

Course Name: Sports Psychology
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INTRODUCTION TO FLOW

Hello everyone, this is Dr. Chaitanya Sridhar, I am a holistic sports psychologist and I am also into elephant welfare. My base has been clinical psychology and I have my PhD from Australia. I am now in my advanced training to become a Jungian analyst and that is something which I have embedded into my work which we will actually see as the units move forward. I will be talking about the second chapter which is on the flow state and developing a champion mindset, right. So, before I even begin, what I would like you all to do is please make sure you are in a quiet space, grab a piece of paper and preferably some colour pens or pencils.

As we go through the unit, especially this section on flow, I would like you all to see what is coming up for me, what are my associations, what are my feelings, not just getting to the head, we are very cognitive. So, we really look into embodying what is flow because what we want to do in this unit and in the psychology section course, is to go beyond just sport. So, it is sport and performance and especially this is a beautiful chunk, this is a beautiful subject. So, at the end of this chapter, this, unit, I would be really happy if you are able to touch into your own flow state..

I hope you all have your paper and pen with you all. And my first question is, my first thought, what I would like to ask you all is what comes up when you hear the word flow, what does flow mean for you? Please write it down and also observe what is happening in you. No judgement, no good, bad, ok, this is right, this is wrong. Just notice what comes up for you when you hear the word flow, ok. Now, let us move and I would want you all to take a minute or so to stay with this image.

Look at what is in front of you and I hope you are in a quiet space and you have given yourself the time to connect to your own self, firstly, because that is essential to understand flow. So, I want you to see what is happening to me, ok, and again mind, body, feelings. As you look at this image, what is

coming up? A memory, a trip with family, with loved ones and what is the association? And notice what is happening to me? Am I coming back? Am I coming into my own space? And if you see there right on top, there is this beautiful quote or a tag that I have just put up there on the flow and what Bruce Lee says is, "be water my friend." What does that mean? Why has water come up in this space? And as you all are sitting with this observing the ripples, can you see the ripples in the image? I am going to read this beautiful quote by Bruce Lee? Be like water making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive but adjust to the object and you shall find a way around or through it.

If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves. What a powerful line, right? And then he goes on to say, empty your mind, be formless, shapeless like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes a cup. You put water into a bottle, it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes a teapot.

Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water my friend. Can we feel our breath coming into us? I want you to again write down what were some of the words that stayed with you as I read this quote? Can we be like water? Can we? It is a question I want you to ask yourself? We are not live but as you go through this session, this section, I would really like you to connect in an embodied way with what we are going through?

I do not think this young man over there on the screen needs any introduction, right? Who is this? We all know it is our own golden boy, Neeraj Chopra. And I want you to observe his body there. This was his winning throw at the recently concluded world championship at Budapest. And we all know after the Olympics, he has been on a high. He just won the gold.

What do we see? What are you seeing there? Can you see this and what is your first thought in association as you see the picture? Is it giving you energy? Is it inspiring you? What is happening? Is there a shift in my body language? The previous image was to help us quieten down and then this image, what is it doing to you? And now, what I would like you to do? If you can mimic that posture, just try standing and holding that energy that you see. You do not have to twist your leg and turn because he is obviously done when he is thrown the javelin, right? But can you hold the upper? Do you notice even I, my body language shifted as we are going through this? And I want you to now go back in time and go, how do I feel? How is my energy when I am embodied? What do we mean by embodied? Why is this title flow embodied? A lot of times people think that sports psychology is all

in the head and I have to say that when I started my tagline would be it is all in the mind. But with time, it is close to 20 plus years that I have been in this profession, you realize that it is not just the mind, right? Of course, the mind influences the body, but so does the body influence the mind, right? Maybe when you came in, you had 100 things in your mind. As we went through the images, what started happening? Did you feel yourself settling down,? And now when we see this, what other sporting memory comes to you? Probably Dhoni's winning six at the World Cup or is it Yuvraj's sixes, six-sixes, right? How do we feel when we see this? Sunil Chhetri, he initially requested people to come and watch football and then see, winning in front of the home crowd. What is coming to you? And now I also want you to constantly keep going back and keeping tabs of what happens to me? Do I feel a shift in energy? When am I embodied? That is very, very important because to understand flow, right? It is very important to understand, am I here? So what is embodied coming together? And why is this important for us is because flow, even if you remember Bruce Lee's quote that we heard? What is it that he was saying? It is a process where we are in a state of readiness, you are alert yet relaxed. Just take a look back again at Neeraj's posture? It is not rushed, it is not tight, it is just. And you trust your instincts.

You have been doing it, you have been in the state and space where you give yourself the permission to touch the field of possibility and see the possibilities, right? What Neeraj opened for all of us was that possibilities and this is why zone, I like to call it the field of potential because it is that energized attention where you are in synergy and balance? Everything is just flowing through. We all know Usain Bolt, right? So apparently, the whole stadium would be cheering for him. So he was once asked, how do you feel, everyone is cheering for you. Does it cause pressure? And he said, I like everyone cheering because I take that energy in. So knowing how to balance that energy becomes very, very important, right? So what I am trying to do is find our way, we are flowing to find, to understand flow because if not, it is still just going to be a concept in the head and as we go into the next sections and the other units, subunits you will understand, we have even athlete quotes, where you will see it is difficult to pinpoint. So this is what is flow, but we can identify the qualities of flow, the characteristics of flow? So I want to give the example of the Hopi runners? If you have heard of the Hopi tribe, the Hopi culture, so basically they are a Native American group and they are known for their running? They are amazing runners.

There is this amazing book for those of you interested to Google up Hopi running. What got me intrigued was when one of the Colonel officers who was part of the sports psychology diploma course

told me, oh ma'am, actually have you heard of this tribe, have you heard of these Hopi runners? And apparently what he told me was, even a 90 year old person can just go and finish it. They can just go for a marathon, they can just get up and run. So it got me intrigued and, at the beginning, when they describe this race, there is a cross country happening and two of the elite runners and one being an Olympic silver medalist himself, are dressed up in normal sporting gear, right? Like shorts and they are dressed up that way. So the Hopis are Native American tribe. And it is in that region, so some of the Hopi elders make fun.

They are like, oh why are you dressed up like this? This is not how we run. And what happens is, they say, oh, what, come on, let us see, can you beat us, take it up as a challenge. I think around 60 year olds, they just say, okay fine, without any shoes, without any gear and they take on the race and they beat the elite athletes. Now this got me very intrigued as a sports psychologist going, what is actually happening here? I think in traditional terms, they were not really prepared, but preparation is not just at that point. Neeraj Chopra did not become a gold medalist in one day. He did not just go and throw the javelin, right? There was practice or anyone for that matter. Anyone who has been in, not just sport, any aspect of life, you do not just become that, no? Some of them are talented and gifted, but you need talent with discipline and practice. So it got me very intrigued about this tribe and I went and looked up and for Hopi, the Hopi tribe, or the Hopi culture, running is actually a way of life. So right from the young, they actually run together as a group, as a community.

In olden times, they used to run to deliver messages and they have a little potion that they take, a medicinal potion that they take before running, which is like our protein shake or, your supplements that you need in order to deliver your best. And there was also, so it got me very intrigued, and so they have been running from childhood, from when they are born. This is what they are seeing. So it was very easy for the runners, for the native elderly runners to say, okay, fine. And they went ahead with it. And there was also this very interesting aspect I found after a lot of research and digging up was for the Hopis. Running is also symbolic because they feel when they run. The impact, the movement, the sound, footsteps, invokes the rain god to send down rain. So do you see, there is an association, belief that we are runners, there is also some deep purpose to that connection. You talk to anyone who has achieved and especially if you look at Abhinav Bindra's own book, where his book says, A Shot at History, he talks about his journey that you have that goal and then how do you move about and prepare to actually achieve that goal. So the reason I brought this in is to show that flow happens, but

for flow to happen, you have been at it, you need to be at it. And I am now going to explain just a little bit about Michael Phelps' process.

And I want to give this example of Phelps' 200 metre butterfly during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. So what happens is as he begins the race, water goes into his glasses, his glass, it has blinded him and he practically cannot see. So he goes on, swims, flips, turns and when he touches the dashboard, he then opens up his glass, what do you think has happened? Of course, I have written there but apart from that, he has actually broken the world record. The world would have forgiven him if he did not perform. But when they ask him, a journalist asks him, how is it to swim blind? So he says, I have been training myself for this. So it is not just about, visualizing or not just about preparing for a perfect race. That does not happen all the time.

Sport especially and life is all about challenges, right? But what he would prepare, what his coach Bowman would actually do was take him through challenges, water goes in my glass, my gear is ripped, I have a bad start. So all these kinds of challenges and then no matter what, I still come back. I do not lose it. So then what happens? The brain, then is going, ah we have done this. There is no need to panic. If not, what could have been the other end of the story would have been, oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, what has gone into my gear? then what is going to happen? Sympathetic overload, stress hormone, cortisol is going to kick more and more and more and that race is gone.

But, because there was a preparation, not just that, no matter what the situation is, I am going to come out, that is very essential. But he would literally see himself through it. This is visualization which will be touched upon in one of the other units. So, and interestingly there is another small point to it that apparently once his coach broke his glasses on purpose before one of his races. Look at the preparation. Do you understand what we are looking at here? Its flow. happens but for that there has been so much, right, happening.

Let us watch a very interesting video by Miss Aparna Popat who I am guessing a lot of you know. She is our two-time Olympian, badminton champion and she really embeds her flow state. So it is a really nice video to bring it in at this juncture.

My name is Aparna Popat. I am a two-time Olympian in badminton. I have won four medals at the Commonwealth Games and a record of nine consecutive senior national singles titles. Today I am here

to speak about my experiences and my understanding of what we know as the zone in sport. And I will start off with an example. So in 1998 when I was playing the semi-finals of the Commonwealth Games, the match was levelled at one game all and now in the third and deciding game I was down 1-10. At that point in time the games were up to a score of 11.

So which basically meant that I was one point away from losing the match and probably a certain medal. And that is when I experienced the zone, making a comeback until 10-all and winning the match securing India's first Commonwealth Games medal in women's singles. Now what is the zone? It's often referred to as the state of flow of peak performance and I love this definition by Steven Kotler that says, "in the flow action follows action according to an internal logic that seems to need no conscious intervention." And I think that's exactly what I experienced, right? It was this psychological, physiological state in which there was this heightened level of focus and awareness and the execution of my skills seemed absolutely effortless. So if I were to describe what the zone is like, right? Imagine each performance as this endeavour to make a perfect picture puzzle.

Now this puzzle is mostly broken up into several pieces and there are times without any conscious command or effort these puzzle pieces guided by you subconsciously seamlessly come to fit together to reveal this perfect picture puzzle. It seems magical but in a sense it isn't magic and I say this only because preparation and training lay the groundwork. These pieces are different physical, mental and emotional nuances and challenges that you face as you compete and as you play sport and to achieve the zone really requires these pieces to combine in a very timely and seamless manner. It requires a solid foundation of skills and tactics, your physical conditioning, your mental preparation, your emotional regulation and all this has to be executed instinctively and clearly. So knowing this, can you really enter the zone intentionally? Can the zone be called on upon command? Athletes often say that they stumble upon the zone unexpectedly during competition and it's this transient, ephemeral, fleeting sort of experience that cannot be forced. Yet knowing the tremendous benefits of being in the zone there are certain things and techniques that you can use to at least try and get to the zone as often as possible. And for me what really worked was creating routines, having cues, creating a mental space conducive to peak performance, the visualization and meditation techniques really helped and sometimes I also felt like the external factors like the energy from the crowd or the importance and the scale of the event that really helped sort of achieve this state. So if I were to summarize what the zone is like, I think the zone is the sweet spot, this perfect picture puzzle and it is pursued relentlessly and often and when that happens, when you get into the zone, I feel an athlete transcends the ordinary

boundaries of human performance. It's not just a physical phenomenon, it's a mental and emotional experience as well and it really represents a culmination of years of training, mental fortitude and a deep connection between the body and the mind.

Now we come again to a beautiful image and as you look at the bird, what comes to you? What's coming? Just looks so effortless, right? Looks so easy, but is it really as easy as that? There is so much technique to it, right? Even on a flight, it looks effortless, but is it really effortless? And I myself, I am recouping from a knee surgery and trust me, you understand the whole dynamics of your calf, your quads, your glutes, your shin, everything being in symmetry and then you can walk. If we have seen how toddlers walk, do you get it? It took time to get there and then it became effortless.

I want to bring in this quote by Dr. Mihaly, who is a flow researcher, the topic we have been talking about. He is a flow researcher and he has been researching for over 30 years, not just athletes, not just, elite athletes, but also leaders, inspirers, CEOs, artists, business students, toppers and try to understand what is flow to each of them? What are the characteristics of flow? My own PhD was on cricket, emotional management in cricket and I looked at both athletes, cricketers and the support staff and what you see is the performance factors stays the same across disciplines. It was one of the first findings of my research. So, this is a quote which sums up what we try to look into here.

Dr. Mihaly says, "you know that what you need to do is possible to do even though difficult and sense of time disappears. You forget yourself, you feel part of something larger and once the conditions are present, what you are doing becomes worth doing for its own sake." Beautiful quote, right? I want you to now take a moment or so and see what is coming up for you from the quote of Bruce Lee to Neeraj Chopra's embodied image to what we have discussed about the Hopi and now what Dr. Mihaly is saying. What do you feel are the key elements of flow and do you touch on it? Do you tap on? Do you connect to it? If not on an everyday basis, at least occasionally are you doing that? I want you to see what are some of the thoughts, images, feelings that are again coming to you and please write it down because you are trying and what we are trying is to touch and tap into your flow state. What is coming up and what do you feel you need to do in order to come into your flow state? The first unit, the first sub part of this, I wanted to actually bring in what is flow. In the next unit, we will be looking at what is "flow" in sport.

Today what I would like to leave you all with for you all to reflect upon is when do I enter a state of flow? How is my energy? What aids a sense of connect? Today, have I been in touch with myself and entered a state of oneness? What touched me? And I also want you all to see what is happening to you as you are listening to this. Do you feel like I want to do this or are you feeling resistance? What are you feeling? Again please no judgement. One of the things as a sports psychologist and I am sure even a psychologist is we really try to help an athlete to reflect and understand themselves and especially for me, I always go - what is the story? What is the narrative? What is this athlete telling here? Is it aiding his flow? Is it not aiding? But of course, this image that you see here is of me. I work with captive elephant welfare and rehabilitation and for me my biggest sense of connect is the elephants.

They really hold and centre me. Of course, I cannot see them every day because they are not in Bangalore, but there is that sense of connect. What is your sense of connect? Are you allowing yourself to be touched and to touch something? And I want to leave you with this thought of please take a moment to be in flow. What do I mean by being flow? To be with yourself, to be in the moment today and build it into your daily ritual which is what will help attain the flow state. Thank you.