Rowing and Zen
28 July 2020

The window of the coach's office at the William A. Shoemaker boathouse is lined with the complete works of Charles Dickens. Through the window, behind *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations* sits the rowing program's head coach. He is the owner of the Dickens collection, a six-foot, grizzly, bearded man in his mid-fifties. Formerly an Olympic rower in the lightweight four, he studied English at Wesleyan, where he quit the lacrosse team because he the team's apathetic culture turned him off to the sport. He sought the sort of "brutal afternoon workouts [that] left him exhausted and sore but feeling cleansed, as if someone had scrubbed out his soul with a stiff wire brush."[1] He wanted gratifying, hard work and thought rowing might provide it.

He walks with a surprising spring in his step for someone who has an artificial hip, restless because his doctor prohibited vigorous exercise. Each morning he offers to his team sermons about the formula for racing success, the imperfection inherent in rowing, and the immense opportunity born of the athletes' mutual accountability. And he expects similar articulation from his athletes, too. When a rower make a subtle technical change on the water—for example, connecting one's heels with the footplate after six inches of the seat's slide—, he asks that the rower tell him how it feels.

[1] From Daniel James Brown's *Boys in the Boat*

When I began rowing for him, I noticed another oddity I now find particularly amusing: he appends quotes to his weekly emails. They run the gamut from Lao Tzu to Winston Churchill—there was even one from Gandalf. The quotes distill some wisdom which he finds germane to our work on the water. The frequency with which they originated with Eastern philosophers intrigued me. Every week, I read a bit of Yamamoto Tsunetomo, Confucius, or Suzuki Roshi. They described insights one can glean in a racing eight—and they are many of the same ones which Eastern philosophers contemplate. Here are a few.

Equanimity in the Midst of Pain

The 2,000-meter erg test is reputed to be the most grueling fitness assessment rowers face. The rowers know this, so most of them are asleep by 9:00 PM the night before. The next morning will bring butterflies, exhaustion, and an indescribable amount of pain. For some, it will bring nausea, vomiting, and near black outs. Twelve rowing machines would be organized in two neat rows, on which the rowers will pull 36 strokes per minute, letting out a guttural yell or, for those struggling most, something more like a moan. To give you an idea of this test's difficulty, "physiologists…have calculated that rowing a two-thousand-meter race—the Olympic standard—takes the same physiological toll as playing two basketball games back-to-back. And it exacts that toll in about six minutes."[2] If you pace yourself well on this sort of test, you have nothing left to offer at the end. You can do nothing but keel over and pant, relieved that the pain has passed. Anyone who endures this test knows that the suffering in it is inevitable.

Some months ago, in my own home, I had done ten minutes of a thirty-minute erg test when I collapsed to the floor. My legs were already giving way, and my head was spinning. The thought of twenty more minutes of pure agony was repellent. Why not stop? No one was watching me, and I dreaded the pain to come. A bit later, I noticed a paradox about quitting that piece: I felt that the pain was unbearable, but in each moment, I was bearing it. It was not present pain, but the thought of future suffering which compelled me to give up my strenuous effort. The prospect of more pain ailed me more than the lactic acid in my legs.

The first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths describes the inevitability of suffering. In this spirit, the coach included two quotes at the end of his pre-test email. The first was from *Hagakure*: "If you are caught unprepared by a sudden rainstorm, you should not run foolishly down the road or hide under the eaves of houses. You are going to get soaked either way. Accept that from the beginning and go on your way. This way you will not be distressed by a little rain. Apply this lesson to everything." He instructed us to not be distressed by pain, but to accept its presence and feel it with equanimity.

The second was from *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: "When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself." Seven years before Shunryū Suzuki wrote these words, the Associated Press photographer Malcolm Browne captured the photo "Burning Man." It shows Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk, in meditation at a busy intersection. Behind him a car is parked with its hood

[2] From Daniel James Brown's *Boys in the Boat*

propped up. Beside him is a white jerry can, with which he has doused himself in gasoline. He sits in the lotus position, fully aflame in a religious protest of the persecution of Buddhists. Hundreds of monks surround him, their faces painted with horror.

Yet his expression is serene, as if he might be sitting in a monastery rather than in flames. His body is doubtless pained, but he does not struggle. The photo illustrates that it is possible to find equanimity in the midst of unknowable pain. This is precisely the state of mind one tries to inhabit during intense rowing.[3]

Attention in the Present Moment

At the Olympic level, rowers control the subtleties of their stroke in near perfect synchrony with one another. Like driving a car, rowing in this way requires mindful attention before it can be done automatically. Correcting technical mistakes requires mindful attention; ensuring the changes endure requires mindful attention; and performing an identical motion several hundred times while gasping for air requires mindful attention. A successful rower must focus on his stroke as a meditator focuses his breath.

Almost without fail, people fail to pay attention in this way. Daydreaming in the boat guarantees mistakes. Glancing to one's side, pausing for a breath, or thinking of one's future commitments provides with certainty that the quality of rowing will decrease. No one but the best-trained meditators can pay the sort of consistent attention that produces good rowing. (College-aged students at 6:00 AM are especially bad at this.) Some approximation of this focus is a prerequisite for rowing well.

I mentioned that initiating and maintaining technical changes requires mindful attention. So does another elements of the sport: rowing a losing race.

When one is three boat-lengths behind after a poor start, one's past mistakes are irredeemable. There is only *this stroke* to move the boat forward. In rowing, as in everything, there exists only the present moment and what opportunities are given in it. Even when one's boat is comfortably ahead, there is still only *this stroke* to extend one's lead. Framing a race in this way can help avoid frenzied, panicked rowing. Training in preparation for the season is like this, too. One must take small steps in pursuit of lofty goals.

With this in mind, our coach attached the following quote from *Hagakure* to a mid-March email: "There is certainly nothing more important in life than what we do at the present moment. A person's entire life consists of nothing more than one moment piled on top of another, over and over again. Once enlightened to this, the warrior has nothing else to worry about, because he realizes that he has only to live in the present moment with the utmost intensity."

[3] Please note that I do not mean to make light of religious persecution. I cite this example as an extreme case of equanimity in the midst of pain.

Egolessness

There is a common image of an elite collegiate rower as lithe, built, and well-groomed, an Andover or Exeter graduate with a high opinion of himself. He comes from money, probably looks like one of the Winklevoss twins, and looks down on novice rowers with uninterest. His athleticism is Olympic. Not only is he is built like a Greek god, but he knows it, too.

However he may comport himself on land, a good rower is not like this on water. Overconcern with oneself in the boat guarantees slow, laboring rowing. Rowing is unlike other team sports in this way. The chemistry between athletes in, for example, football, basketball, or soccer, relies on each player doing something distinct from his teammates. In rowing, one must integrate oneself with the other seven rowers, and in so doing form a single entity. As George Yeoman Pocock said, "You had to give yourself up to [the boat] spiritually; you had to surrender yourself absolutely to it."[4] In this sense, rowing in a racing eight is a modest sort of self-transcendence.

This sort of egolessness is a bit different than the one Buddhists discuss. In rowing, it is a result of collaboration; in Buddhism, it is a result of introspection. The Buddhist teacher David Nichtern writes, "Egolessness is not a product of our effort—it is a discovery. We look and look and cannot find a solid self anywhere. We can look at our name, our body, our mind, our experience and nowhere in there can we find a single thing that is not subject to change. Try it and see what you come up with."[5]

Final Thoughts

I should note that I am a collegiate rower with an interest in the philosophy I discuss, but I am by no means an authority on either topic. There is much to be learned about rowing that has little or no application to Eastern philosophy—e.g., the importance of physical fitness. Likewise, there is much to be learned about Eastern philosophy which has little or no application in rowing—e.g., vegetarianism or lovingkindness. In both, however, one practices equanimity in the midst of pain, attention to the present moment, and self-transcendence. I think rowing is among the most profound sports and Eastern religions among the most practical.

[4] From Daniel James Brown's *Boys in the Boat*

[5] From Nichtern's "The Discovery of Egolessness"