

Daily Meditation 08-12-24

Olympic Games Ended: A Meditation on Sport & Competition

Good morning.

Today, we're meditating on the relationship of sports and spirituality. And I think there are a lot of connections, and I'd like to address two of them.

The first is that a lot of meditation, I understand to be calming of the reptilian brain. The reptilian brain is, of course, our oldest brain, 420 million years old.

We have three brains--the reptilian brain, the mammal brain, and the rather new neocortex brain.

And the mammal brain is half as old as the reptilian brain. 210 million years old. The mammal brain is where we find, I think, kinship and compassion in its fullest. For the mammal brain to operate, you choose compassion and practice it, and kinship. To do that, the reptilian brain has to mute somewhat. Calm down. Not take over. The reptilian brain wants to take over. It's been here the longest and thinks it's number one on the block.

And a lot of the reptilian brain is about survival. It's very important. It's about win or lose, live or die. That's important. But we do have to mitigate it.

I think this is what the great spiritual teachers of the world, whether you're talking about Jesus or Lao Tzu or the Buddha or Muhammad or Isaiah or Black Elk or the White Buffalo Woman, Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Day.... I think they're trying to steer us into developing more our mammal brains, our capacity for caring and sharing and forgiving and compassion.

Now, I see at least three ways that we go about calming the reptilian brain, and one is meditation, understood as learning solitude, being at home with stillness, being still.

As the psalmist says, "Be still and learn that I am God."

And we call a lot of that today mindfulness. And really it's a mind emptying first. An emptying and then a filling. That's one way to meditate.

And another way is what I call Art as Meditation, what some scientists have called extrovert meditation. The first kind spoken about being introvert meditation. We're talking about Ornstein and Naranjo who wrote that book on psychology and meditation back in the 1970s.

But in Art as Meditation, you also calm the reptilian brain in order to get into this space and place of creativity and heeding the imagination, and of course, the focusing that that takes to create. That too calms the reptilian brain. Creativity does.

And I tell the story in today's daily meditation about the Inuit people who, when they felt a war was coming between tribes, would have a poetry contest. Number one poet from each tribe and a jury made up of people from both tribes for a contest. It lasted a week. And when the jury decides whose poetry was the best, the war is over.

Very advanced way, I think, of dealing with conflict and war, to turn it into a poetry contest.

Well, thirdly, a third way to counter the reptilian brain is, I think, sport, because sport too is a contest, isn't it?

But to me, there is genius in sport. It shows the genius of our species. First of all, I don't know any tribe that we know of in the world that does not have games or sport. So, it's universal.

And in sport, what we actually do is we play with the reptilian brain. We play with the reptilian brain. Instead of just squashing it or trying to kill it or let it run away with our other brains, we play with it

We create a field. Let's say, let's talk about basketball.

There's a field, a parameter you have to stay on the court, and there's a timer, and timing, it lasts so long, and there are basic rules. If you follow another player, that player gets a free shot. There are umpires to make sure the rules are enforced. And the basic rules: put the ball through and try to prevent your opponent from doing the same. That's typical of so many sports, obviously.

But back up a bit. Realize what's happening here. We're, in a way, we're kind of making fun of the reptile brain. We're making a game out of it, that the reptilian brain, as I say, is about if I win, you lose. So we're saying as a species, really, okay, we'll play with it.

There are these rules, and once the rules are set up and so forth, then find people on each team at a time, get out on the court, and they play their hearts out. They go for winning at all costs.

And so the reptilian brain is invited to a game. It's invited to a game which has some restrictions, some rules, and it enforces. Enforcers of the rules, called umpires. But within that context, timing, the rules,

size of the court and so forth, you play your heart out. Your reptilian brain goes for it, goes to win, and only one team can win.

So at the end of the game, one team is sad, disappointed, and its fans, its many fans who are cheering or involved, strongly as well, and the other team is alive and happy and proud of themselves, and their fans, too. So that joy goes on for a while, maybe 24 hours or something, and the sadness does too, but then no one dies in the process, everyone comes back, and there are other occasions to play the game.

So I think it's really genius what humans do in sport in terms of taming domesticating their reptilian brain. And I think that's one reason why the Olympic Games, or any games, are valuable for our species. They take the reptilian brain out for play.

Now, if you look at sport from the point of view of the Four Paths, there's joy in playing well, preparing well, sharing that, displaying that in the context of a crowd of participants who cheer you on. There's the Via Positiva there.

There's a Via Negative which we've been talking about. That is the focusing that has to take place, just like in art. So in sport, that's a great deal of focusing. And many athletes will do meditation to calm down, to focus before they go on the track or wherever it is they're displaying their craft.

And of course, there's Via Creativa involved, isn't there? That great creativity. Dimension of mind and intelligence that goes into a strategy of a sport, of basketball game or ball game or soccer, any other game, is strategy and creativity. How should we do this as a team, etc.?

And finally, there is that transformation that happens, and potential for moving our species away from mere conflict to appreciation, the gifts and talents and the hard work, blood, sweat and tears that goes into competition. As long as the competition itself doesn't become an idol or a god but is seen within this context of sharing the joy, of exercise and of good playing.

In this context, something great can happen. And I see that in the potential of the Olympic Games. And certainly, at every other level of sport. There is spirit involved in sport.

Thank you. We'll see you next week. Bye.