Rowing and Eastern Philosophy
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 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 to row.

He walks with a surprising spring in his step for someone who has an artificial hip, restless because his doctor prohibited him from exercising. He offers to his team each morning carefully chosen words about the formula for racing success, the imperfection inherent in rowing, and the immense opportunity born of the athletes' mutual accountability. And, in return, he expects carefully chosen words from his athletes. When you make a subtle technical change on the water—for example, ensuring your heels connect with the footplate after six inches of the seat's slide—, he requires that you articulate to him how it feels. Most curiously, he appends quotes from Lao Tzu, Winston Churchill, and even Gandalf to his weekly emails.

These quotes describe insights you can glean in a racing eight, many of the same ones which Eastern philosophers contemplate. Here are a few.

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

Equanimity in the Midst of Pain

On the eve of the 2,000-meter erg test, reputed to be the most grueling fitness assessment rowers face, the rowers went to bed at 9:00 PM. The next morning would bring butterflies, exhaustion, and an indescribable amount of pain. For some, it would bring nausea, vomiting, and near black outs. Twelve rowing machines would be organized in two rows, on which the rowers would pull 36 strokes per minute, intermittently 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.

It's this test which leads rowers to quit in droves.

Malcolm Browne's photo "Burning Man" shows Thich Quang Duc, a Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhist monk, in meditation at a busy intersection. Behind him is a parked car with its hood 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]

At the end of his pre-test email, the coach added the following quote 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."

Mindful Attention of Present Difficulties

At the Olympic level, rowers control the subtleties of the stroke in synchrony with one another. Before this can be done automatically, it requires mindful attention. 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 does his breath.

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

[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.

Almost without fail, people fail to pay attention in this way, and it is for this reason that a meditation practice is the handmaiden of good rowing. 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 this sort of consistent attention (especially not college-aged students at 6:00 AM). Some approximation of this focus is a prerequisite for good rowing.

For obvious reasons, initiating and maintaining technical changes requires mindful attention. So do two other facets of the sport: rowing a losing race and "checking in" with your own pain.

It takes mindful attention to row a losing race. When one is three boat-lengths behind after a poor start, there is no reclamation of past mistakes. 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.

Or a rower might find himself in the following situation: in his own home, he has done ten minutes of a thirty-minute erg test, and his legs are already giving way. The thought of twenty more minutes of pure agony is repellent. Why not stop? No one is watching him, and there is so much pain yet to come. But here there is a paradox: the rower feels that the pain is unbearable, but in each moment, he has already borne it. It is not present pain, but always the thought of future suffering which compels him to give up his strenuous effort. Paying mindful attention to your experience, you may notice that mere *thoughts* of future pain, not experienced present pain, is what most ails you.

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."

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, he must not be like this on water. Self-absorption in the boat guarantees slow, laboring rowing.

Rowing is unlike other sports in this way. You must move exactly as 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] 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 individual curiosity. 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

Of course, there is much to be learned in rowing that has little or no application to Eastern philosophy—e.g., the importance of physical fitness. Likewise, there is much to be learned in Eastern philosophy which has little or no application in rowing, like vegetarianism, compassion, or lovingkindness. In both, however, one must practice equanimity, mindful attention, and egolessness. This overlap renders rowing 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"