' quality. Promiscuity brings disease to the body, adultery brings disease to the household, and lust itself brings disease to the mind – taunting it with irrational impulses. The destruction that comes from such a lack of self-control is seldom a good thing...



Shallow unions can do more harm than good.

14. THE WEAKER SEX

“God gave them up unto vile affections. Even women changed the natural use into that which is against nature.”

- *Romans 1:26*

All this talk of sex brings us to one of the most controversial religious issues of all – that of homosexuality. Sport actually chimes in again here, because we see a resistance to it there too. Although they must surely exist, there are very few openly gay competitors in the more masculine sports. Even if their peers accepted it, the jeering masses that come to see them are less likely to let it lie. Bullying takes place on a grand scale in most stadiums, and the perceived weakness of homosexuality is the kind of ammunition that a sportsman could be torn apart with.

The religious argument isn't about eliminating 'weakness' nor bullying those who are different. For all the hysteria it causes, homosexuality is only mentioned (briefly and indirectly) a handful of times in the whole of *The Bible* – and nothing comes from the mouth of Jesus himself. If anything, it seems clear that he would have defended the persecuted of any persuasion! Christians have to resort to a stray remark that St Paul makes in his letter to the Romans, which criticizes men for “turning to each other in lust.” The emphasis is obviously on the word 'lust' more than anything else. That's not to say that homosexuality remains beyond criticism. It may be that lust is more prevalent among the gay community (if not synonymous with it) and must be guarded against rather than indulged. In the religious view, both homosexuals AND heterosexuals have a responsibility to gravitate

towards love rather than lust. As we've established, the effects of irrational desires of any kind can be devastating.

We have to go all the way back to Moses' book of *Leviticus* for the only other explicit reference to homosexuality. This text cautions that "man shall not lie down with man", before denouncing it as an "abomination." Believe it or not, there's actually a disclaimer on this provocative statement too. It's very fashionable for us to embrace homosexuality nowadays, when the world is more over-populated than under-populated and our survival as a species is assured. At the time Jews were ruling against it in 1250BC, their community was beleaguered after escaping slavery in Egypt and traipsing through the desert for 40 years. Procreation within a family environment was no 'lifestyle choice' – it was of the utmost importance if they were to survive and prosper. The sentiment against homosexuality at this time might best be described as it not being 'desirable' or 'helpful'. Now that the planet is over-populated to the tune of 6 billion people, it might very well be the other way around! Homosexuality could be seen as a natural way of curbing birth rates.

Again, that's not to say that the family is any less sacrosanct now and that its downfall should be celebrated. Questions must always be asked of any community, lest they find themselves beyond criticism and free to indulge the very same bigotry they accuse others of. But what is clear is that circumstances have changed considerably over the past 3'000 years, and a fierce resistance to gay relationships is harder to justify. Quite frankly, we've got a long way to go before we can complain that there's 'too much' love in the world! If that's a problem

then it's a nice one to have and the last one we should ever have to worry about addressing.

Women are almost as aggrieved as homosexuals when it comes to enduring the combined misogyny of both sport and religion. In the more masculine sports such as football and boxing, women must work tirelessly to be taken seriously (or to even be allowed to take part in the first place!). This dynamic is reminiscent of the way women are perceived to be 'subjugated' by religion. Both Judaism and Islam are largely patriarchal and imply that a woman's place is in the home. Similarly, Buddhism rejects the idea that female monks are as advanced as male monks. Even Christianity manages to perpetuate this sexism in the hands of St Paul (although Jesus himself ranked women among his greatest disciples).

The reason ancient religions are united in their subjugation of women has more to do with the conventions of the time than any spiritual philosophy. It's easy for us to pursue equality in the 'Information Age' where the nature of our work is largely intellectual, but thousands of years ago the average job was somewhat physical and work was the exclusive domain of men. It was entirely natural that the 'weaker sex' would assume the responsibilities of the home, for which they were perfectly suited. I can only assume that this dynamic seeped into every other activity that took place outside of the home – such as religious worship and instruction. Indeed, women were often rendered unable to read or write by virtue of their limited responsibilities. Evidently, it was an imbalance that the men were keen to perpetuate.

This deeply rooted misogyny even resulted in God himself being cast as a male! Again, this is merely a reflection of the patriarchal

culture of the time and has no logical basis. As we've established, God is anything but a physical entity with a definite form – so a specific gender is even further out of the question. We simply project a gender onto God depending on how we perceive that powerful force. Evidently, the Jews saw him as a responsible 'father' figure – whereas Hindus tend to think in terms of a 'Divine Mother'. As with all things in existence, God has both male qualities and female qualities. Whichever side we behold to be at the forefront determines how we see him (or her!).

Personally, I prefer to speak of God in the female form so as to destroy any preconceptions that people may have. Original thoughts are then permitted to flow into the mind more freely. In fact, I referred to God as 'she' and 'her' throughout this book until I realized it would cause unnecessary confusion for some readers! I am, after all, dealing with preconceptions and must take those preconceptions in hand before I rattle them.

Speaking of preconceptions, Islam is often accused of being the most misogynistic religion – but, as with the stigma of terrorism, there are several misunderstandings at work. Again, we can trace it back to the conventions of the time. We often hear about how Muhammad and his fellow Muslims were permitted to have multiple wives – which conjures up images of over-sexed, unfaithful deviants! In actual fact, looking after multiple women was essential because so many were widowed after losing their husbands in the many wars that ravaged the early years of Islam. The same courtesy was also extended to 'orphans' who were left without parents. These engineered families were rather more honourable than we like to assume from our enlightened 21st

century perspective. Imagine if footballers dropped dead every time they took to the field! Their beleaguered wives would probably be looked after by the rest of the team in a similar fashion.

As for the wives covering themselves head to toe in ‘burkhas’, that is not a religious imperative either. The practice was already extant in Persian kingdoms, where a veil shielded princesses from the gaze of the public. Muhammad is thought to have adopted the practice when it became apparent that his wives were the subject of similarly incessant scrutiny. In later years, it merely became a fashionable way of emulating the women who were close to Islam’s beloved prophet. It’s rather like impressionable young girls striving to dress like the glamorous women they see on the arms of sports stars! The only religious advice is that self-respect comes from dressing modestly. Quite how a woman chooses to embody that principle is up to her. Although I suspect that’s one instance where copying the scantily clad glamour models is of no avail!

For better or worse, sports such as football keep this patriarchal dynamic alive. Successful footballers become the ultimate ‘bread-winners’ – allowing their trophy wives to dedicate their lives to preening themselves. Even mere fans play their part in this phenomena by reducing their spouses to ‘widows’ when they disappear to watch a game! These questionable priorities can even be grounds for divorce. Here in England, one man was condemned by a judge for “caring more about Chelsea than his own wife.” His cutting response was that he even cared about lowly Torquay United more than his wife!

Sport isn’t all about misogyny though. The gradual rise of female versions of each major sport is a positive reflection of the world’s

changing attitudes. Likewise, religions are becoming increasingly respectful of the female viewpoint. Indeed, they always have been. Early religious movements may have fallen short of the equality we enjoy now, but they did at least take steps in the right direction. While the secular world was content to milk bigotry for all it was worth, the religious view was that humans of every gender and creed had value. It set the ball rolling to this pivotal moment in time where a life of any kind has the chance to prove its worth...



The veil is more of a fashion statement than a religious imperative.



15. TRAIN TO GAIN

“Men are anxious to improve their circumstances,
but unwilling to improve themselves.”

- *James Allen*

Perhaps the greatest lesson sport has to teach us is that the body needs to be taken care of as well as the mind. Although religions caution against worshipping the physical body as if it were “all there is”, they are united in proclaiming it to be a ‘temple’ of the soul – a vehicle through which we make this journey. As with any other vehicle, ours has to be kept in good condition if it is to fulfil its purpose effectively.

The sportsman can often be found toning his bodily instrument in the gym. People assume that physical activities lack an intellectual dimension, but nothing could be further from the truth. It takes an extraordinary amount of willpower and discipline to stick to an exercise regime – not to mention a sound understanding of the human anatomy and the way it is nourished. With an almost religious fervour, the fitness fanatic studies books and sets aside time to devote to his cause. Indeed, this level of discipline is the first step towards spiritual mastery. While everyone else is killing time (and brain cells) watching TV or living unhealthily, the disciplined individual is SPENDING time bettering himself. He’s prepared to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain – and that’s exactly what he ends up attaining. He even comes to ENJOY the process that others find so daunting!

There’s a lot to learn from setting goals and then achieving them. When you’re looking at something that weighs more than you which

you're about to lift over head, it redefines your ideas about what is and isn't possible! It's true what they say about "strong in body, strong in mind." The two are inextricably linked. Even when I used to sit hunched over a computer making games, I always felt the benefits of being fit. It undoubtedly gave me the energy to work as hard as I did during those long 12-hour days. The whole point of exercise is that you trick your body into thinking that life is harder than it actually is. It then adapts itself to cope with that and everyday life becomes a breeze! Mentally and physically, you acquire the skills to control life instead of being controlled BY it. That's the greatest strength there is.

Cynical philosophers like Karl Marx liked to dismiss religion as some sort of 'easy' option – proclaiming that it "eases pain even as it creates fantasies." Or "a crutch for the weak-minded" as others have put it. Nothing could be further from the truth. There may be some comfort in anticipating a favourable afterlife, but everything else about the pious individual's life requires more effort than that of the carefree atheist. That's precisely why it has become so fashionable to reject religious principles! People appreciate any excuse to avoid a disciplined existence – as surely as lazy people find excuses not to go to the gym.

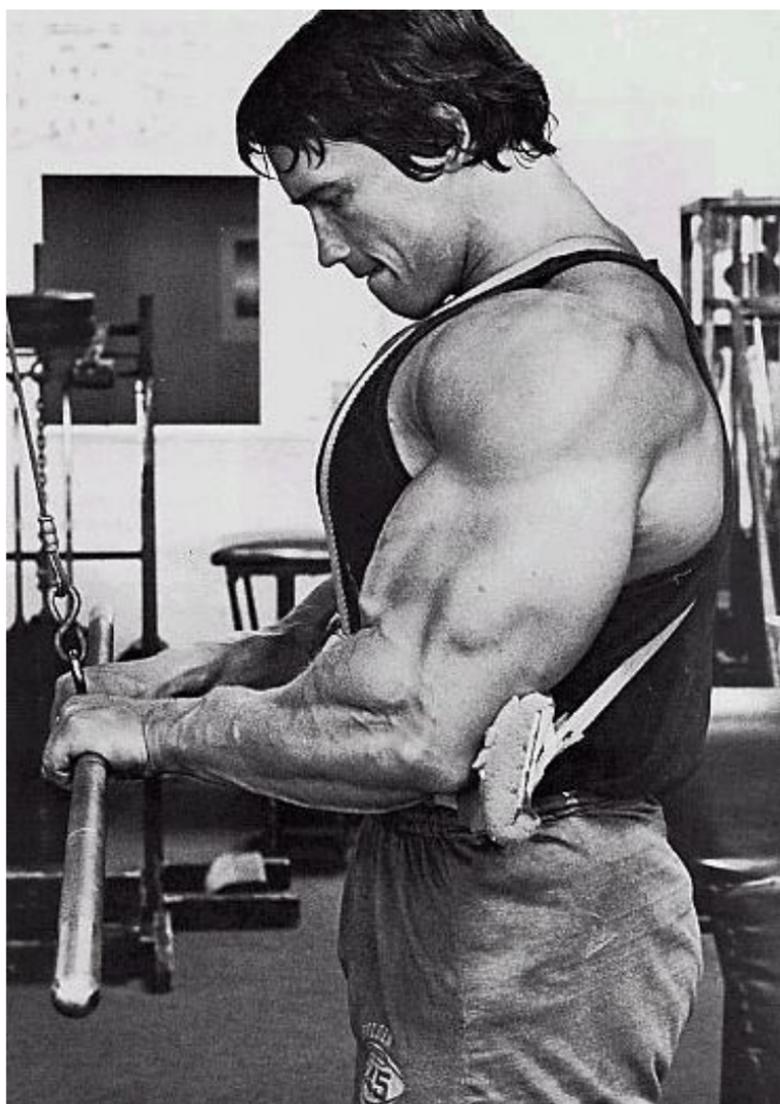
Religious people don't begrudge their workload though. As with exercising muscles, it only has the illusion of being difficult and eventually becomes second-nature. This is what Jesus sought to convey when he tried to convince people that "my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Instead of avoiding hardship, the religious individual courageously embraces it and removes its sting.

It's a myth that we make our lives better by making them 'easier'.

It's not 'easy' to lift weights, but those that do are strong. It's not 'easy' to study books, but those that do are wise. Whenever a man goes beyond the call of duty he betters himself. Resistance builds strength – whether it's in the gym or the outside world! When learning to play a sport such as basketball, it's said that you should bounce the ball HARD so as to maintain control. A weak approach to the ball would never achieve anything. It's a good metaphor for how life is more likely to respond to your will if you take it in hand and approach it with tenacity. As the *NBA* slogan has it, "Either play hard or go home."

This is the wisdom that lies behind the religious ideal of 'forgiveness'. A lot of people protest that it's 'difficult' to forgive their transgressors – but that's the whole point! It's an extraordinary achievement that says a lot about your character. As surely as the physical strongman benefits from lifting heavy weights, the spiritual strongman makes light work of moral burdens.

A teacher of mine used to tell us a charming tale about two caterpillars at the bottom of his garden. One of them struggled out of its casing as nature intended and flew away as a colourful butterfly. The other had made no such progress, so my teacher gently cut it open to help the process along. To his utter astonishment, this butterfly emerged black and white! Without the struggle, no blood had gotten to the wings and they remained without colour. There's a similar story about two mice dropped into a bucket of cream – one gave up and drowned, the other fought so hard that he churned the cream into butter and crawled out. It all goes to show that hard work can be essential to a worthwhile existence. Our attitude most certainly does determine our latitude...



Resistance builds strength in life itself as well as the gym.

16. YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

“I prefer my players not to drink.
You shouldn’t put diesel in a Ferrari.”

- *Harry Redknapp*

What goes INTO the body is just as important as what you seek to get OUT of it. Sport tends to share the resistance to drugs and alcohol that we find in religion – and for largely the same reasons too. The simple fact is that mind-altering substances prevent the body from functioning at its best. Even where supposed benefits are to be found, they’re temporary and come with dire side effects. As the 2nd *Surah* of the *Qur’an* warns, “The evils of drugs far outweigh their utility.” We’ve seen this recently in baseball and athletics, as competitors resort to steroids to enhance their performance. The needle ends up puncturing their reputations as well as their veins! And they’re the lucky ones. In the world of wrestling, people have been dying at an alarming rate after abusing substances in pursuit of the perfect physique.

Although I enjoyed the odd drink at university, I often came across people experimenting with drugs as well and vehemently resisted their attempts to make me join in. I remarked that I would be interested when they concocted a drug that makes you work harder and achieve more, whilst still jumping out of bed the next morning feeling like a million dollars. When they conceded that there was no such drug, I pointed out that’s what I got out of exercise! They were poisoning their bodies and emptying their bank accounts in order to acquire a state of mind that I got for free. No argument their brittle minds could muster would make me join their self-destructive sect.

The most baffling thing about binge drinkers and drug addicts is that they're killing themselves trying to attain something that comes naturally. The stillness of meditation offers the exact same 'high' that they claim to be looking for. The only difference is that it costs nothing and the side effects are extraordinarily positive! After a few minutes of being still and silent behind closed eyes, the individual is overwhelmed by a sense of serenity as the energy of their body melts into that of their surroundings – allowing moments of inspiration to dominate the mind. It's like a musical masterpiece that requires silence to be heard. People often think of God as some sort of thunderous giant that looms over us. The reality is that she's an easily frightened butterfly that only lands on you when you're still and quiet.

Ultimately, a man's resistance to drink and drugs is commensurate with the respect he has for himself. Somebody that's at peace with their mind has no desire to "get out of it", and somebody that enjoys good health has no wish to throw it away. In that sense, the body really is a 'temple' – the recipient of the respect we show to ourselves. As the manager Harry Redknapp said with regards to his players drinking, "You shouldn't put diesel in a Ferrari." Instead of seeking to own a sports vehicle, an athlete should appreciate that he already IS one! Both religious people and sportsmen share the belief that the human body is a perfectly designed machine that must be valued.

One might ask why Jesus drank wine and socialized with drunkards if alcohol is so deplorable. Christians often point to the "fruit of the vine" consumed at the 'Last Supper' as evidence that it's permissible, along with the famous story of Jesus miraculously providing it by the gallon at a wedding feast. This is a little

inappropriate. Not least because wine was deeply symbolic for Jews at the time. In the *Old Testament*, Israel itself was likened to God's 'vineyard' – which was supposed to bring forth 'fruit' after being nurtured so lovingly. By repeatedly bringing wine into the equation, Jesus was laying claim to being the Messianic individual that bore fruit. Given that grapes 'died' to produce it, it was also symbolic of how his impending death would bear fruit.

Besides, just because someone did something once or twice as a gesture, that's not to say it was an habitual part of their everyday life. I strongly doubt that Jesus would have endorsed drinking to that extent. Even if a spiritual master is spotted doing something, that's not necessarily a green light for his novice disciples to follow suit. The Hindu tradition tells of a disciple who copied everything his master did – eating and drinking whatever he saw his master have, assuming it was OK for him too. Then one day his cunning role model took to eating burning coals! The disciple neglected to follow that particular diet, and the lesson was learned. Sometimes spiritual masters have earned the right to bend the rules a little. They've arrived at the destination and no longer have to worry about getting there.

This brings us to similar rules about food, which are even more prevalent in religion. In fact, they're literally 'set in stone' as far as the Jews are concerned! Moses came down from communing with God on Mount Sinai with a whole host of rules for his people to follow. Among them were instructions as to which foods were permissible (known in Hebrew as 'kosher'). The most famous injunctions involve leaving yeast out of bread and refraining from the meat of swine. Muslims share this aversion to pork and other unsuitable meats – with 'halal'

being their term for denoting what is acceptable.

They each have their own logic for doing so. Contrary to popular belief, health doesn't factor into the Jewish penchant for rules. It's more about discipline and the ability to go without – an essential quality on the spiritual path, and one that set them apart from the indiscriminate pagans of the time. The Prophet Muhammad's logic did have more to do with hygiene – not only in the sense that pigs wallow in filth, but because they also eat offal instead of fresh vegetation and compromise the nutritional quality of their meat. Pork has more fat and less muscle building properties than other meats, and is also responsible for diseases such as trichinosis that allow worms to destroy the muscle tissue. It's to their credit that prophets like Muhammad and Moses foresaw as much in less enlightened times.

Christians claim that all bets are off on account of Jesus wittily remarking that “what comes out of a man's mouth” is more important than “what goes in”. But that's not to say that “what goes in” is of no consequence whatsoever! As a somewhat observant Jew, I suspect Jesus would have remained vigilant about what he ate. Indeed, at *Acts 15:19* the surviving disciples recommend following a diet that is almost identical to that of Jews and Muslims. There's even a good case for claiming Jesus was vegetarian. Although he's credited with catching and eating fish, and spoke of lambs being slaughtered, these are once again largely symbolic episodes and say nothing about his regular diet. The lesser known *Essene Gospel Of Peace* gives us a Jesus so pedantic that he warns against eating anything that is cooked!

This was perhaps an Indian influence, where spiritual individuals tend to be vegetarian and are happy with what nature provides. This is

primarily because the idea of killing animals is an affront to their profound respect for all living things. More importantly, it is felt that the energy of meat is second-hand and is therefore of less value. When we eat, we're essentially absorbing the energy of the sun. The sunlight gives energy to vegetation, which we either eat directly or inherit from an animal. It is argued that the former is more effective and more ethical. The principle is the same though. We're still talking about an interplay of energy, passing from one entity to another. In the lesser known *Gospel Of Thomas*, Jesus can be heard implying that an animal "becomes human" when it is consumed. This is technically true because the human does indeed absorb the atoms of the animal and make them part of him. You really are what you eat!

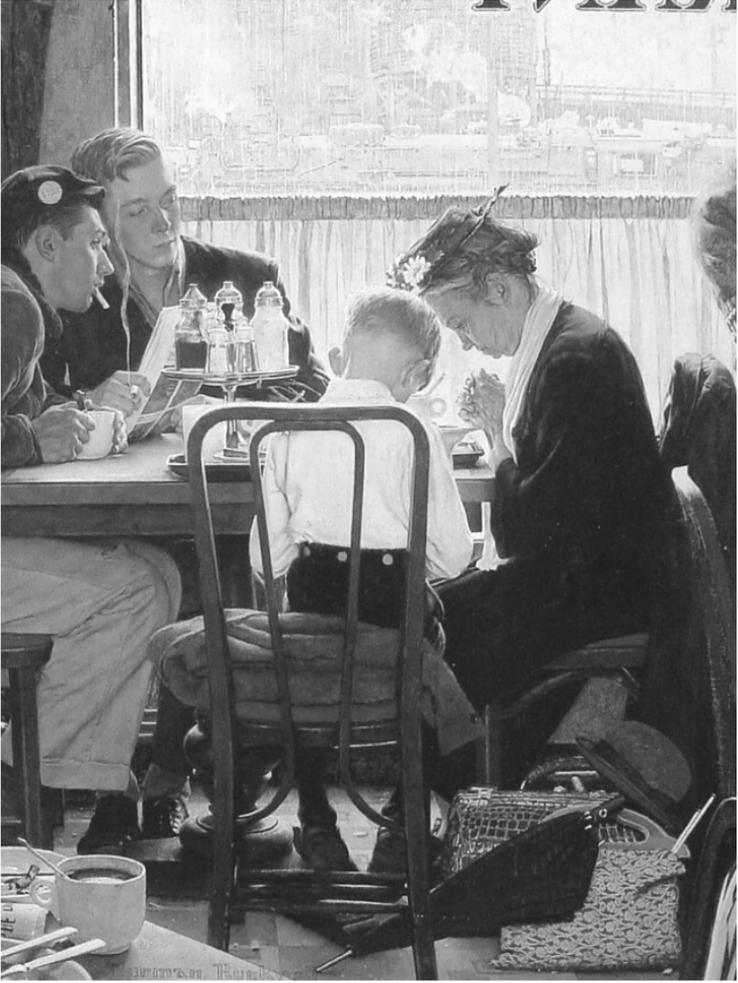
This could be seen as an argument for eating meat so long as it is done humanely. There's something honourable about that which is eaten living on in us. We practically have a responsibility to do it justice. I once knew a girl who mocked religious people that said grace before a meal, which I never understood because it's a harmless moment of reflection. Even if you don't believe in God, surely you must appreciate the science of what has gone into the food on your plate and how fortunate you are to be enjoying it? It's a simple matter of human decency – not a religious issue! In their haste to distance themselves from religion, people often stray into dark territory. They're so very proud of their 'intelligent' stance, and yet there's often so very little to be proud of.

The spiritual individual delights at this constant flow of energy though. Everything they consume is literally woven into the fabric of their being, and they set about using it wisely. That is if they consume

anything at all! Some particularly disciplined believers occasionally refrain from eating entirely in what is known as ‘fasting’. Most famously, Muslims do this from dawn ‘til dusk during the holy month of ‘Ramadan’ to commemorate the Prophet Muhammad receiving the *Qur’an*. Followers of other faiths are known to fast occasionally too.

There are several reasons for this self-inflicted austerity. Primarily, it is an impressive act of discipline that shakes one out of habitual eating and brings them to the realization that they are more than just a body. As Jesus famously said when he was tempted in the desert, “A man cannot live by bread alone.” Instead of being controlled BY the body, the faster assumes control OF it. That’s what the term ‘master’ refers to in spiritual circles – being the master of oneself, not of others! Furthermore, fasting fills one with enormous compassion for those that have no choice about hunger and helps us to empathize. We move from a place of selfish greed to consideration for others. Either way, by the end of a fast the individual tends to have developed a healthier relationship with food.

We don’t often see this level of self-sacrifice in sport, because an athlete would obviously compromise their performance without a decent diet. The British-born Muslim boxer, Amir Kahn, prefers not to schedule fights in and around the month of Ramadan (September) for this reason. Although the faster’s physical strength may get weaker for a short time, their mental strength emerges more powerful than ever and sees them through the rest of the year. Both the sportsman and the spiritual man are defined by their ability to sacrifice short-term pleasure for long-term gain...



Like athletes, religious people have a good relationship with food.

17. RIDING THE CHALLENGE

“When you lose, don’t lose the lesson.”

- *Dalai Lama*

The most popular argument against a belief in God is that the world isn’t always that nice a place. Even the most open-minded religious believer can often be found wondering why “bad things happen to good people.” This very question has merited its own field of study known as ‘theodicy’. Assuming he even exists at all, many philosophers have argued that God either CANNOT address evil (in which case he is not all-powerful) or WILL NOT do it (in which case he is not ‘good’). Religious believers are left having to justify that God exists and is both powerful and good – for nothing less would be worthy of worship.

In order to answer this conundrum, we first have to establish what we actually mean by ‘good’ and ‘evil’. It turns out that a ‘bad thing’ is anything that compromises the happiness and physical welfare of a human being, whereas a ‘good thing’ is something that safeguards all of the above. This is actually a very childish and egotistical way of viewing the world if you think about it! Nothing remotely bad is ever allowed to happen to anybody for any reason? How would such a universe even function? The answer is it wouldn’t.

As we established in the very first chapter, a push and pull between positive and negative influences is needed for anything to mean anything. As surely as a player cannot take to the field without risking injury or failure, a human cannot dwell in the physical world without

taking a few knocks and bumps. Instead of wrapping the outside world in cotton wool, we must wrap ourselves in armour! If nothing else, we need a kind of spiritual and mental ‘armour’ that removes the childish assumption that life should be perfect. Nothing has any meaning – good or bad – save the meaning we GIVE it. Rain isn’t ‘bad’ unless it’s your agenda to avoid getting wet. It’s perfectly ‘good’ if your aim is to grow something in the garden! As Shakespeare famously intoned, “Nothing is good or bad lest thinking make it so.”

The irony is that religion never asked us to believe any different. No religion ever promised that physical life would be some sort of playground of perpetual happiness. After all, that’s what ‘Heaven’ is supposed to be! Perfection is where we come FROM – not what we come here FOR. Religious figures are a fine example of this. They teach us that challenges are there to be overcome – not swept away by an interfering deity. Krishna was born in a prison, but OVERCAME that indignity to rule his own kingdom. Joseph was sold into slavery, but OVERCAME that plight to become the benevolent Governor of Egypt. Jesus suffered the most horrific death humanity could muster, but OVERCAME that hostility to live on in the hearts and minds of his followers. The Prophet Muhammad’s mind was torn apart by searing headaches, but he made sure to recite the profound words that accompanied them.

In each instance, ‘bad things’ aren’t something to be avoided so much as turned around. Those that succeed in doing so are the truly ‘good people’. And that’s what makes a good player in sport too. The average sportsman is no stranger to suffering. He is tackled a thousand times per match, but he gets up each and every time. He concedes goals,

misses chances to score himself, and has decisions that go against him. At no point does he have a nervous breakdown or storm off the pitch in protest! He accepts that it is all part of the game, and he wouldn't have it any other way. He retains his faith in his ability to score and win. He has more faith in his strengths than fear of his weaknesses.

There's much inspiration to be taken from the sportsman's ability to endure pain. We imagine them to be the fittest and healthiest human beings on the planet, but they're often struggling with more ailments than the average person. If we could miraculously swap bodies with them for a moment, we would behold ourselves to be in agony over some niggling injury or other! This is especially true of professional fighters and wrestlers who inflict pain as a matter of course. When I watched wrestling, it would often transpire that some valiant soul was soldiering on with a dislocated shoulder or a 'torn quadricep'. Kurt Angle and Steve Austin even claim to have competed with broken necks?! We also see this in football, where recently injured players are often trotting around on sprained ankles or 'broken metatarsals'.

Although sportsmen have the luxury of adrenaline to mask their physical pain, there's also a mental element to it. What people don't realize is that there's a difference between 'pain' and 'suffering'. We don't have any choice about pain – it's the body's way of reporting that it is damaged or being jeopardized. What we actually DO with that information is a matter of choice, however, and that's where 'suffering' come in. Technically, a man is in 'pain' when he lifts weights – but he doesn't consider himself to be 'suffering'. Nor does he even consider himself to be suffering when something goes wrong and he's left with an unwelcome pain. You simply intellectualize that information and

make of it what you will – like a telephone call that you don't answer. The most famous example of this stoicism is Christ on the cross, who maintained extraordinary composure throughout horrendous circumstances. It's often said that he didn't suffer, which is true. He most assuredly felt 'pain', but he chose not to 'suffer'. On the contrary, he channelled the experience into something positive. We also have that opportunity whenever pain is registered in our lives.

We can't ask God (or the soul) to share our peculiar fascination with living forever in the physical form, free from harm. If anything, God is a NON-physical entity that would have far less regard for the material world than we do! The message of religion is that we must transcend the physical and put it in perspective – not cling to it as if it were all there is. We are like birds that have become so accustomed to the cage that we refuse to leave – even when the door is open to us and we are promised a freer existence outside.

Of course, when people talk about the existence of suffering they're really talking about the BIG things. They can accept losing their car keys and put up with the odd shower of rain – it's the millions that perish in wars or starve in Third World countries that really concerns us. The same logic applies to cases both big and small. It's neither practical nor beneficial to have God intervene in human affairs on a regular basis. In fact, to do so could be considered an act of evil! Millions starve in Africa because of corrupt leadership, irresponsible living, and a lack of compassion on our part. If God were to miraculously clean up that mess, none of the above issues would be addressed. They would practically be rewarded!

The message would be that it's fine to be corrupt and heartless. God's involvement would be a quick fix that solves nothing, whereas the solutions we arrive at ourselves would be real and lasting. When we finally do solve world hunger, it will be because we genuinely want to. Humanity will have been inspired to show itself at its best. Perhaps that's where God can be found in all of this – inspiring us to do things for ourselves like any loving parent would. Indeed, one of the most famous passages of the *Qur'an* reminds us that “Allah helps those who help themselves.”

At this juncture, you might recall the miracles of Jesus and wonder why he fed thousands of people if it's so irresponsible to do so. The answer is that the two situations simply aren't comparable. There's a difference between feeding a few faithful disciples as a one-off gesture and propping up an entire nation on a daily basis! The latter makes a mockery of the entire political and economic landscape. Jesus didn't feed and heal every human being in Israel each day of his 33 years on this earth. Chaos would have ensued if he did! His miracles – if they occurred at all – were carefully calculated symbolic gestures.

The earth and the creatures upon it are really ONE living organism. Like any organism, discomfort is felt when something is wrong and we are moved to address it. When we are hungry, discomfort emanates from the stomach and we are encouraged to do something about it. Likewise, when MILLIONS of people are hungry, discomfort visits the minds of us all and we are inspired to take action on a grander scale. Sinister facts of life aren't there to be swept under the carpet – they're warning signs that we must pay the utmost attention to!

We also see this in natural disasters, as the earth becomes restless under the pressure of keeping things ticking over. God regularly takes the blame for such events (they're even legally defined as "Acts of God"!), but once again it's only our response to them that makes them 'bad'. Earthquakes and volcanic eruptions come with the territory – as do floods and tsunamis if we want to live on a planet that has water. Our selfish complaints about such things can once again be traced back to our penchant for living forever. No good can come of such an irrational desire. Instead, we must learn from such events and adapt our behaviour accordingly (as we are beginning to do with our response to climate change).

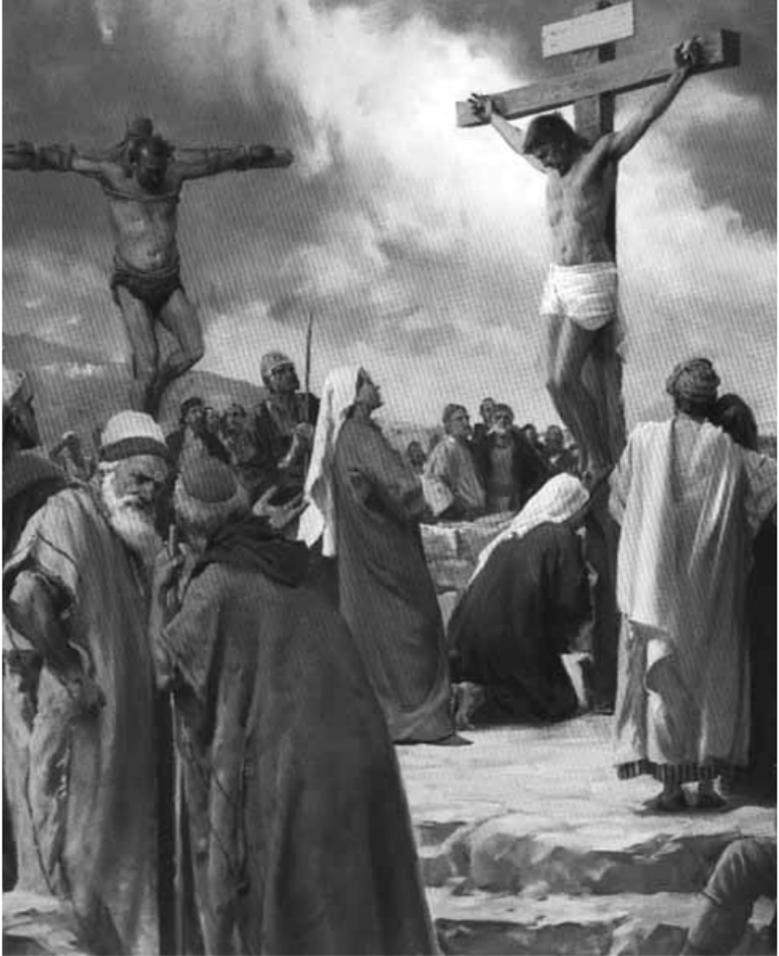
The sportsman should be able to relate to this concern for the environment more than most. He too seeks to step onto a well kept playing field where he can perform at his best! When our national Wembley stadium was relocated, the unsettled pitch left a lot to be desired and players complained that it had compromised their performance. We also see this in cricket matches, where every inch of the ground is examined to ensure the ball bounces properly. It's equally important that we keep this 'playing field' of ours in good enough condition to play the game of life.

In fact, sport embodies everything we've been talking about here. The evolution of football has regularly seen positive developments follow negative ones. In 1989, almost a hundred people perished needlessly at a match between Sheffield Wednesday and Liverpool at Hillsborough. In those days, thousands of fans stood precariously in 'terraces' instead of enjoying proper seating. On this fateful occasion, the arrangement led to great swathes of people crushing each other as

they spilled downwards onto the field. 96 people lost their lives amid the chaos – and a great many more were injured.

Of course, the response to this debacle was that terraces would forever be abolished and sports fans could expect proper seating wherever they went. A positive evolutionary step forward came from that dark moment. Sport is never worth losing one's life over, but this is a good example of how the world tends to sort itself out. Things reach a pivotal moment where they can no longer be tolerated and must change for the better. Even the most wretched episode in human history brings us one step closer to a solution. In that sense, nobody lives nor dies in vain. Everything has a meaning if we choose to bless it with one.

When I lived in Manchester I enjoyed going to a certain park, but I had to walk through one of the roughest streets in the city to get there. So too does humanity have to walk down some dark corridors on its way to a beautiful destination. As *Psalm 23* famously declares, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil for thou art with me.”



Religion teaches us that obstacles are to be overcome – not avoided.

18. RISE AND FALL

“You may feel as though you're going round in circles, but those circles wind up a mechanism until it has enough energy to run like clockwork.”

- Jonathan Cainer

A team's fortunes in the league can be a testing time in and of itself. Every failure renews the club's resolve to do better next time, as the squad slowly evolves into what success requires. Over the years, I've seen a lot of changes take place before my very eyes. I've seen Hull City rise from the very bottom to the very top – where they made an unlikely assault on the *Premier League* in the 2008/2009 season under Phil Brown. Likewise, I've seen Scunthorpe United develop into a force to be reckoned with – now regularly enjoying *Championship* football thanks to my old schoolmate's heroic performance at Wembley. Conversely, I've seen my local Grimsby Town plummet from a stable position in the *First Division* to the very bottom of the professional game – where they were lucky to avoid being spat out of the system altogether!

Going back to the idea of reincarnation, this fluctuation between different leagues is symbolic of the soul's alleged progression from lower forms of life to higher forms of life. Indian doctrines suggest that a soul incarnates in the form most suited to its sensibilities – embarking on a tour of insensible plants, insignificant insects, and sense-enslaved animals, before enjoying the prize of human consciousness. A lazy man is said to manifest as a static tree, those that are cruel must taste life as a fragile insect, and the man that responds to his instincts is reduced to an animal. When the soul finally gets a stint in the human form, it

should appreciate it all the more – but invariably ends up making mistakes that squander the opportunity.

In other words, you get what you deserve – much like the teams in a league find themselves where they belong after sustained success or repeated failure. The fact that we have 4 such leagues in English football (plus the bonus *Champions League*) is significant because there are 4 main planes of existence in Hindu philosophy (plus a bonus one where God resides). These are known as ‘koshas’ and are likened to ‘sheaths’ which unfurl to reveal the next phase. The soul is thought to begin its journey at the level of the ‘Matter Sheath’ (*Annamaya Kosha*), where it manifests as inert minerals such as rocks. This experience then gives way to the ‘Life Sheath’ (*Pranamaya Kosha*), where the soul enjoys a stint as a living plant or tree. Then the ‘Mind Sheath’ (*Manamaya Kosha*) unfurls to offer life as a primitive animal that is able to make its own way in the world. This eventually develops into the ‘Discriminative Sheath’ (*Jnanamaya Kosha*), where intelligent humans can be found making rational decisions (in theory!).

But the soul’s development does not end here. Our existence as a human is merely an opportunity to cultivate the divine qualities that reunite us with God himself. Exceptional human beings negotiate access to the ‘Bliss Sheath’ (*Anandamaya Kosha*), where the soul is so pure as to reside beyond ALL physical manifestations. From this lofty paradise, it need never incarnate again unless it chooses to. As you may have gathered, this is rather like a team progressing from the lower leagues to the *Premier League* – and eventually the *Champions League* where the best of the best are glorified.

We also see this idea in Jewish mysticism – except there are 4 degrees of humanity instead of a journey spanning different species. The most basic level of consciousness is known as ‘Nefesh’, where the individual is no better than an animal that responds to impulses without thinking. The physical realm where such creatures reside is known as ‘Assiyah’. When the individual develops a little more emotional depth, his level of consciousness is elevated to that of ‘Ruach’. Most of us settle in this realm, known as ‘Yetzirah’. Once a man has an emotional dimension, he begins to intellectualize his experiences and make sense of them at the ‘Neshama’ level of consciousness. This realm is called ‘Beriyah’.

It’s important for a man to aspire to this level of existence because if the intellect doesn’t rule the emotions then the emotions rule the intellect! Every man has the faculty of reason – the question is who or what has control of that faculty? The average person has less control over their life than they like to think, and they remain stuck at the emotional level of existence. Better than a mindless brute, yes, but still falling far short of what they could be.

And we haven’t even got to the *Premier League* yet! In Jewish mysticism, a man has not reached his full potential until the intellect itself has been transcended. Instead of settling at that level, they aspire to a spiritual state of consciousness known as ‘Chaya’. In this realm, known as ‘Atzilut’, human reasoning is secondary to divine intuition. In other words, thinking gives way to feeling. Or as *Star Wars* might put it, “Use the force, Luke!” This is not the abdication of reason, as some might protest. Rather, it is reason operating at the highest level (“speeded up and encapsulated in an instant”, as Karen Armstrong puts

it). It's the intellect PLUS divine insight – not the intellect lacking something.

As we've seen throughout this book, a thoroughly 'scientific' view of the world can do more harm than good. These self-proclaimed 'intellectuals' are guilty of arrogance in the extreme and attach undue importance to the physical world. It's this attitude that St Paul was critical of at *Romans 1:20* when he said, "Professing themselves to be wise they became fools." There's a difference between academic intelligence and spiritual intelligence. An individual may seem 'intelligent' and yet still fail to make life work, bringing misery upon himself and others. That's where religion steps in. Indeed, Hindus define it as "the art of eliminating the suffering caused by ignorance."

As beneficial as science undoubtedly is, religion teaches that a man must not cling to the physical world as if it were all there is. Science must guide us towards even greater truths and allow room for a spiritual dimension to life where virtue is cultivated. Like a finger pointing to the moon, one should not focus on the finger so much as where it is directing our gaze!

As with the 'Bliss Sheath' of Hinduism, those that succeed in making life work at this level leave all 4 realms behind and reside with God himself at the 'Yechida' level of consciousness. This is the *Champions League* of Judaism, where a select few enlightened prophets can be found flying the flag for spiritual mastery. There can be no winners or losers at this level. All deserve their place in the hall of fame.

This concept of dividing human potential into leagues is also reminiscent of the Hindu 'caste' system. Indian culture maintains that

people fall into one of 4 basic categories – enlightened teachers (*Brahmins*), courageous warriors (*Kshatriyas*), shrewd businessmen (*Vaishyas*), and hard-working labourers (*Sudras*). Like a team in our hypothetical league, one's soul is thought to progress from the life of a hard-working 'Sudra' to that of an enlightened 'Brahmin'. Such clumsy comparisons aren't entirely appropriate though, because it's not fair to dismiss each caste as significantly lower than the other. They're merely different. After all, human society wouldn't function if we all had the same talents and aspired to do the same job!

Although the caste system has now lost its legal significance in India, it went through an ugly phase where it was abused as a hereditary 'class' system. People felt they were born into a life of privilege or toil and accepted their 'fate'. The *Bhagavad Gita* itself reminds us that a man's natural disposition is most important. A man must be judged by the qualities he cultivates and exhibits. In fact, the scriptures point out the folly of a man straying outside his remit. A volatile warrior has no business pretending to be a peaceful spiritual teacher (and vice versa!). A man must be a first-rate version of himself instead of a second-rate imitation of somebody else.

I wonder what 'caste' a modern-day sportsman would belong to? It's tempting to think of them as 'warriors' on the battlefield, but that caste tends to refer to military LEADERS rather than any old soldier. Only the managers, captains, and star players could lay claim to such responsibility. The average team member is more likely to be of the labouring caste, using their physical strength under the guidance somebody else. That said, they're also businessmen when they command huge salaries and set about deploying their finances wisely.

The more conscientious players even stray close to spiritual territory, as they use their fame to have a positive effect on society. A star player who conducts himself well and holds court with his public could be considered a ‘teacher’ of sorts. Like anybody else, it seems they each have their own unique qualities and areas of interest. I suppose the life a man lives is more telling than the job he does.

Of course, entire civilizations also rise and fall as surely as individuals do. The demise of a team like Newcastle United, which was once a staple in the *Premier League*, is rather like the Roman Empire crumbling into obscurity. Whereas the rise of a humble team like Hull City is comparable to a new world power emerging out of nowhere like the USA did! In that sense, the various leagues may not be evolutionary stages for the soul so much as the world itself.

Indian philosophy speaks of 4 ‘yugas’ – distinct ‘ages’ that human civilization goes through. The most wretched is ‘Kali Yuga’, where humanity is at its lowest ebb and is most barbarous. This is thought to have spanned 2 sets of 1’200 years (one descending and one ascending) between 700BC-500AD and 500AD-1700AD, which history does indeed recognize as the ‘Dark Ages’! The next step up is ‘Dwapara Yuga’, where man begins to harness science and becomes a notch more enlightened. This is where we find ourselves now in the ‘Information Age’, which is thought to continue ascending for 2’400 years up to 4100AD. Beyond this is ‘Treta Yuga’, which is supposed to be a more enlightened era where man transcends material science and unlocks the potential of his mind. This takes us another 3’600 years into the future, before we stumble on ‘Satya Yuga’ around 7700AD and finally enjoy a ‘Golden Age’ of spiritual enlightenment.

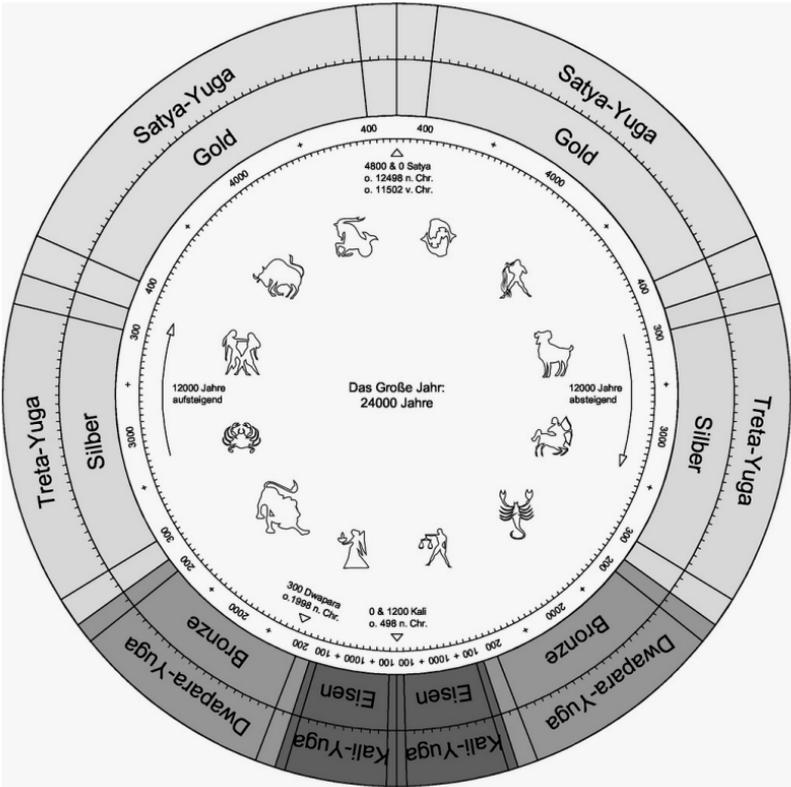
This is the *Premier League* of civilization! It lasts the longest too – stretching for 4’800 years to 12500AD. Unfortunately, after that there’s nowhere left to go but down and the world slowly begins retracing its steps back to ‘Kali Yuga’ over the course of another 12’000 years. This is the equivalent of a successful team’s gradual descent to the bottom of the league. Unlike football leagues, however, these ‘yugas’ are cyclical – so there’s some comfort in knowing that once you hit rock bottom the only way is up! If only football teams were guaranteed promotion each season.

We might wonder whether there’s a ‘destiny’ to all of these seemingly random developments? I firmly believe in destiny (a whole other book could be written on the subject!), but it is a destiny that is shaped by our thoughts and actions. A ‘controllable’ destiny may sound like a contradiction in terms, but consider a hose spouting water. It’s the water’s ‘destiny’ to travel in the direction the hose is facing, and yet the direction of the hose can be changed at any time. Put in a sporting context, a ball is ‘destined’ to travel in the direction that a footballer strikes it – but he maintains control over which direction that might be.

In this manner, we’re constantly shaping the future with our actions in the present. Whether collectively or as individuals, we’re setting the tone with our thoughts. Our lives, and indeed the universe itself, must contort itself to honour these intentions – for better or worse. If it’s a footballer’s intention to strike a ball then his body subconsciously goes through numerous stages to make it possible – from cocking his leg back to swinging it towards the target. If we were to inspect that process halfway through, we might wonder what the individual was up to and mock his strange pose! Likewise, life often

looks strange when we over-analyze during a process of change. We behold it to be ‘unpleasant’ when it is in fact evolving into something beautiful. We behold it to be ‘unfair’ when it is in fact perfectly just. And we behold it to be ‘chaotic’ when there is in fact order. If we could see the centuries fly by like seconds, as God no doubt does, then the power of our thoughts would be more apparent.

Indeed, some religions maintain that the entire universe is such a ‘thought’ of God’s. It was his desire that this physical playground should evolve into being, resplendent with meaningful experiences to be had. But the only way that would work is if we had the ‘free will’ to have experiences in the first place. It turns out that God’s will is OUR will! Paradoxically, it is our ‘destiny’ to have free will. And so our thoughts commingle with this original one to shape a constantly changing experience. The more in-tune our thoughts are with the source, the more smoothly life flows. Only when we resist the flow do we behold ourselves to be ‘drowning’...



Hindus consider the universe to evolve through 4 increasingly sophisticated stages – rather like the leagues in football.



Enlightenment is comparable to winning the *Champions League*!

19. THE PILGRIMS

“Where two or more are gathered together in my name,
there I am in the midst of them.”

- *Matthew 18:20*

Thousands of loyal fans can be found supporting their team through good times and bad. As I mentioned in the introduction to this book, this is where comparisons to religion are most poignant. Spectacular stadiums now adorn each city as surely as a church or cathedral, and just as much funding and artistry goes into building them. Inside, we find images of sporting legends adorning the walls like stained glass windows – along with trophies of silver and gold that are cherished like religious artefacts. And, of course, this elaborate institution is funded by the generosity of the faithful – who reach into their pockets and fill the coffers to safeguard its future. Unfortunately, the sports fan doesn’t get to choose how much money he puts into the collection plate! At the turnstile, he is forcibly charged considerably more to enter his place of worship.

Even so, a significant number of the population pour into these venues on a weekly basis – demonstrating where they would prefer to spend their time. The weekend has of course been traditionally associated with a religious “day of rest”, which was dedicated to more peaceful pursuits than sport. This can be traced back to the story of creation in *Genesis*, where God himself “rests on the 7th day” after spending the previous 6 days shaping the universe. As commanded by Moses, Jews then took it upon themselves to follow suit by setting aside a day to contemplate life instead of getting lost in it. As John

Lennon famously quoted, “Life is what happens while you’re making other plans.”

For Jews, this weekly period of reflection (the ‘Sabbath’) straddles Friday evening and most of Saturday. Muslims also take Friday evening to be the most sacred time for prayers. It was only under Christianity that the Sabbath moved to the widely accepted day of Sunday. As well as distinguishing the movement from Judaism, this switch sanctified the day that Jesus rose from the dead (whilst conveniently conforming to the Roman schedule).

Traditionally, people have refrained from work on this day and all other commercial activities have come to a halt accordingly. This level of piety has been resisted by an increasingly secular world that demands the freedom to treat Sunday like any other day. As well they might. Jesus famously argued that “The Sabbath was made for man – not man for the Sabbath.” In other words, it’s supposed to be there to improve your life. If it doesn’t then you’re perfectly entitled to question it. But if the individual isn’t taking Sunday as their moment of reflection, when are they doing it? The answer is that they’re probably not, which is what alarms religions that teach that external peace comes from internal peace.

People invariably destroy the peace of Sunday and then fail to replace it elsewhere in the week, which is a regrettable development. It scarcely matters when you take a day off from worldly distractions, but to never take one at all is considered intellectual suicide! People often claim to “switch off” in front of the TV or by listening to music, but nothing could be further from the truth. Your mind is far from ‘peaceful’ when it is filled with a cacophony of noise and hypnotized

by images. You've merely emptied the mind of one thing and replaced it with another, creating the illusion of 'rest'. As meditation dictates, what the mind truly needs to regain sanity is silence and stillness. A masterpiece can only be heard against a backdrop of silence – not amid noise.

Our clumsy attitude to rest is symptomatic of a civilization that is utterly consumed with the material and has no spiritual dimension, no sense of perspective. The sportsman knows better than any other how important it is to take a break from one's normal regime. We imagine them pottering around all week doing nothing prior to a big performance, but the reality is that they're training for as many hours as we tend to our regular jobs (if not more!). The irony is that muscles do all their growing when they're NOT being used, so it's important to completely switch off for a day or two to allow one's body to recalibrate itself.

We often see our favourite players being 'rested' on the bench so that they can be more effective somewhere else down the line. This is a 'holy' day in the most literal sense because it makes them WHOLE again! It returns them to their full potential and protects them from self-destruction. As surely as their careers benefit from these "days of rest", we must ensure that our lives benefit from one of a spiritual kind. A period in which we do the OPPOSITE of what we were doing the 6 days previously. A quiet moment of reflection where we're alone with ourselves and have an opportunity to fix what we find to be breaking. That's why Jews are so serious about not doing any 'work' on the Sabbath. It doesn't refer to a job of work so much as strenuous activity of any kind – such as cooking and cleaning, etc. The things that were

occupying our minds throughout the week are to be dispelled on the Sabbath; shedding our material burdens and allowing the spiritual to shine through once more. As surely as a sportsman toils in the gym all week and then excels on the pitch, so too must a spiritual man set aside a time to enjoy the qualities he has cultivated.

There's also the question of who you take time off WITH. The great benefit of having a universally accepted day of rest was that you could be sure your loved ones would be free to spend the day with you. It's rather like when sports fans are compelled to watch a match that takes place at a specified time and place. Their devotion is focused on a point in time and is all the more effective for it.

The sense of camaraderie at sporting events is not dissimilar to what religious people get out of communal worship. It is, after all, an opportunity to bond with like-minded people – people who share your passion for both the sport in question and the particular team or player. When a man enters a church or mosque, he knows he's amongst people who share his belief in God AND his preference for the wisdom of a particular prophet such as Jesus or Muhammad. This might seldom be the case in the outside world, where persecution and ridicule awaits. It's rather like being a fan of a lesser known sport or an unpopular team! That's how I felt when I was a fan of American wrestling living in England. It was a rarity to meet people in the same situation and made it all the more special when we congregated at a rare event this side of the Atlantic.

Such fans even take to identifying themselves with their choice of clothing – rather like religious individuals do. We wrestling fans could often be found wearing branded t-shirts with distinctive logos, rather

like traditional sports fans take to wearing the authentic shirt of their favourite team or player. It demonstrates where their allegiances lie and recommends them to anybody of like mind. This is essentially what religious people are trying to achieve when they wear Christian crosses, Jewish caps, Buddhist beads, or ethnic dress. In addition to bringing their deity or prophet to remembrance, it also binds them to their fellow believers and creates a sense of camaraderie.

Throughout history, we've also seen religious believers branded against their will. The most poignant example is the plight of Jehovah's Witnesses during the Holocaust in World War II. They had incurred Hitler's wrath by refusing to acknowledge his authority and were forced to identify themselves with purple triangles. Although it singled them out for persecution, it also inadvertently created a brotherhood that each could draw strength from! Instead of suppressing their resistance it only strengthened it – resulting in some 5'000 martyrs losing their lives.

Historic moments resonate with both sports fans and religious believers alike. One of the cornerstones of religious belief is a healthy regard for the places and events that shaped a particular faith. Believers can be found gravitating towards particular places in what are known as 'pilgrimages'. Most famously in Islam, where a pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) is a 'pillar' of the faith that every Muslim must undertake at some point. Here they see the sacred monument (the *Ka'ba*) that Muhammad liberated from the pagans and purified for Muslim worship – along with several surrounding landmarks that are significant to both Jews and Muslims.

A religious believer cherishes standing on such ground as surely as a sports fan stands in awe at the gates of his favourite team's stadium. Encased within are decades of memories that stir the passions of the individual. Indeed, the stadium or pitch as a focus of attention is comparable to the landmarks that religious people choose as an object of worship. Most famously, Jews pray towards the temple ruins in Jerusalem while Muslims pray towards the cube-like Ka'ba in Mecca. Like the crowd at a sporting event, the thoughts of thousands of like-minded people are concentrated on one particular place and become all the more powerful for it.

Even when stadiums are not in use, fans still gravitate towards them to express their innermost feelings. As I write this, the legendary English manager Bobby Robson has died – and fans can be seen pouring into Newcastle United's ground where they lay wreathes in his memory. Earlier in the year, Liverpool's Anfield was actually the venue of a memorial service for those that perished in the Hillsborough disaster of 1989. As a priest stood in the middle of the ground and conducted a service before thousands in attendance, the connection between sport and faith was abundantly clear.

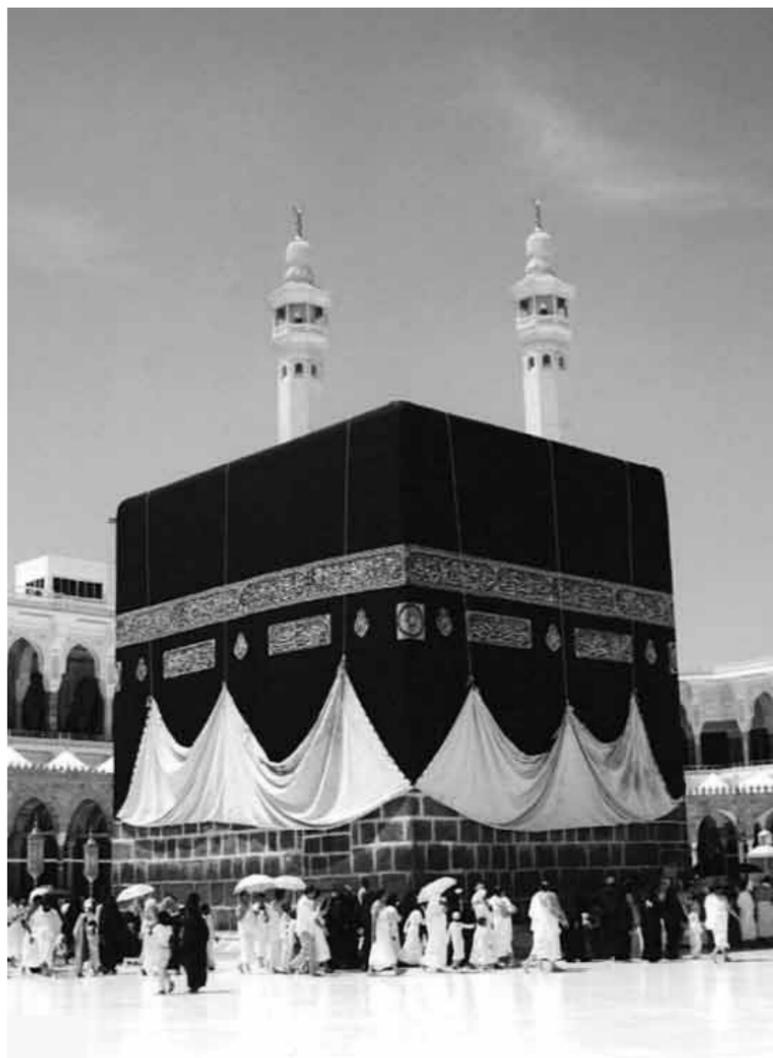
That football-themed memorial service also drew out a great many other spiritual similarities. Those in attendance sang and chanted in unison as if they were stood in church on a Sunday morning (although the content was considerably different!). It's one of the great joys of attending a sporting event, as the congregation unite to see a desired result and will it to come to pass. Going back to the original metaphor of one's life being a stint on the pitch, it occurs to me that the cheering fans are the 'angels'. From their lofty vantage point, they will the

sportsman to succeed and offer guidance in chorus. The sportsman doesn't know them personally – as surely as we can't sense angelic beings – but he nonetheless benefits from their presence. Their will seeps into his actions and the two become one.

This sense of unity was made vividly clear to me when I went to see England play at Old Trafford one time. Before the game, each spectator found a coloured sheet of paper at his seat which we were asked to hold up at the appropriate time. Upon doing so, our combined efforts painted an image of the English flag that rippled throughout the whole stadium! Individually we were insignificant, but collectively we were revealed to be important to the bigger picture. On that day in that stadium, the meaning of life was taught as effectively as in any temple...



Football fans gravitate to stadiums to pay their respects.



Religious people have their own focus of attention.

20. THE BARMY ARMY

“The challenge of the world today is that the civil
aren’t organized and the organized aren’t civil.”

- *Jimmy Breslin*

Of course, not all sports fan are angelic forces of good. One of the most poignant similarities to religion is that a negative contingent can spoil the positive atmosphere. A loud minority of hooligans can leave a sport (namely football) with a violent reputation. We often see this in religion nowadays, as the original teachings are dragged in a violent direction by misguided extremists. The parallels to hooliganism are plain to see, because terrorists aren’t really ‘religious’ – just like hooligans aren’t really football ‘fans’. They’ve merely hijacked a gathering to indulge their violent, hateful agenda. For them, the heightened passions of a sporting event are an excuse to crack skulls – not a reason!

Likewise, the terrorist or warmonger hijacks religion to achieve some sort of political goal. Even if he does genuinely believe in a religious cause, it is a thoroughly misguided brand of religion that he subscribes to. Islam is often accused of being a warmongering religion, but it’s far more peaceful than people give it credit for. Although it accepts that war is occasionally necessary (or at least was at the time), the *Qur’an* places more rules on it than the Geneva Convention! The individual must not be fuelled by hate, must not harm the innocent (including the environment), and hostilities should end at the first possible opportunity. Terrorism fails on every single count and cannot accurately be described as ‘religious’ in motive. Very few wars can.

The reason we see these similarities between religious warfare and sporting aggression is that it is ultimately an issue of human frailty, which can be roused by any petty dispute. Club and country are little more than banners that warring tribes seek to rally behind. This is plain to see when we inspect the clashes between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland and elsewhere. It's supposedly a 'religious' dispute, but when was the last time you saw the participants engaged in a theological debate? It's not *Bible* references that they're firing at each other!

Very few people even know what the differences between Catholics and Protestants actually are, and couldn't construct an argument either way even if they had to. They're merely labels that the individual has been brought up with and now staunchly defends like any other family member. This is vividly represented by the two Scottish football clubs Celtic and Rangers – whose volatile fans are said to be Catholic and Protestant respectively. As with Manchester United and Manchester City, they even emanate from the same town and manage to divide themselves! It's merely a tradition though, and lacks the philosophical dimension that religion would require.

Movements of any kind become so big that they inevitably divide and evolve. The more minds are involved, the more likely it is that an independent thought will demand change. This is essentially what led to the famed 'Reformation' of Christianity in the 16th century. The religion had become so widespread that people such as Martin Luther and John Calvin began to take exception to the power held by the Pope and found support for their own ideas. The opportunity to interpret scripture for ourselves was wrested away from the Catholic Church and

gave rise to the many alternative brands of Christianity that we see today (for better or worse).

We see this in almost every other religion too. In the Islamic world, believers are divided into ‘Shi’ites’ that revere the bloodline of Muhammad’s son-in-law Ali and ‘Sunnis’ that prefer to democratically elect the most suitable leaders – whoever they may be. Even peaceful Buddhists find themselves divided into those that preserve the original teachings of the Buddha (‘Theravada’) and those that took it upon themselves to add to the philosophy (‘Mahayana’).

It’s a kind of cultural evolution that isn’t dissimilar to the way sports evolved. Football itself was a by-product of rugby that sought to use the feet more than the hands. A movement becomes big, an independent thought demands change, and a new movement is born. Rugby as it survived even managed to evolve into two different forms with alternative rules – “Rugby League” and “Rugby Union”. Evidently, the desire to change and adapt isn’t exclusive to religion – it’s a human instinct.

Even so, with all these dividing lines it’s fashionable to claim that religion is responsible for many of the conflicts in the world. A growing army of atheists seek to convince us that there would be fewer wars without it – as if Israelis and Palestinians would stop competing over land and power if there was no God?! The trouble in the Middle East is obviously a political dispute with a racial undercurrent. Once again, we’re talking about banners that fallible humans rally behind.

As far as religion is concerned, Jews and Muslims actually have a lot in common so it’s hard to divide them along those lines. In the early days of his movement, the Prophet Muhammad found more support in

the Jewish community of Medina than his native Mecca and adopted their way of life. Christianity is Judaism plus Jesus, and Islam is Christianity plus Muhammad. All 3 faiths enjoy a shared history and philosophy. Only human insecurity divides them. As far as scripture is concerned, the 29th *Surah* of the *Qur'an* states that religious factions shouldn't even DISAGREE with each other (let alone fight) "lest it be in a pleasant manner."

It's rather like David Beckham playing for 3 clubs throughout his career – Manchester United, Real Madrid, and LA Galaxy. The fans of each may argue as to who has him now, who has him next, and who had him best – but deep down they should all be united in their love of the same sport and the same man. Or perhaps religion is a team whose shirt has been worn by many iconic players. People have their own favourite era and scoff at opposing views. Jews cherish the early days of the 60's and 70's, Christians celebrate the advances of the 1980's, and Muslims believe the game reached perfection in the 1990's. Beneath their superficial preferences, they're all fans of the same sport and the team. Whichever way you cut it, the similarities between religions far outweigh their differences. The similarities are significant and plentiful; the differences are trivial and few.

If there's any merit to claim that religion causes conflict then it depends what we mean by 'religion'. There's a difference between the principles a religion was founded on and the principles it comes to represent in the hands of later generations. We're often reminded of the barbaric 'Crusades' in the name of Christianity and Islam, but is something done "in the name of" the same as it being "thoroughly endorsed by"? Of course not. You're responsible for the latter but you

have no control over the former! Your movement is at the mercy of anybody who takes it upon themselves to do something “in your name”. When I made computer games for a living, the violent content was regularly held responsible for inspiring some kind of negative behaviour or other. Such faulty reasoning obviously lacks credibility. As I said at the time, “the weakest links are the easiest to make.” At the end of the day, an individual must always take responsibility for their actions. Neither religion nor the media has the power to influence your actions unless you allow it to.

In any case, Jesus himself gave us dozens of quotes that caution against the folly of waging war – from asking us to “love our enemies” to pointing out that his kingdom is “not of this world” (and therefore doesn’t need to be fought for). Is a man ‘religious’ if he contradicts everything the religion in question stands for? I suspect not. As the lesser known *Gospel Of Philip* points out, “Some people pretend to be Christians and some people ARE Christians.” It’s like a sports fan claiming to play for a professional team just because he happens to be wearing the shirt. ANYBODY can buy the shirt! It doesn’t automatically qualify him to play at the highest level. Nor can extremists lay claim to Godliness simply because they adopt the guise of piety.

In his inexplicably popular tirade against religion, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins takes this warped logic to new heights by claiming “there are more religious people in prison than there are atheists.” Statistically speaking, there are indeed a significant number of people in prison that would profess a faith. But how sincere do you suppose that faith is? Could we accurately describe them as ‘men of

God' at the moment they committed a crime? Or is it more accurate to say that they found God after the fact? Even then they may only pretend as much to make their life inside easier!

The average criminal is of course an atheist, devoid of a moral compass. Mention the word 'God' to a group of feral yobs and you will be howled at with derision. This is the negative contingent that more intelligent atheists must accept as company. They have 'terrorists' of their own who reflect badly on them.

It's a classic example of what a sports fan would denounce as a 'glory supporter' – those that profess an allegiance to whichever team happens to be doing well. It's an allegiance that lacks sincerity and falters under questioning. The religious version is no different. Those that profess a faith for spurious reasons are easily found out and don't do a good job of representing the side. It's a kind of intellectual 'terrorism' that does more harm than good.

There's a difference between those who appear to be religious and those who genuinely are. You'll never see the latter waging war with a smile on his face. Likewise, you'll never see a true sports fan getting embroiled in scuffles and acts of vandalism. Win or lose, he'll be too busying enjoying his favourite pastime to hold hate in his heart...



Gatherings are hijacked by hooligans and terrorists alike.



21. THE POWER OF PRAYER

“You don’t ask God to give you things;
you depend on God for your inner theme.”

- Bruce Lee

Upon uniting behind their team, sports fans can often be found ‘praying’ for the desired result. This is one of the most overtly spiritual similarities between religion and sport. Regardless of their beliefs, a tense moment can cause an individual to look skyward and hope that events unfold in their favour. Towards the end of a game when a goal is desperately needed, the camera repeatedly cuts to the crowd to reveal closed eyes, clasped hands, and mumbling lips.

When I was too young to know any better, I fondly recall ‘praying’ that England would score in extra time to defeat Germany in *Euro 96* and go through to the final. With that, the ball rolled across an open goal and Paul Gascoigne lunged towards it... only to miss it by a couple of inches. Such wishful thinking is, of course, of no avail. Not because prayers are without merit and there’s no God to pray to – but because a deity doesn’t particularly care who wins a mortal sporting contest! As we’ve established elsewhere in this book, there’s a discrepancy between the spiritual world and the physical world – one that fallible humans have a hard time coming to terms with.

There’s a telling scene in an episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer is pitted against his neighbour, Ned Flanders, in a golfing tournament. He stumbles upon Flanders praying and exclaims, “I just prayed to God too and we can’t BOTH win!” It sums up the way most people view God’s involvement in sporting contests. Whoever asks him

first gets a helping hand from on high! Whenever I saw footage of Muhammad Ali praying before a fight and claiming to have God “on his side”, I would often wonder to what extent it was true. He certainly seemed to be a blessed individual, but did God really favour him to win more than his opponent? What if his opponent was equally religious and prayed equally hard?

The answer to this conundrum is that it’s not actually about ‘winning’. Flanders sums up the religious view perfectly when he assures Homer, “I was praying that nobody gets hurt.” People assume that prayer is about ‘wishing’ for valuable possessions and favourable outcomes, but that’s not how it works in the mind of a truly religious man. The whole point is that the spiritual man is BEYOND wanting those worldly benefits for himself! His prayer is an intellectual dialogue with life itself, which helps him understand events as they unfold – whatever those events may be. He doesn’t pray for a favourable outcome – he prays for the strength to handle ANY outcome! The notion of losing might even enter his mind, and he’ll pray that there’s a lesson to be learned from that too. Indeed, the Jewish term for ‘prayer’ is *l’hitpalel* – which means to ‘judge’ oneself. It’s an introspective examination of your psychological make-up – not a casual flick through the *Argos* catalogue.

I once caught my mother praying that she would win the lottery and offered that instead of praying to be rich, she should pray to realize that she’s ALREADY rich! God isn’t interested in making you a millionaire in the material sense. For all you know, that could do more harm than good. I’m often taken aback when I watch the pseudo-spiritual game show *Deal Or No Deal* and see Noel Edmonds invoking

the power of God to win money for contestants. The God I know is more likely to make you LOSE money than win it! There's more to be learnt from that character-building experience.

God is more impressed if you draw out the value from what you already have. It may be a cliché, but the average person in the west really is 'richer' than they imagine themselves to be. They have pleasant company, nice food, good health, comfortable living conditions, etc. What they're lacking is a sense of perspective on all of the above. Their real gripe is that they're not 'millionaires' – but that's a slippery slope to nowhere. Millionaires are no happier and find themselves wanting to be billionaires. Then billionaires want to rule countries, people who rule countries want to rule worlds, and people who rule worlds want to be Gods. But the irony is that a God wouldn't be so insecure as to want to 'rule' anything in the first place, so it's a self-defeating ambition! Prayer stops the individual thinking in such materialistic terms and allows them to step off the treadmill. There are two ways to be rich. One is to have a lot of money. The other is to not NEED a lot of money! If you have everything you need, you're wealthy by your own standards.

This is one of the reasons that even the less successful teams in sport still manage to find support. Deep down, their fans know that there's more to life than 'winning' constantly. There's a certain charm to cheering for the underdog and willing them to do the impossible. Every little step of progress becomes worth celebrating, whereas fans of the leading teams expect to win every time and nothing means anything. The only emotion they feel is the disappointment of a rare defeat. Being rich in one way makes you poor in another.

When Muhammad Ali was praying all those times, he wasn't praying to 'win' inexplicably. He was perhaps thanking God for the opportunity before him and praying that he gives a good account of himself. Upon having that selfless wish granted, his confident state of mind then invites success. And even if it doesn't, he's equipped with the tools to cope and the initiative to learn from the experience. He then comes back stronger and wins eventually anyway – just like in the *Rocky* movies! We associate Muhammad Ali with success, but he was actually on the back-foot more often than not. It's how he came back from upsets that secured his legacy. As Rocky himself says, "It's not about how hard you hit, it's about how hard you can GET hit and keep coming back."

The spiritual man literally cannot lose because he sees the value in every outcome. That's what Jesus meant when he said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all else will be given to you." A sense of perspective is the solid foundation upon which every other achievement is built. He also pointed out that God "knows what you need before you even ask", which drills home the point that it's not about acquiring possessions – it's about tapping into a state of mind that helps us make life work. This is perhaps why *The Bible* gives us the curious instruction to "pray ceaselessly". It doesn't literally require us to kneel constantly with closed eyes and clasped hands for 24 hours! 'Prayer' in this sense is a prism through which one views life, filtering all of the events of the day through a spiritual perspective. It's what Buddhists refer to as 'mindfulness' – a constant awareness of what you're doing and why.

That's not to say that God is reduced to some sort of 'imaginary friend' that we derive false confidence from. On the contrary, it's my belief that God is a very real and very powerful force – one that prayer systematically helps us to unlock. As understood in the form of meditation (which I've referenced regularly throughout this book), prayer is a means of turning the volume DOWN on the physical and turning the volume UP on the spiritual. Upon doing so, the spiritual seeps into the fabric of your being – like the waters of an ocean that have been invited into an open jar. I believe this produces the moments of clarity and acts of strength that pass for 'miracles' or 'answered prayers'.

We assume that God 'spoke' to lucky individuals like Jesus and Muhammad and then fell silent for a few thousand years. The reality is that God never changed and never went away – WE did! As Neale Donald Walsch points out, "God is speaking to all of us all of the time. The question isn't who hears – the question is who LISTENS?" The reason the average person doesn't perceive God is that they haven't looked properly. They haven't 'tuned' their minds into that frequency through meditative prayer. As Emerson said, "If we see no Gods without, it is because we harbour none within."

That's why sincerity is so important in prayer. It's a two-way process that has more to do with YOU than God. If you smugly ask for a flash car and a nice house, you're duly ignored because your mind isn't in the right place. If it was, you wouldn't ask for such things in the first place! Demanding that items inexplicably materialize suggests that you're not capable of acquiring them any other way. A virtuous individual is more likely to ask for help in achieving something for

himself – not for it to be done entirely on his behalf. It’s like when people wish with all of their might, “I WANT TO BE RICH!” Indeed you do. You ‘want’ to be rich – and will remain ‘wanting’ forevermore! The mantra “I want never gets” has never been more appropriate. A worthy candidate would have a blueprint to success all mapped out and would ask only for a nudge in the right direction. As a Muslim proverb puts it, “Deserve before you desire.”

It’s one of life’s little ironies that we often get the OPPOSITE of what we claim to want or need. There is actually method to this apparent madness. As we’ve established, nothing exists in any meaningful way without its opposite – including those things we desire. You can’t experience rest until you’ve experienced work, you can’t be rich until you’ve been poor, you can’t love until you’ve lost, and you can’t feel warmth until you’ve felt cold. When we desire something, we subconsciously invite the perfect scenario to feel it fully – the catch is that we don’t like the journey as much as the destination!

We see this dynamic played out in sporting contests. When an athlete seeks to achieve something, it doesn’t happen effortlessly. On the contrary, his ambition draws him into a competition where he must do battle with a series of opponents. The desire to win invites the risk of failure, the desire to celebrate invites the task of work. Our desires are constantly creating mountains that we have to climb. That’s why it’s important to intellectualize them and deploy them wisely. Failure to do so would be like an athlete signing up for every single tournament that’s going!

We might contemplate how we can control such a powerful dynamic. I vividly recall staring at a leaf at a tram stop one day and

wondering whether I might be able to move it with my mind. With that, a tram suddenly screamed down the line and blew the leaf away! I gave a chastened chuckle to the deity that was teaching me a valuable lesson. What I proposed to do with my mind was more effortlessly achieved by conventional methods. Sometimes the easiest answer is right in front of your face. As Bruce Lee once said to a student that kept inquiring about inane tricks, "If you want to break something, use a hammer." God didn't create this physical world so that he could make a mockery of it with miracles every 5 minutes.

Above all else, the thoughts of the average person haven't passed through the purifying waters of divinity and are of little consequence. It's like a sportsman thrashing away at a ball that he doesn't possess! His talentless limbs are swinging at thin air, and yet he still desires to score the most wonderful of goals. The ball of consciousness must first be collected from the stillness of your mind. Only then can you advance on your goal with any hope of success.

Scientific investigations into prayer are often scuppered by a lack of sincerity. Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, mockingly 'prayed' over one plot of land in favour of another to see what difference it would make. Rather predictably, he then smugly declared that there was scarcely any difference at all. In fact, the 'blessed' land had become LESS fertile! We see similarly bungled experiments where hospital patients are 'prayed' for with dubious results. None of these secular explorations of prayer get to the heart of the matter – which is that enlightened people must focus on a worthwhile goal. Any scientific test is doomed to fail simply by virtue of it being a 'test'! As Pope Benedict XVI illustrates, "The arrogance that would make God an

object and impose experiments upon him is incapable of finding him.” It’s like banging a drum whilst parading through the forest in search for a rare bird. Your approach compromises the very thing you seek to find.

Jesus would often delight at ignoring people that demanded to see a miracle from him – as if the approval of a dead-eyed sceptic was so valuable that he would contort the fabric of existence to attain it! It’s like an athlete being stopped in the street and asked to ‘prove’ how good he is to a curious member of the public. He knows what he’s capable of and has no intention of jumping through hoops like a circus animal. He may do so if he’s in good company and feels the time is right, but he’s under no obligation to do so.

The Prophet Muhammad had to endure similar taunts. A perceptive line from the *Qur’an* points out that their receiving a ‘sign’ wouldn’t make any difference anyway. They would only attribute it to ‘witchcraft’ and continue living in much the same way as before. It’s their underlying attitude that is at fault. No amount of sorcery could knock them onto a spiritual path. In fact, it would only prolong their fascination with all things material.

The quality of ‘faith’ is ascribed to those who are more spiritually receptive. This has caused much confusion over the years because the word can have various connotations. Critics take it to mean a blind belief that God exists and religion has value when these things may not be true. This is taking things ‘on faith’ and doesn’t do justice to the definition of ‘faith’ itself in the spiritual sense. The convictions a religious person arrives at are far more empirical than critics assume. As Os Guinness articulated, “Faith does not feed on thin air but on facts.” The individual draws on ‘facts’ to support their world view. They

didn't wake up one morning and decide to embrace a set of values for no reason! They observe nature, draw on personal experience, and deduce what they find in scripture to be true. They 'reason' that a religious world view makes sense and has value. That faculty is not the exclusive domain of the cynical atheist. It obviously works for them on some level. Nobody would pursue a course of action that didn't. It's like a recipe book that delivers exactly what it promises – at least in the hands of an accomplished cook!

Above all else, a truly spiritual person has entered into a relationship with the deity they profess a belief in. They don't doubt God's existence any more than they doubt the existence of their biological mother! It's not up for discussion. The problem is that it's a deeply subjective experience that cannot be articulated to others. I liken it to playing the piano. A guest at my house may stab at the keys and protest that it's 'impossible' to play. I confidently assure them it is, drawing on my own personal experience, but there's nothing I can do to instantly pass on a knowledge and skill that took years to acquire. Spiritual mastery is the same. It takes a lot of time and effort to peel back the layers of mortality and let divinity shine through. It's of no avail when a cynic closes their eyes for a few minutes and declares, "Nope, nothing there." It's like tossing a seed into a heap of soil and demanding to see its fruit! Nothing worth achieving is ever easy.

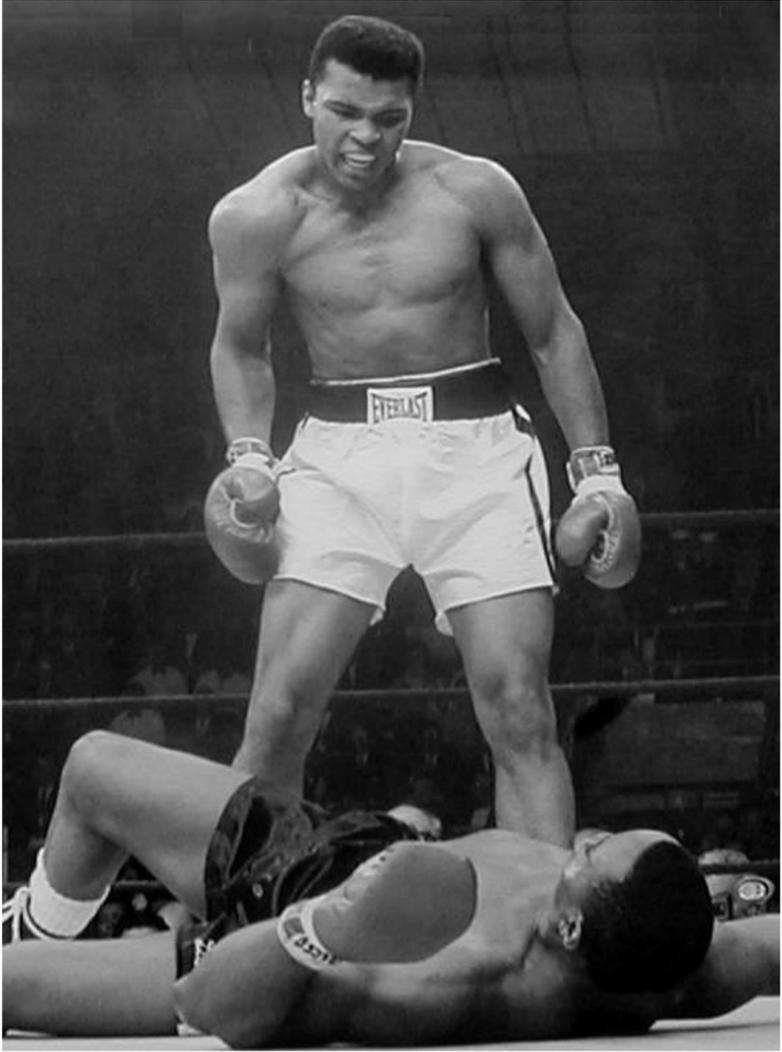
The misunderstanding surrounding 'faith' is that it's actually a MEASURE of this spiritual quality – not a belief that it exists. That's why Jesus uttered those immortal words, "Ye of little faith." If we were dealing with beliefs, he would have said "Ye of NO faith." You can't 'believe' in things to various degrees – you either do or you don't.

Faith, then, is a sliding scale of spiritual prowess. Putting a sporting spin on it, it is perhaps a ‘faith’ in one abilities – not faith that those abilities exist! It’s that measure of confidence which determines an athlete’s ‘form’. His talent exists – of that there is no doubt – but is he fulfilling the potential of that talent? This is what religious people mean by ‘faith’. It’s the ability to unlock your full potential and operate at the highest level.

So going back to those initial prayers offered by fans in a stadium, it seems no petition will convince a deity to grant victory to any particular team. What a sincere prayer will do, however, is elevate your mind to such a state that it doesn’t matter either way. You may not be able to control the events in your life, but you CAN control how you react to those situations – which is practically the same thing. It’s not about changing THE world – it’s about changing YOUR world! And the irony is that upon doing the latter you’ll trigger a chain of events that will make the former increasingly likely. As Gandhi put it, “You must BE the change in the world that you wish to see.”



What is going through this praying child's mind?



Did Muhammad Ali really have God on his side?

22. THE SPECIAL ONES

“I am not a man – I am Cantona!”

- *Eric Cantona*

Those that succeed in making life work on a grand scale are often hailed as ‘stars’ or ‘geniuses’. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in the world of sport, where exceptional players are regularly described in such terms. Although the average sportsman is ridiculed for his mental capacity, the word ‘genius’ isn’t entirely inappropriate. As the football pundit Mike Parry has always argued, the brains of players like Wayne Rooney and David Beckham instinctively make the kind of calculations that would pass for ‘genius’ in any other walk of life. In a split-second, their minds weigh up distances and trajectories – and then their bodies execute the formula perfectly. The only caveat is that this tends to happen sub-consciously, but that’s true of a great many other talents – such as those that predispose Mozart to play the piano or Shakespeare to compose a verse.

There’s a certain amount of snobbery that dooms the athlete’s achievements to be overlooked in all but the most superficial sense. This actually invites comparisons to religion, where standards tend to be reversed and the most lowly are often found to be the most virtuous! As Jesus himself said, “The greatest among you would be the least” and “the last shall be first and the first shall be last.” It’s a sentiment drilled home by St Paul at *1 Corinthians 1:27*, where he praises God for “empowering who the world considers foolish in order to shame the wise.” In his view, the conventionally ‘wise’ are actually the fools and

true genius is to be found in the most unlikely places. We also see this in Islam courtesy of the Prophet Muhammad himself, who could neither read nor write and yet enchanted his followers with the poetic revelations of the *Qur'an*. It's not dissimilar to the way inarticulate footballers are now chosen to be unlikely ambassadors for human potential!

I was once put on the spot and asked to define what I thought the elusive quality of 'talent' actually is. My response touched on many of the things we've discussed here – the idea of divine perfection shining through a fallible human instrument. It's my belief that a man is at his best – physically and mentally – when his mortality is toned down and his divinity is turned up. I liken it to the sun shining through a clear window, as opposed to struggling through a murky or distorted one. In Chapter 6, that was my definition of the 'son of God' – somebody that shines with the full brilliance of the force behind him. It's more like the SUN of God than the 'son' of God!

Not that we can put too much of a spiritual slant on it, because the 'geniuses' in question here are seldom religious. In the case of sport they tend to be anything but, and can be numbered among the most worldly and sense-enslaved of men! But that's beside the point, because a man can still enjoy the fruits of divinity even if he stumbles upon it accidentally. Going back to the window analogy, talented people are perhaps otherwise murky panes that have had the good fortune to let a slither of sunlight through. It just so happens that the light they allow in is shining on a particularly interesting part of the room – one that attracts the attention of a great many visitors! As

blessed as their existence may be, they would do well to purify the whole window and illuminate every corner of their existence.

When I think back to my school days with Matthew Sparrow of Scunthorpe United, his childhood was no different to anybody else's. Until the age of 16, he ate the same food, did the same things, and attended the same classes. Although he obviously works hard at it now, it's fair to say that his 10 year old self didn't do an awful lot to acquire the skill. He was just born with an innate ability to make a football respond to his will, which inevitably resulted in an enthusiasm for doing so. That confident state of mind is ultimately what turned a pastime into a profession. His genetic make-up may have kindled the flame, but it was his love of the light that kept it burning.

Few would dispute that there is a mental element to physical achievement. When an otherwise fit athlete fails to perform at his best, we can only assume that the defect is a mental one. It's often referred to as 'form' in the world of sport. A competitor falls in and out of a groove that does his talent justice. It's synonymous with confidence itself, which can make or break an athlete. We see this a lot in football at both sides of the field. A goalkeeper with shattered confidence frets every time an opponent advances on him. Meanwhile, an out of form striker loses faith in his ability to score whenever he has the opportunity. It's a slippery slope that allows one mistake to snowball into a tainted career.

A confident player, on the other hand, has no such trouble and consistently performs at his best (if not surpassing it). He has ascended to a positive state of mind where negativity hardly ever impinges on his actions. His optimism and enthusiasm are constantly exploring avenues

to success – avenues that would be blocked to the fearful individual. In either case, the person tends to have a slender grasp of their ‘form’. Once they’ve lost it, they can’t imagine how they will ever reclaim it. And even when they’ve got it, they can’t quite explain where it came from.

This sense of helplessness causes many competitors to become excessively superstitious. As surely as they are prone to pray, they are also given to pre-match rituals that invite good luck. Sportsmen can often be found touching ‘sacred’ parts of the arena, clinging to a lucky item of clothing, or simply crossing their chests in overtly religious fashion. None of which seems to guarantee success or protect them from harm! But as we saw in the previous chapter, that’s not quite the point. It’s the thought that counts.

Religions are often accused of being similarly ‘superstitious’. All manner of rituals are followed fastidiously in a bid to appease God and invoke his power (with results that are just as questionable as those of our forsaken sportsmen). Although many faiths find themselves veering down this path, it has more to do with human nature than religion. In fact, most religions were founded on arguments AGAINST superstition! In the *Old Testament*, Abraham rebelled against his pagan father’s ‘superstitious’ worship of inanimate objects – preferring instead to develop a relationship with “the one true God”. Muhammad went through this transformation himself in 7th century Arabia, when he purged Mecca of pagan practices and implored people to look to the moral reasoning of the *Qur’an*. And most famously of all, Jesus quarrelled with out-of-touch Jewish clergymen on a daily basis – exposing the folly of observing rules and rituals for no good reason.

The great men of history knew that true power lies WITHIN a man and not outside of him. Although rituals can help to remind us of this fact, they are of no use when they fail to do so.

I would posit that remarkable individuals are accidentally tapping into a spiritual state of mind and temporarily reaping its benefits. Going back to the window analogy, a divine light is constantly circling their dwelling place – but only very occasionally does it peer through a crack in their closed curtains. If they knew where their moments of inspiration were coming from, and purified their windows to invite more light, they would no doubt have more control over this elusive quality of ‘form’. It’s synonymous with what religious people call ‘faith’. As Jesus said, “If you have faith, nothing is impossible for you.”

The martial artist Bruce Lee thought of this in terms of ‘expression’. Like a sharpened tool, it was his belief that the human body should be honed to such a point that it always does the mind justice. The connection between one’s will and one’s actions should be quick and effortless. Upon operating at this level, a man expresses himself perfectly and is truly himself. ‘Form’ wasn’t something that Bruce Lee fell into or out of – it was something he walked on with the conviction of an acrobat! That’s actually the significance of Jesus “walking on water” too. It symbolizes the fact that he was ABOVE that which others ‘drown’ in. The athlete at the mercy of form beholds himself to be either ‘sinking’ or ‘swimming’. The spiritual master does neither and is quite happy to tread on the tumultuous waves of existence.

It occurs to me that a perfect triangle between mind, body and soul is essential to the human experience. Like an ongoing game of *Rock/Paper/Scissors*, you need access to all 3 options to even stand a chance of winning! If you're not playing with a full deck then you're doomed to lose to players that are. Each quality grows stronger with the support of the other and weaker without it. Intelligence without strength leads to insecurity. Strength without intelligence leads to humiliation. And either of them without soul doesn't lead anywhere.

After all, a strong man can choose to be gentle – but a weak man cannot ‘choose’ to be strong. True power lies in the ability to choose; to be in control of life instead of at the mercy of it. Upon reaching this state, one comes to the realization that ANYTHING is possible – at least in terms of scale. For instance, it might not be ‘possible’ for Stephen Hawking to win the heavyweight title – but it IS possible for him to achieve so much in his field that his impact on the world matches that of someone like Muhammad Ali. HOW something is achieved is secondary to WHAT is achieved. There truly is no limit to the latter. Even a brain in a jar can have profound thoughts that change the world! That’s essentially what prayer is – a thought expressed and made all the more valid. As the Buddha famously taught, “All that we are is a product of what we have thought.”

This philosophy is embodied in the “law of attraction” that we hear so much about nowadays. It states that whatever we think of comes to pass on some level – whether those desires are positive or negative, intended or subconscious. The idea has taken on a materialistic twist in order to sell books to those clamouring for wealth, but there’s more to it than that. There’s nothing especially ‘paranormal’ about it either.

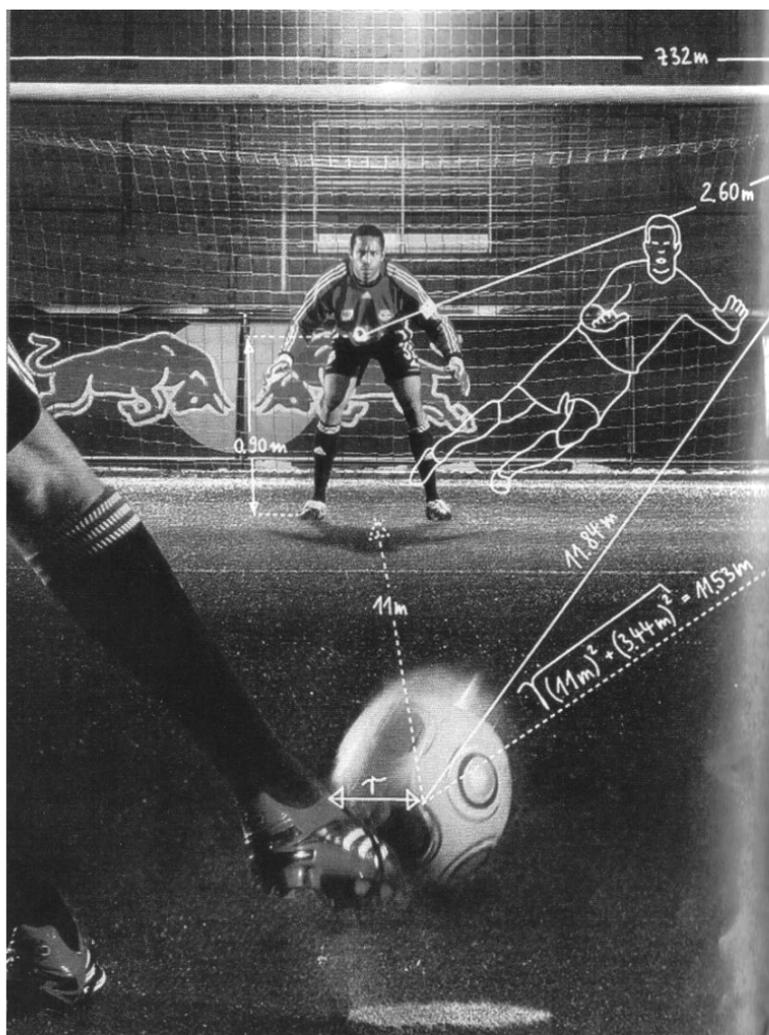
Common sense dictates that you're more likely to achieve something if you give it more thought. Suppose two coaches are plotting on winning a sporting contest. Who's more likely to win – the one that studies the playing field thoroughly or the one that doesn't give it any thought at all? Even if the latter does manage to win, he won't have made life easy for himself! That's what Jose Mourinho meant when he burst onto the football scene proclaiming himself to be "The Special One". He was laying claim to have studied his profession so intently that failure wasn't an option.

It's not a question of 'if' something is possible so much as 'how'? As a programmer, it was something I came to call "The Code". There's always a sequence of events that will lead to what you want to achieve. A certain thing you can do at a certain time in a certain way. As Ronan Keating once sang, "If I said the right words at the right time, you'd be mine." It's just a question of deciphering what those variables are – and then getting on with it once you find out! Most people struggle with the latter. We like to presume that something is 'impossible' because then we have an excuse to avoid trying.

A friend of mine once said that I was 'lucky' to be fulfilling my dream of making games for a living. Although I appreciated the sentiment, it also frustrated me. The word 'luck' made it sound as though I had fallen out of bed one morning and accidentally typed the 250'000 lines of code needed to make a decent game! The reality was that it involved 12 hours of concerted effort every day, 7 days per week. There was a definite connection between what was achieved and my will to do it. As my headmaster used to say, "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity." A focused mind explores every

avenue to achieve its goal and makes success increasingly likely. It's like water gushing forth, navigating every nook and cranny to make progress and refusing to take no for an answer.

We hail these remarkable individuals as 'stars' or worship them as 'Messiahs'. But they come to serve – not to be served. Their greatest gift is that they map out the blueprint to success and inspire us to follow their example. As Mark Twain said, "The truly great make you feel that you too can become great." Or as Jesus himself assured us, "All these things and more will you do." The reason shining examples are called 'stars' is because each one lights up the other...



The calculations a player's brain makes are a kind of genius.



Johnny Wilkinson mentally prepares to take an important kick.

23. SHOW ME THE MONEY

“The trouble with being in the rat race is that
even if you win, you’re still a rat.”

- Lily Tomlin

A key similarity between sporting saints and religious ones is that they both tend to come from humble backgrounds. In addition to “taking the weak and making them strong”, God also seems to have a knack for taking the poor and making them valuable! Krishna was born in a prison, Joseph was sold into slavery, Moses was abandoned in a basket, Muhammad was an orphan, and everybody knows the humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth. Even those that were born into wealth are said to have turned their backs on it – such as the disillusioned prince that became the Buddha.

That’s not to say that being rich is inherently evil and must be vilified at every opportunity. As we shall see, a lot of good can come from the generation of wealth. The religious argument against wealth is that it is a worldly distraction that simultaneously makes one MORE materialistic and LESS spiritual. It’s not exactly ideal if you accept that the meaning of life is to reverse that trend! As Jesus famously said, “It’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to get into heaven.” The 6th *Surah* of the *Qur’an* elaborates on this by portraying wealth as a ‘responsibility’ that very few people can handle. The more money and power you have, the more significant your mistakes are – and the more tempting it is to make them.

Meanwhile, the religious argument in favour of poverty is that it is character building. The poor and oppressed have firsthand experience

of evil, which better equips them to understand it and then combat it. They've felt the harsh hand of the inconsiderate master and they've suffered because of the apathy of the rich. They've seen humanity at its worst and know what humanity at its best should look like. That's why Jesus could utter his socialist mantras with such conviction – from “blessed are the poor” to “the meek shall inherit the earth.”

It's odd that 'poverty' is held up as an excuse for crime in the western world. Surely it should be the other way around? History has shown us that poverty can bind people closer together and make them appreciate what little they have. Some of the most enlightened movements on earth have emerged from humble circumstances – from the camaraderie in the trenches of World War II to the dignified protests of Gandhi and Martin Luther King. The downtrodden should be the last people engaging in anti-social behaviour and vandalizing the property of others. There is indeed a link between crime and poverty. But people aren't wretched because they're poor – they're poor because they're wretched! They fall into that category as an inevitable by-product of being dysfunctional. Such an attitude is hardly a recipe for success.

We see this dynamic in working class sports such as football too. From the streets of England to the plains of Africa, anybody with access to a spherical object can try their hand (or foot?) at it and discover they have a talent that will transform their life. This tends to mean that the average player is relatively poor or of limited intellect. But there's also something quite charming about the way sport overcomes those odds. As with the religious icons, it is as though God has spotted an injustice and determined that it will be rectified through

inexplicable talent! Those that may have otherwise been doomed to a life of poverty-stricken insignificance will be given a ticket to fame and fortune. The meek shall indeed inherit the earth!

It doesn't always pan out that way, however. One of the key differences between a prophet's fate and a celebrity's fate is that the latter is prone to squander his divine inheritance. Instead of making them a benevolent force for good, success can often turn them into the most arrogant and materialistic of beasts. It goes back to what Muhammad warned about it being a huge 'responsibility' that very few can pull off. If you give a starving man a meal, he doesn't devour it with much decorum. Deprive a man of money and respect before showering it on him and the results are equally messy! That's why we see hip hop stars parading their 'bling' in music videos – blissfully unaware that they look crass and ignorant to those with real wealth. Their employers have achieved real success by investing their money rather more wisely. As Chris Rock jokes, there's a difference between being 'rich' and being 'wealthy': "Kobe Bryant is rich. The white man that signs his cheques is WEALTHY!"

Some argue that sport itself has been spoilt by the recent influx of wealth. We certainly see this in football, where Chelsea and Manchester City have been taken over by billionaires and can now buy players for fun! Transfer fees and wages have literally doubled in their hands, creating an obscene difference between wealthy clubs and ordinary clubs. The competition will no doubt suffer, as success becomes increasingly determined by bank balances rather than skill. Romantic dreams of a humble team doing surprisingly well have been replaced by the cold realization that it's no longer possible.

In his own pseudo-spiritual interpretation of sport, *Articles Of Faith*, Russell Brand argues that this is merely a reflection of capitalism in general. I'm not sure I'd agree with that, given that football is free of the restraints that govern every other area of our lives. The economic downturn proves that our system is not foolproof, but the world of business is as thoroughly regulated as common sense will allow. The current plutocracy of Manchester City certainly doesn't exist anywhere outside of football! Even gargantuan success stories such as Bill Gates and *Microsoft* must abide by stringent laws that prevent them having a monopoly. If anything, football's plight is an endorsement of the system we have in the outside world and there will be calls for it to be emulated.

Elsewhere in the world of sport, some people are coming to the realization that democracy itself is not all it's cracked up to be. Ronnie O'Sullivan has recently voiced concerns that the sport of snooker is being held back by its democratic nature. The leading players collectively decide the sport's fate, which means that progress is seldom made in any one direction. He laments that snooker isn't being led by a thrusting, business-minded dictator – which is what people like Bernie Ecclestone bring to *Formula One* racing. Great thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle were railing against democracy as far back as 400BC – pointing out that the masses aren't always qualified to make important decisions. Judging by some election results, they may have had a point!

Football itself could be considered a kind of 'democracy', as thousands of fans are taxed at the gate and consider themselves shareholders in a joint enterprise. They certainly exercise their power to

influence proceedings, as they condemn players or managers that meet their disapproval whilst demanding the appointment of others! It's only the illusion of democracy though. Their ability to influence decisions isn't enshrined in law and remains indirect. The true power lies with one or two wealthy owners, who govern behind closed doors like dictators. I saw this for myself when I was living near Old Trafford at the time Manchester United was taken over by wealthy American businessmen. Passionate fans bristled at the idea of their beloved institution becoming just another corporate enterprise. Their outspoken protests amounted to nothing (and promptly disappeared once the team regained success!), since the club is ultimately none of their business. They were exposed to be little more than customers of a popular brand.

Lest we forget, football as we know it began as a working man's game. It was played by them AND attended by them. It has now evolved into anything but, as soaring ticket prices alienate anybody that would rather eat for a week than watch 90 minutes of football! Purists have had to sit back and watch in terror while their 'beautiful game' mutates into a grotesque monster. Religious believers can empathize with their plight, because they've seen the Church develop from a humble gathering into a multi-billion dollar corporate enterprise. Meanwhile, other faiths such as Islam have seen their religion evolve from one of peace into one synonymous with war. Like football fans, they're left wondering whether to celebrate the fact that their movement is popular or mourn the fact that it has lost its soul.

These negative developments can be opposed though. Wealthy clubs like Manchester City are only as powerful as other people allow them to be. A growing army of brave souls have resisted their attempts

to buy success. Sought-after players such as the Brazilian wonder kid Kaka have turned down jaw-dropping sums of money, while principled managers such as David Moyes of Everton insist that their talent is “not for sale”. Even the powerless fans of Manchester have expressed their dismay by creating their own “FC United” team that upholds traditional values! It’s akin to the way splinter groups separate from mainstream religion, protesting that their needs are not being met. Indeed, that’s exactly how Martin Luther’s ‘Protestant’ movement found itself separating from the Catholic Church.

As Gandhi can testify, one of the most inspiring things about religion is that it shows us how one principled man can bring down entire empires. Moses was expelled from Egypt, but came back to single-handedly liberate his enslaved brethren. Muhammad was hounded out of Mecca, but returned as the triumphant leader of his own movement. And most famously, Jesus was persecuted and executed by the Roman Empire – only to become the state religion of that very empire in later years! Their worldly empire has long since crumbled, but the legacy of the humble man they killed lives on.

Every step of the way, these virtuous individuals resisted the temptation to trade in their spiritual values for worldly satisfaction. Most notably, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness coming to terms with his divine potential. There he was taunted by a satanic influence that encouraged him to abuse his powers in order to rule the world by force. His profound response was that “man cannot live by bread alone.” What does it profit a man to gain the world but lose his soul? Material satisfaction is temporary, but spiritual achievements last forever.

Sportsmen would do well to remember this as they contemplate piling up money at the expense of leaving a genuine legacy. I fondly recall that I refused to accept money for the first computer game I ever made for a client. Instead, I asked that they send me an authentic wrestling belt resplendent in leather and gold. Looking at it rationally, it wasn't a smart move because I could have probably bought several such belts with a cash sum! However, as my sole reward the belt stands as a symbol of the first time my work was ever valuable – and I treasure it as such to this day. In fact, I'm looking at it right now as I write this very sentence! Money would have just been a number in the bank that had long since disappeared.

That which “comes and goes” flows where it will and splashes indiscriminately like the water in a river. No sensible person would build their home on such a surface! It's far better to lay the foundations of your life on the sturdy shores of integrity. Materialism promises everything but delivers nothing. The spiritual life promises nothing but delivers everything...



“What does it profit a man to gain the world but lose his soul?”

24. CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

“You can’t go through life with a catcher’s mitt on each hand.
You have to be able to throw something back.”

- *Alicia Keys*

Money – like religion itself – is often denounced as “the root of all evil”. As in the case of religion, such simplistic rhetoric doesn’t do the matter justice. In my view, money is a kind of ‘energy’ that is neither good nor bad in and of itself – rather like water. Water can be abused to drown you or squirt at you, but it’s not fair to say that the concept of water itself is ‘evil’! On the contrary, the very same substance can be used to quench your thirst or cleanse your body. Likewise, money is neither good nor bad in and of itself. It can indeed be abused to hurt or oppress people, but it can also be used to better one’s circumstances and those of others.

We see this in the current economic situation. The capitalist economy is like a pool of water that is neither perfectly good nor irrevocably evil. In amongst those that happily swim its waters, what are we to make of those that drown? Did they drown because they strayed out of their depth without learning to swim? Or was the pool not regulated properly with enough warning signs? As with all things, it’s a little of both – but one suspects that personal responsibility is paramount. Our attitude to energy harms us more than the energy itself – like a fire that we can either bask in the warmth of or get burnt by.

This line of thinking helps us to grasp the relationship that sports stars have with the energy called money. Specifically, the fact that they seem to receive a disproportionate amount of it! As controversial as it

sounds, they're actually worth every penny that they earn. David Beckham earns as much as he does because he's single-handedly responsible for that many ticket sales and other revenue. The irony is that he's probably UNDERPAID because of political correctness! Like a movie star, he no doubt generates more money than ends up in his pocket. The result is that a fat cat further up the food chain gets even richer at the expense of a truly talented individual.

As we've established, money is a kind of 'energy'. It flows from one person to another, reflecting their innermost desires. For better or worse, it is the desire of millions of people to aim their energy in the direction of sports stars and entertainers. Even if money didn't exist, that goodwill would still manifest itself somehow. The recipient of this adulation would enjoy a privileged life of some description. We even see this with religious icons such as Jesus and Muhammad, who could swan around villages and be feted with food and shelter. When Muhammad first relocated to Medina, the locals would fight over whose house he would stay at!

This positive energy cannot be suppressed – and nor should it. The question is what does the individual do with such resources? Does he spend them wisely or waste them ignorantly? Though we may root for the former, the choice is ultimately his. This is what the *Qur'an* means when it speaks of wealth being a dubious 'responsibility' – one that can backfire as easily as pay off. Christ preferred to think in terms of 'investment'. His "Parable Of The Talents" ('talent' being a currency) saw several people being granted a sum of money. Some invested it wisely and yielded fruit, whereas others squandered it and incurred the wrath of everyone they dealt with. The story isn't actually about money

in the financial sense. It's a metaphor for respecting an energy and using it properly. If you deploy the energy in virtuous deeds then you reap a spiritual harvest and become increasingly powerful. But that very same energy can lead to your downfall if you use it to pursue negative courses of action. Hence the cryptic caveat, "Unto him that hath shall more be added. Unto him that hath not, shall even that which he hath be taken away."

It's one of life's little ironies that true wealth is more about giving money away than hoarding it! After all, you can't give away something you don't have. When you give money away, you're acknowledging that you have it in the first place – and will no doubt have it again. It's a confident course of action that shows you have faith in your ability to make life work. It also increases the chances of goodwill coming back to you. It's rather like blood flowing through the body of mankind rather than clotting in one particular artery. One brings life whereas the other brings death!

Indeed, the quickest way to attain something is to give it to another. As Gandhi said, "You must BE the change in the world that you wish to see." If you want love, make somebody else feel loved. If you want to experience happiness, cause somebody else to be happy. And if you want to be rich, make somebody else feel rich. Whatever you create for another you are guaranteed to partake in. Our lives are all interconnected after all! This is the truth that Jesus was hinting at when he implied that "whatever you do for another you do for me."

This is one of the reasons that charity is so prevalent in religious circles. In addition to wanting to help others, the spiritual master is aware that he doesn't need much money himself. As Jesus himself said,

“I came to serve – not to be served.” Only those that lack something need filling and feel the need to withhold what little they have. The perfected individual gives freely of his infinite abundance. We see this in the generosity of sports stars, who can give away thousands of dollars without missing it. Although their wealth is literal rather than metaphorical! Of the pocket rather than the mind.

Some argue that this is not true charity at all, because the wealthy individual has not gone out of his way to ‘sacrifice’ anything. He hasn’t drawn upon the mental strength to go without so that another may have. There’s a poignant story in the *New Testament* where a poor widow is ridiculed for placing a paltry sum into the temple coffers. Jesus astutely points out that hers was the greatest of all contributions because she gave a significant portion of what little she owned. The others negligently gave of what they had to SPARE. The 9th *Surah* of the *Qur’an* follows up on this sentiment by pointing out that giving of one’s time and energy is worth more than money. This kind of charity has since become known as ‘Sadaqah’ to Muslims. We often see it at work when celebrities take the time to visit people and places instead of throwing money at a problem.

Although huge sums of money – wherever they come from – are of great benefit to others, it says nothing about the giver himself. Religion isn’t always about helping others – it’s just as much about perfecting YOURSELF. Like fasting, charity is a means of cultivating a compassionate and selfless state of mind. Ostentatious acts of generosity do more harm than good in that respect, because the ego is at the forefront of proceedings instead of being trampled underfoot! It

is for this reason that St Paul claimed that “true charity speaketh not” and is more likely to go unnoticed.

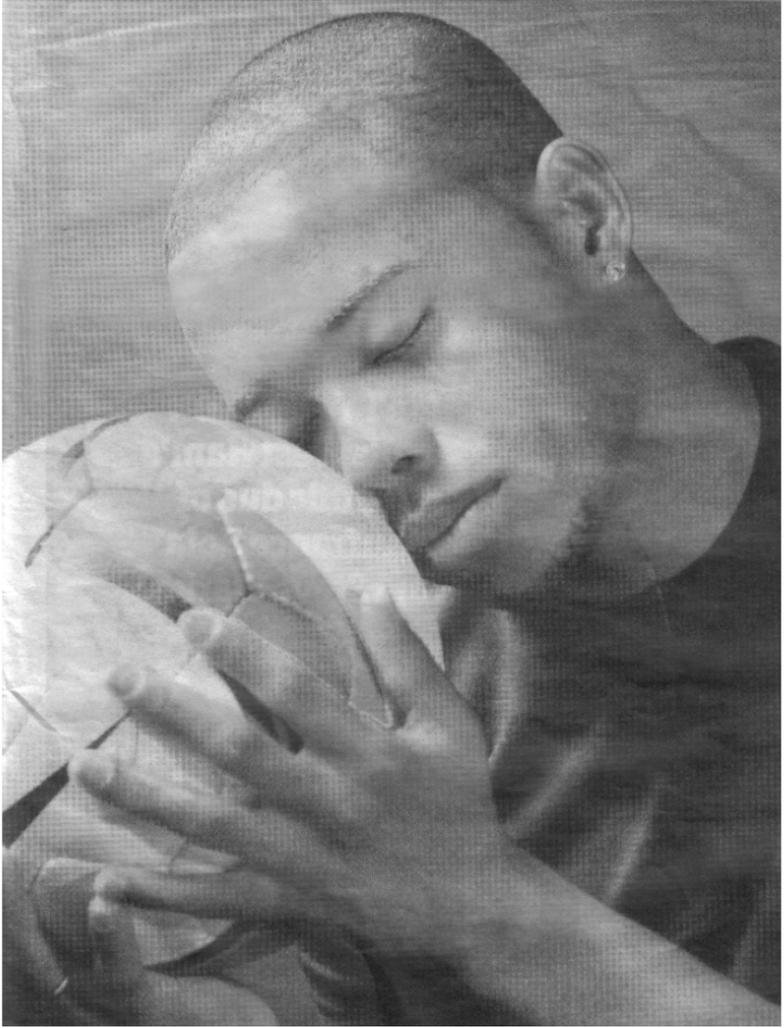
Charity is so central to religion that it is often enshrined in law in what is known as ‘tithing’. Up to 10% of one’s disposable income is supposed to be set aside for charitable causes – which can include funding the religious institution itself. However, this practice originated long before our governments were as benevolent as they are now. Its purpose has been skewed by the fact that people already pay a significant amount of tax to provide a safety net for others. The result is that tithing has more to do with propping up religious movements than providing for the poor per se, which is why people have found it increasingly disagreeable. Sports fans know this all too well as they’re ‘tithed’ themselves at the turnstile and have a limited say as to where their money ends up! They’re often left lamenting the fact that they must break the bank to attend while individual players earn more in a week than they do in a year.

Regardless of their compassion for those less fortunate, both sporting institutions and religious institutions have to tread a thin line between being too generous and being too miserly. Islam speaks of the ‘deserving’ poor and rejects the idea that money should be thrown at people without question – lest it inadvertently perpetuate a self-destructive lifestyle. One of the problems with socialist policies is that it’s a myth that you ‘help’ someone by giving them things. On the contrary, you ROB them of the power to do it for themselves! As the African mantra goes, “Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for one day. Give him a net to catch his own and he’ll eat for a whole year.” When we seek to ‘love’ our neighbours, we must bear in mind that there is such a

thing as TOUGH love! A truly compassionate act is one that empowers the recipient instead of prolonging their misery with a quick fix.

We saw this in sport when David Beckham arrived at *LA Galaxy*, sharing a locker room with players that earn less in a year that he does in a day. As grotesque as it sounds, there's not an awful he can do about it. If he propped up the income of his team-mates by offering to double their salaries, it would create a distorted economic landscape that eventually does more harm than good – not least to the players themselves. Upon being invited to suckle at the teat of David Beckham, they would flail around like helpless kittens in his absence! A temporary act of generosity would have only made them weaker. When an entire system is at fault, it's not the responsibility of any one individual to redress the balance. Or as the popular slogan has it, "Don't hate the player – hate the game." Lasting change requires that the system change itself of its own volition. A few gimmicky gestures on the surface would only create the illusion of change.

Nonetheless, it seems clear to me that both sport and religion are ultimately forces for good in the world. Perhaps that is their greatest connection. They both invite us to look beyond ourselves and buy into a collective consciousness – one that rouses our emotions and turns them into passion for a life well lived...



Compassion is the greatest gift of both sport and religion.

25. THE FINAL WHISTLE

“If the savage one is me, how can there be so much that you don’t know?”

- *Pocahontas*

As the final whistle blows on this unlikely pairing of religion and sport, I should like to re-iterate some of the points that were made. Like a series of action replays, let us analyse some of the goals and near misses. I’m well aware that there will be plenty of the latter! Analogies are notoriously weak, and the many that I’ve called upon to construct this book will no doubt wilt under sustained scrutiny. But as I established in the introduction, that’s not the point. Metaphor exists to point our minds in the right direction – not to announce the discovery of absolute truths. Like a finger pointing to the moon, we do ourselves a disservice by dwelling on the finger. A grander vision awaits if we allow it to draw our eye skyward.

In this secular age, more credence than ever is given to such excessively analytical ways of thinking. Critics of religion, such as Richard Dawkins and his “God Delusion”, are growing increasingly confident that science has all the answers while theology has none. Great swathes of the public fall in behind these bold figureheads, rejoicing that somebody has said what they were thinking. “It’s finally official that God doesn’t exist,” they reason, “It’s all there in that book that biologist wrote.” In the irony to end all ironies, they take this man as their Messiah and revere his book as infallible scripture! Right down to failing to read the damn thing and settling for the basic gist.

What I find most offensive about this development is that atheists lay claim to ‘reason’ and ‘rational thinking’ when atheism can be just as ‘irrational’ itself. In fact, I define it to be an entirely irrational fear of religion! One of the more perceptive things Karl Marx said was that atheism is a kind of ‘protest’ against religious authority. I concur with that – although I see it as an invalid protest whereas he speaks of a valid one. The average atheist is simply annoyed by people that he perceives to be religious, and knows no better way of expressing that annoyance than to reject EVERYTHING and tar everybody with the same brush. Which, rather ironically, is an intensely irrational stance to take! Like a child replacing the teacher at the head of the class, the atheist delights at rebelling against something that was once powerful. Unfortunately, just like that of the child, such a protest lacks credibility.

As I set out in the introduction, this not about being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ so much as having an intelligent opinion. My quarrel with atheism is that it falls far short of the ‘intelligence’ it lays claim to. In fact, I’ve always maintained that I’ve “never met an intelligent atheist.” What I mean by that is one who actually understands the religions he is so scornful of (or even the science he is so sure about!). There’s always something missing. They didn’t know this, they haven’t read that, they heard this, they assumed that. Richard Dawkins himself openly admits that there are religious principles he doesn’t ‘understand’ (although the implication is that nobody does). It’s hard to take such ignorant opposition seriously. They’re so very ‘intelligent’ for having strong opinions about books they’ve never even read, whereas religious people are so very ‘stupid’ for basing their opinions on tireless study?

As Pocahontas famously sang to her arrogant oppressor, “If the savage one is me, how can there be so much that you don’t know?”

One of the advantages I feel I bring to this debate is that I’ve been both an atheist AND a believer. I know how the atheist feels because I’ve thought his thoughts. I know everything he knows PLUS religious insight. He doesn’t know everything I know ‘plus’ cynicism! Or should that be ‘minus’ given that cynicism is such a drain on human potential? Digging back into the dark depths of my atheistic mind, I recall that it seemed obvious that there was no such thing as God or miracles. I certainly never saw either! Or did I? We assume our senses serve us well, but the information they deliver is only as good as the mind that interprets it. If you hand me a series of Chinese characters, I will declare it to be nonsense – but someone who can read Chinese would protest that there is a message to be heard. In this manner, we must also learn to read the language of life.

Whenever I hear worldly people speak of God, they often claim that they only believe in what they can ‘see’ and ‘feel’. Thomas Jefferson, himself a closet atheist, declared that he was “sufficiently occupied with what is so without tormenting myself about what may be.” This is all well and good if our senses do a reliable job of comprehending all there is to comprehend, but the simple fact is they don’t. For a start, you’re not seeing this page as it really is! This is a complex network of energy in the form of billions of jostling atoms. But your brain fills in the gaps and regards it to be a recognizable image in order to make sense of the physical world. If you’ve got that wrong, what else have you got wrong? You may want to start with the assumption that there’s no intelligence lurking behind that energy.

There's a charming anecdote from the 17th century discovery that the earth revolves around the sun (instead of the other way around as we had previously assumed). Two scientists are musing over it and one says that it never occurred to him that the earth would revolve around the sun because it appears as though the sun circles the earth each day. To which the other scientist protests, "What do you imagine it would look like if the earth DID revolve around the sun?!" The answer is of course that it looks the same either way, so we shouldn't have been so quick to rule it out.

I feel this is a fitting question for atheists to ask themselves. What do you imagine the world would look like if there WAS a God? No religion genuinely considers God to be some wizened old man peering out from the sky, so we can stop looking for that. Rather, God is everything and everything is God – so no one manifestation of energy will fit your preconception of a deity. Our perception is at fault – not God's existence. As Karl Jaspers observed, atheists don't disbelieve in God per se – they only reject a version of God they've been presented with. Richard Dawkins himself concedes that his argument is only against God as traditionally understood.

Zen Buddhism has a saying that encapsulates this way of thinking: "Before I studied, a cloud was just a cloud. After I studied, a cloud was no longer a cloud. Now that I understand, a cloud is again just a cloud." Throughout any learning process our perception goes through these changes. In this case, we take the world at face value, then break it down into energy, and finally reconstruct it to appreciate it as it was before – only this time with true understanding rather than ignorance.

Understood this way, science is PART of spiritual thinking rather than an obstacle to it. It's just that it slots into the middle instead of being the final word. It's a complete and utter myth that science is somehow in conflict with religion. Evolution is the most popular example. We're told it 'disproves' the existence of God. All it 'proves' is that the first chapter of an ancient book doesn't make sense when taken literally! It's not an argument against God existing, nor is it an argument against the story having deep philosophical value (which it assuredly does). Charles Darwin himself retained something of a belief in God, so it's rather odd that his followers would go to extremes that he didn't. As we've established in this very book, followers don't always do justice to the movements they profess to follow.

Science is indeed cutting into religion in many ways – but it's cutting away that which has no value to reveal that which does. It's rather like a plant being pruned only to grow back stronger and more fruitful. Bruce Lee applied this philosophy to his martial arts by advising his students to “absorb what works and reject what doesn't.” Dogmatic doctrines and misunderstandings are being swept away, but that allows the light of religion to shine all the more clearly. This is what Catholics describe as arriving at a “mature faith” – one that has endured criticism and is all the stronger for it. The irony is that Richard Dawkins and co could be doing more for spiritual progress than any religious institution! Evidently, God does indeed use the most unlikely instruments to do his bidding.

Whichever way you look at it, spiritual thinking will become increasingly important as time goes on – not less relevant as so many assume. As we head into a 21st century fraught with self-inflicted

problems of a material nature, the answers to those problems will be spiritual. The religious principles of modest living and selfless sharing will no longer be ‘ideals’ towards which we aspire – they will be essential to our survival as a species. The ‘meek’ will indeed “inherit the earth” because they’ll be the only ones that can make life work! It seems we should embody this wisdom now by choice, rather than being forced to reach for it at an inopportune time.

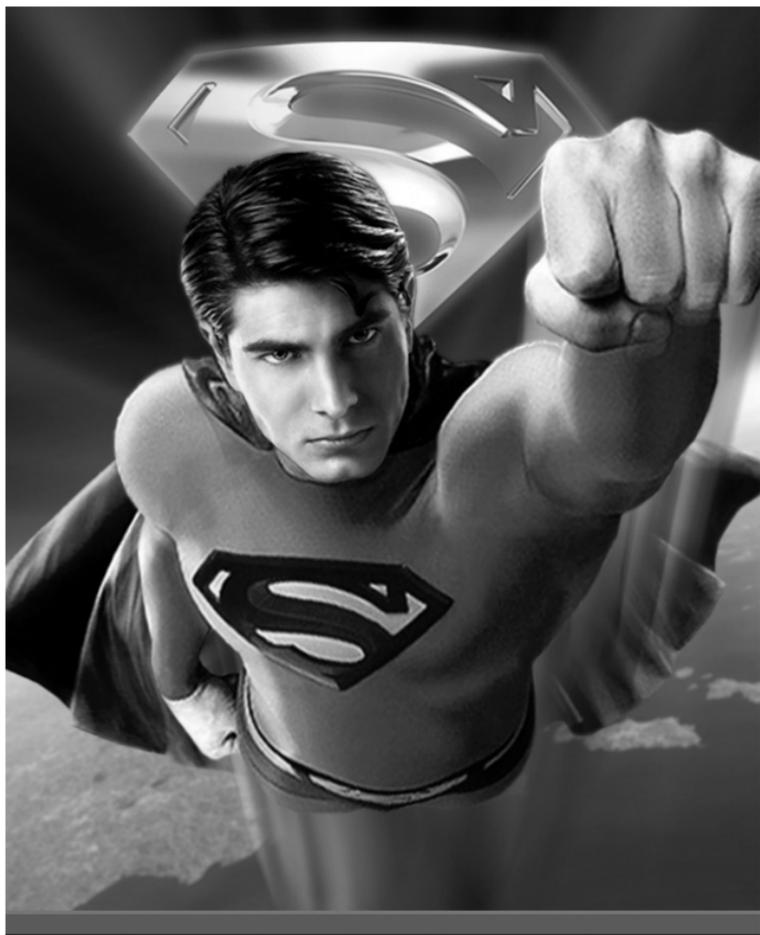
The human ego is also safeguarding the future of religion. So far, egotism has worked against it – as a smug minority of atheists lay claim to ‘intelligence’ while convincing themselves that everyone else is less so. It thrills them to rebel against something that was once so powerful and which most people held dear. But now the pendulum has swung so far the other way that the average person is a dead-eyed atheist, devoid of a spiritual dimension. Like the rats in London, they say you’re never far away from one!

This means that religious people have become a rare and valuable commodity, because it’s remarkable to find one. Amidst a desert of misunderstanding, anyone who genuinely understands religion becomes an oasis of interest. In this manner, religion will become strangely fashionable the more it is persecuted. Christianity, in particular, is on the brink of being reduced to the mystic cult it was to begin with – which might very well be the best thing that ever happened to it. Instead of being populated by millions who are there against their will, it will be attended by thousands who are there by choice. The sincerity harboured therein will represent the faith well. It harks back to that Zen analogy about the perception of a cloud. Religion was once sacrosanct,

is now being torn apart, but will ultimately be revealed to have value again.

In the face of such relentless opposition, I'm often forced to ask myself why I continue to be so fascinated by religion. The answer I keep coming back to is the very same reason I hold sport in such high regard. Religion is self-improvement on a grand scale. As surely as an athlete hones his mind and body to master a sport, the religious man hones his mind and soul to master life itself! Indeed, the Indian definition of religion is "the art of eliminating the suffering caused by ignorance."

All of the weird and wonderful stories found in religious books point to that one elusive goal. When ignorance is trampled underfoot, a man leaves the shackles of mortality behind and reaches for something greater – like a butterfly emerging from its casing and taking to the skies to live a more colourful existence. Once he claims his divine inheritance, a man is the best he can possibly be and performs at the highest level. Who could ask to achieve anything more?



Religion is the art of becoming more than just a man.

COVERING ALL BASES

“Wrestling is an art form. I don’t worry about those who don’t get it; I worry about satisfying those that do.”

- Paul Heyman

As you no doubt gathered, my main focus for this book was the sport of football/soccer – but I sincerely hope the general principles apply to any sporting activity. You may enjoy reinterpreting the various philosophies through the prism of your own favourite pastime! To get you started, here are my thoughts on several other major sports:

WRESTLING

I was a huge fan of professional wrestling growing up and it formed the backbone of my work as a game designer. A whole other book could have been dedicated to it were it not such a niche interest! Given that it’s openly theatrical nowadays, some would even dispute that it’s a legitimate ‘sport’ anyway. That actually works in our favour here though, because the pantomime characters are perfect representations of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ (or ‘Faces’ and ‘Heels’ as wrestling terminology has it).

The fact that their enmity is not real (in theory!) is also symbolic of how the world is an illusion that we sometimes take too seriously. We may be dismayed when our heroes take a beating and lose, but it’s all part of a greater story arc. Wrestling is renowned for using ‘angles’ to sew the seeds of something bigger. When the big matches do finally take place and the hero does finally win, it has all the more significance. It’s a perfect example of the merits of delayed gratification.

The ‘double-life’ that wrestling stars are forced to lead is also reminiscent of the relationship between body and soul. A wrestler is just an ordinary guy backstage, but he dons the guise of a character when he emerges through the curtain. Upon doing so, he may purport to be heroic or villainous – but the man underneath retains his true identity. At least we hope so! Suppose he embodied the character a little too much and took it home with him (as some do)? He would be denounced as insane. Likewise, the soul is considered deficient when it identifies too much with its human form. You must remember who you really are if you wish to return to it once the show is over.

This opportunity to enter the ring numerous times is comparable to reincarnation. Indeed, wrestlers are known to ‘reinvent’ themselves as entirely new characters on a regular basis. The soul has many opportunities to enter this worldly arena and perfect its craft. Like a wrestler, it can don the guise of many different characters in the process of doing so. Upon looking back, it remembers each incarnation with fondness and appreciates that they were all essential to the overall career.

The melodramatic fighting in the ring also has something to teach us. It is a vivid representation of the battle between positivity and negativity that rages within the human mind! As an act of meditation, one can imagine their problems playing out in this environment. Perhaps each wrestler represents an agenda – such as the ambition to achieve something being thwarted by the forces of doubt. We will the hero to win on our behalf – calling on the powerful moves of virtue and integrity. Meanwhile, the villain dips into his own arsenal of devious tricks to fight back. Whoever wins gets their way, so we meditate

deeply until the villain taps out! The 3-second pin count represents the opportunity to resist evil, which the hero must always strive for instead of giving up and accepting defeat.

In a team environment, each wrestler represents a quality – such as compassion and self-control uniting to overcome anger and greed. Each one brings out the best in the other, and they combine to make use of special ‘double team’ moves. The interfering managers at ringside represent treachery, and their cheating is symbolic of them having to resort to any means to win. On the other hand, the assistance of friends and allies represents loyalty and justice – which the virtuous competitor can always rely on.

Above all else, wrestling reminds us that anything is possible – as there’s always a move to defeat even the most formidable of opponents! This is reminiscent of the Biblical tale of David versus Goliath. As surely as the lowly shepherd boy outwitted his gigantic opponent, so too can we find methods of overcoming any obstacle or solving any problem.

MARTIAL ARTS

The connection between sport and spirituality is most keenly felt in martial arts. The Eastern ones tend to go hand in hand with Buddhist meditation and graceful movements. This is because physical prowess can be attributed to the concentration of an energy called ‘Chi’. A fighter is thought to be performing at his best when he harnesses this intangible power and calls on it to strengthen his actions. This is what Bruce Lee attributed his famous “one inch punch” to. The swift

movement of his hips and limbs had to be informed by intense concentration to become powerful.

Meditation also gives a martial artist the clarity of mind to act ‘intuitively’. Ideally, his actions are so swift that they can’t possibly be pre-meditated or over-analysed. He must learn to instinctively take the most effective course of action, immediately responding to what his opponent does (if not predicting and pre-empting it!). Bruce Lee likened it to catching a ball thrown at us. We don’t give it much thought – we just do what is required. This mirrors the religious ideal of ‘intuition’ over excessive reasoning. We must develop a natural relationship with life instead of constantly over-analysing it. As they say in *Stars Wars*, “Use the force, Luke!”

Bruce Lee’s particular brand of martial art, *Jeet Kune Do*, extolled the virtues of being versatile. It was his belief that the ultimate fighter should ‘absorb’ the best of the styles he is exposed to, whilst rejecting what doesn’t serve him. He likened it to water being versatile enough to adopt any form and therefore adapt to any situation. So too must the perfected individual have the tools to take apart any given problem. He felt martial arts was a dynamic process, and denounced established systems for “solidifying what was once fluid”. This is the ideal approach to religion too. One must familiarize himself with all belief systems and embody the best philosophies from each. Only then is he versatile enough to arrive at the truth that works for him in any given situation. It must be a fluid process that avoids being solidified by dogma.

FISHING

The natural sport of fishing gives us plenty of opportunities to take inspiration from the outside world. In this case, enlightenment is the biggest (and most elusive) fish in the pond – but many minnows are encountered before we find it! Upon catching a fish in meditation, we behold it and determine whether it is a positive quality or negative quality. Those that are negative are kept out of the water and consumed by the fisherman. Those that are positive are returned, gradually creating a purified stream of consciousness.

The water represents the material world. Most of us ‘drown’ in it, but the infinitely wise soul sits beyond it like the fisherman on the bank (or ‘walks’ on it in the case of Jesus!). The rod represents the spine cord, which connects the mundane to the divine and allows enlightenment to take place. The bait is the ‘flesh’ that must be sacrificed in order to achieve enlightenment.

BASEBALL

In this game, the pitcher represents a satanic influence that seeks to make the disciplined batter ‘strike out’. His assaults are tailored to the target, as he calls on different types of pitch to outfox the batter. These represent the different kinds of temptation a human being may face. If the batter is tempted to swing for every ball, he is sure to strike out. He must resist transparent attempts to make him fail, whilst hitting balls out of the park when the pitch is weak.

The satanic pitcher’s mound represents worldly possessions, atop of which he taunts his lowly opponent. The batter must concentrate on his own route and run AROUND the mound instead of towards it. His

journey around the 4 bases represents the 4 evolutionary steps of the soul – progressing from primitive consciousness to the divine enlightenment of a homerun. It is the soul’s intention to return ‘home’ to God, without being ‘caught out’ by the satanic opposition.

Once the forces of positivity are in control of the game, the mound represents the ‘moral high ground’ – from which the pitcher must use his skill to defeat the satanic batters one by one. When the forces of negativity hit a ball into the air, the fielders must be alert enough to catch them out. They must also watch out for bases being stolen. Every run the negative team scores makes it increasingly miserable to dwell in the ‘home’ of the human body.

MOTOR RACING

Motor racing is another good metaphor for the relationship between body and soul. The vehicle is the human body, the driver is the soul that gets the best out of it, and the track the physical world that both conspire to navigate successfully. The radio team represents the divine inspiration of God that the soul must commune with in order to succeed. His infinitely wise, omniscient perspective gives the driver information that he would never be able to acquire himself.

The vehicle’s gradual progress in the race represents the long hard struggle for enlightenment. Each opponent the driver ‘overtakes’ is an irrational desire that has been thwarted and now lingers BEHIND the vehicle where it can no longer have any influence.

Each lap represents a year in a man’s life. He must race to eliminate as many negative character traits as possible so that he remains in front once he passes the finishing line. A pleasant afterlife is

promised if he does so, as he frees himself from the confines of the vehicle and celebrates on top of the podium. If he fails, he can always incarnate in another race and strive for enlightenment all over again – building on what he learnt in previous outings.

SNOOKER

The red balls symbolize irrational desires that must be eliminated one by one. Upon doing so, the player has a chance to ‘pocket’ the increasingly valuable virtues represented by the coloured balls. When all desires have been eliminated, there is nothing left to do but concentrate on cultivating these virtues - culminating in the black ball of enlightenment!

Each frame in a game symbolizes a lifetime. The soul’s ‘opponent’ is a satanic influence that seizes on mistakes or moments of weakness and removes opportunities to cultivate virtue. The soul is ‘snookered’ when the white ball of pure consciousness is pulled out of position and rendered unable to achieve its goals.

TENNIS

The ball represents consciousness, which is knocked from side to side by a positive player and a negative opponent. Each shot they choose to play represents either a positive quality or a negative trait respectively. If the balls land in and scores, without being adequately opposed, then the corresponding emotion resonates throughout the court of the soul. The player must ensure that positive sentiments score more than negative ones.

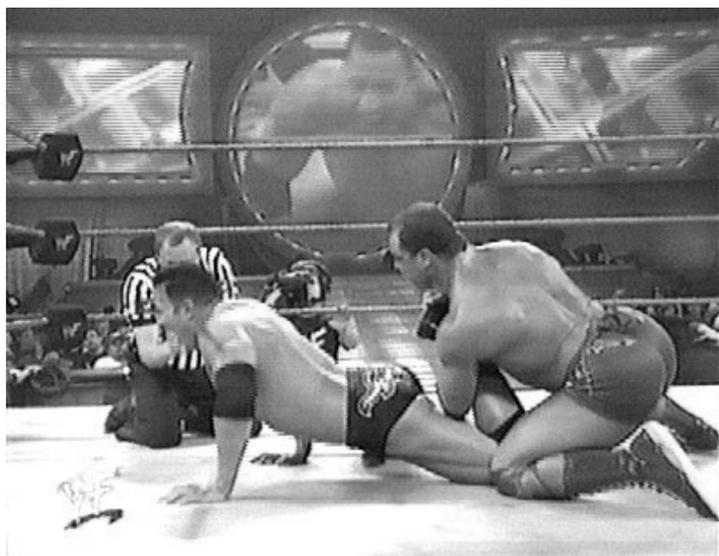
A shot that hits the net lacks conviction and ends up doing more harm than good. On the other hand, a shot that is overstated flies beyond the confines of the court and also guarantees failure. The player must maintain the middle ground of composed actions.

The 6 games required to win a set are symbolic of the 6 chakras that are awakened from the base of the spine. The successful player gradually works towards the ‘enlightenment’ of victory, whereupon the satanic opposition falls to its knees and skulks away.

VIDEOGAMES

Most scientifically-minded people feel their work disproves the existence of God, but my work as a game developer had the opposite effect on me. Every day I would sit there creating worlds and programming the life that would live upon it, and I began considering that the outside world could be such a creation. Not in the trivial, clichéd sense of it all being a ‘game’ – so much as a keenly engineered experience designed to achieve something.

It felt like a good metaphor for the relationship between body and soul too. A character in a game is a physical vehicle which the hitherto ‘invisible’ player is influencing like a spirit – the purpose being to experience what they choose to experience from that omnipresent vantage point. As in real life, the bewildered ‘body’ often fails to make sense of what’s happening to it – blissfully unaware of the soul’s existence (let alone its agenda). Meanwhile, the all-powerful soul grows weary of the limitations of a physical body and yearns to be ‘free’ sooner or later. And behind every second of this is the creator himself, who facilitates the experience for both body and soul...



The philosophies in this book apply to many other sports.



FURTHER READING

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.”

- Richard Steele

If your interest was piqued by the issues raised in this book, you may like to consider looking up the following titles for more information. They were certainly instrumental in my own spiritual awakening and helped to shape this project:

***Conversations With God* by Neale Donald Walsch**

The accolade of “life-changing bestseller” has never been more appropriate! Whether you take it as a hypothetical “conversation with God” or a genuine one, it’s hard to dispute the witty wisdom that gushes forth from Neale Donald Walsch’s pen. It’s a little simplistic in hindsight, but there’s no better introduction to spiritual thinking.

***Autobiography Of A Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

Exactly what the title promises – the life story of a spiritual master as told by the man himself. Like the spiritual life itself, the verbose writing style of the Indian author takes a lot of getting used to but bears fruit once you do! A surprisingly witty and light-hearted exploration of what religion truly means.

***Man’s Eternal Quest* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

A collection of lectures and essays from my favourite spiritual thinker. They come thick and fast in easy-to-read chunks, and yet manage to be

deeply relevant every time. A gentle introduction to the man's work. Follow it up with yet more titbits from *The Divine Romance* and *The Journey To Self-Realization*.

***God Talks With Arjuna* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

A reliable translation of the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita* – complete with an exhaustive commentary that reveals its deeper meaning. When God manifests as Lord Krishna and advises Arjuna how to win a 'battle', it turns out to be a profound metaphor rings true for all religions.

***The Second Coming Of Christ* by Paramahansa Yogananda**

Not an estimate as to when Jesus will walk the earth again so much as an insight into what 'Christ' actually means. This is essentially the *New Testament* as interpreted by an Indian guru – and is all the better for it! The teachings of Christ have never been so relevant and compelling. If you've ever been tempted to accuse *The Bible* of not making sense, this will bring some much-needed clarity.

The King James Bible

If you're curious as to what's actually in *The Bible*, make sure it's this time-honoured version from the 17th century. The "olde" English of Tyndale might make it an uphill struggle, but it's infinitely more reliable than the modern translations that followed. It's more poetic too and captures the genius of the man at the centre of proceedings.

***Kabbalah For Dummies* by Arthur Kurzweil**

A charming insight into one of the world's oldest and most important religions, Judaism. All of the dogmatic misunderstandings are stripped away to reveal a faith that is deeply symbolic. It also dispels the myth that 'Kabbalah' is some sort of cult attended by vacuous celebrities!

***Muhammad: A Biography Of The Prophet* by Karen Armstrong**

A studious interpretation of the Prophet Muhammad's life for the benefit of western readers. Every common misconception is dealt with here in exhaustive detail. It will help you appreciate the difference between where Islam came from and where it is now.

***The Meaning Of The Holy Qur'an* by Abdullah Yusuf Ali**

A reliable translation of the *Qur'an* itself – complete with an insightful commentary from a knowledgeable Islamic scholar. Don't assume you know what a verse means until you've double-checked it here.

***The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran**

A poetic work of fiction from the Lebanese wordsmith, which reinterprets religious principles through the mouth of an anonymous 'prophet'. It's hard to disagree with a single sentiment that is uttered.

***The Last Hours Of Ancient Sunlight* by Thom Hartmann**

A perceptive analysis of the environmental problems we face as we fall increasingly out of harmony with the planet we call home. Spiritual solutions are offered to material problems.

***The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins**

A popular tirade against religion that comes recommended if only because it highlights the ignorance of militant atheism. It only holds up as an argument against religious extremism – not religion proper. The work of a scientist straying far outside his comfort zone. Nonetheless, it is seductively well written and the author has a contagious enthusiasm for science.

***User's Guide To Science And Belief* by Michael Poole**

A humble antidote to the venom of *The God Delusion* and co. If you've fallen for the popular misconception that religion is at odds with science, this will make you think again. It features a large variety of quotes from scientists who see no conflict with religious ideas.

***Articles Of Faith* by Russell Brand**

The omnipresent comedian strays into the territory of journalism with this collection of passionate articles about football. He goes even further than this book in reading poetic significance into the game – with consistently hilarious results!

***Have A Nice Day!* by Mick Foley**

Of all the wrestling memoirs to flood the bookshelves, this is the only one that was written by the wrestler in question – and it's all the better for it! A passionate account of life as a professional wrestler that should appeal to fans and curious onlookers alike.

***Sly Moves* by Sylvester Stallone**

The iconic movie star's very own book about fitness and self-improvement. Like the *Rocky* movies themselves, it's littered with inspirational advice – including autobiographical passages that reveal how Stallone himself managed to overcome adversity.

***The Audacity Of Hope* by Barack Obama**

The political musings of America's first black president, documented when he was a mere senator and had yet to hold office. It's full of the idealistic rhetoric of a man that intends to change America (and the world), but there's a backbone of common sense that makes it agreeable. His multi-cultural upbringing is a fine example of how an understanding of ALL faiths can dispel ignorance.

***Inspiration For The Interactive Generation* by Mat Dickie**

My own autobiography about fulfilling my destiny as a videogame designer. As I draw out the poetic significance of my existence, you might just find something to like about your own.



My Indian inspiration, Paramahansa Yogananda.

