

— ONE — LET GO

MINDFUL BUCKET

TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE, you have to change the way you think. To improve your golf game, you have to change the way you think about practicing.

Playing games while you practice is a way to optimize your time in the dirt. It keeps your mind engaged with each shot and ultimately helps you improve much faster than you normally would just banging out a mindless bucket at the range on the few occasions you get to go.

Be present at the range by making keen observations of your surroundings. Notice the difference in how the better players hit balls. The seasoned players are hitting more wedges and short irons, picking out targets, and making sure they are getting feedback with each shot. They are (more than likely) hitting off the grass and will work through a progression of short irons first, then mid-irons, long irons, and finishing with their woods.

It is highly recommended to hit off the grass. A mat will not give you accurate feedback and can also be harsh on your wrists and elbows. When you see a seasoned player hitting off the grass, they will often leave what I refer to as a *pro-style patch*—a singular divot patch or efficient line that rips up as little turf as possible. They do not leave the range with potholes all over their hitting area. Don't be that guy.

Your mind and attitude are the key indicators of
how well you'll perform.

Imagine each ball you hit costs one hundred dollars. That changes your thinking, doesn't it? Being mindful means you pick a target for each and every shot. It also keeps your attention engaged by playing different games to challenge yourself, helping you remain keenly focused. You can work on shaping your ball a specific, deliberate way, you can grip up on the club and hit low stingers to simulate playing on a windy day, and you can even take aim at the ball guy. Do not waste a swing.

You can perfect your pre-shot routine by imagining what you would like to do with each ball, then execute. Like anything involving visualization, you will be astonished at how well you hit when you imagine the shot first. If your ball is not going exactly how you envision, that is okay—welcome to golf. Work through it until your thoughts match your physical reality. The goal of hitting a mindful bucket is to improve your mental and

physical game simultaneously.

Your mind and attitude are the key indicators of how well you'll perform. It's all in your head. How and what you think can allow your greatness to come out.

BUDDHA GOT GAME

Mindfulness is the energy of focused attention. It is the practice of being fully alive in each moment, finding the space inside yourself to be completely present to what is happening within and around you. In both life and golf, the benefit of practicing mindfulness is the awareness that peace and joy are readily available to you in every moment. The formula is simple: whatever you do, do with your whole being.

We tend to avoid the here and now, living in a seemingly infinite pattern of habitual energy, a loop running much of our lives. We are almost always multitasking. We are addicted to scrolling through our phones, checking emails, texting, watching social media, reading endless news headlines...the list goes on. It is the mundane, everyday circle we frequently live in with our routines and unconscious daily rituals that can set us back. Use golf and time in nature to break the loop.

The more we can utilize mindfulness to be aware and break the cycle of habitual energy, the more we can remind ourselves that we are free to live fully in the now.

Why not focus on your golf game?

Being in the now is what it takes to improve and genuinely enjoy the game.

Mindfulness can happen in a single breath or a single footstep. As you become accustomed to this practice, it can lead to a new form of relaxation. This will no doubt result in an improvement in the quality of your life.

Like your golf skills, mindfulness gets easier with training. We can intellectually understand this way of life, but it still takes practice to master in action. Allowing mindfulness to be second nature will transform how you take on challenges or deal with pain. It is our Buddha nature. We have direct access to this every day: the power to gain enlightenment, to create our best life.

Access your power by playing golf. Use the time practicing and playing as a meditation with mindfulness—awareness that helps you focus and stay present. It quiets your mind and nervous system, allowing good thoughts to flow.

IT WORKS IN REVERSE

Just go hit balls.

Without getting overly technical or mechanical, just swing your swing. No overthinking. Aim and hit the golf ball where you intend.

Easier said than done? Yes.

When it comes to learning your golf swing, there is no magic recipe. You have to go find it in the dirt. You have to hit balls.

Learn your swing through repetition. Feel the nuances of various shots. Watch players like yourself—or better—at the range. Examine their moves on the ball. Yes, take a lesson and watch online videos, read articles and books. The bottom line is: you *have* to hit balls. The only place you will find your tempo and consistent good-shot feeling is digging it out in the dirt.

Practicing with a club in your hands, getting your grip right, visualizing, then executing a golf shot—it's all about *feel* as you're contorting your arms into the right angles, your hands in the right position, your hips turning through the swing, to get the ball flying where you are aiming. It may not be pretty (yet), but you're golfing your ball. The technical talk will make more sense *after* you learn how to hit a good ball.

You have to work with your hands to get the feel. Work on chipping and putting. Chipping is a benchmark for the whole swing. It's all in your hands: the feel of the impact zone as the blade hits the ball. With a chip, you can practice every shot in the book because you're feeling the ball impact with the clubface, computing the trajectory, and familiarizing yourself with the bounce of the blade. Next time you're on the range, it's a highly effective drill to chip with every club in the bag and feel the impact zone with all degrees—hit with all clubs to the 100-yard flag.

Learn the grip first. The grip is your one point of contact with the club. Any deficiencies in the grip will likely manifest themselves in swing flaws. In his book *Five Lessons*, Ben Hogan said, "When a golfer has completed his left-hand grip, the V formed by the thumb and forefinger should point to his right eye."¹

Grip your club at home and take practice swings. Get used to

the feeling of a golf club in your hands and the proper interlock or overlap. Be comfortable in your position over the ball.

Optimize your time at the range—and at home—by being efficient and focused while you build a bedrock of golf skills. Here are four helpful points to give you a solid practice foundation:

1. ***Get a grip.*** Understand the simple mechanics of a golf grip and how the club head is a direct extension of your hands.
2. ***Aim and fire.*** Pick your spot. What is the yardage? What club do you hit that far? Go with it and commit.
3. ***Swing your swing.*** Do what you do consistently, and you will start seeing consistency. Figure it out for yourself.
4. ***Pay attention.*** Have awareness of your tendencies. Watch every shot with every club, note where the golf ball lands, and how it feels off the clubface.

Use the data to inform you of what to practice. Go with what you got and do what you do—but go deeper. Be self-aware of *what* you are doing, *when* you are doing it, *how* and *why*. Study yourself, make proper adjustments, and find your consistent swing within all of that.

There is no question that you should analyze the golf swing, but don't let the analysis weigh you down with too much jargon, buzzwords, and clichés. Just go to a driving range and hit every club in your bag. You don't want to just pound ball after ball and

engrain bad habits. Be aware and hit each ball with a purpose. Wield your sword for battle, know you're there to train your game, and commit to the work it takes to improve.

It works in reverse—get the ball going where *you* want it to go, and you'll realize that you actually have a golf swing. Develop your vanilla stock shot—your go-to when there's pressure. When you play, commit to a shot shape and aim for the middle of the green. Play for bogey when compromised. Stay away from making sixes.

Work on your lag putting. Focus on the last three to five feet. Every putt is makeable. Pick a spot and just hit a good putt. They will start to fall.

If you are serious about getting better, then *hit*, *chip*, and *putt*. Take your mind off all the advice and just swing freely. Don't be afraid of embarrassment on the range. We've all been there!

SWINGING MEDITATION

The awareness that mindfulness is accessible to you is half the battle. Make the effort to be intentional when you practice and play golf, especially when you walk around the course.

Walking meditations give you space inside yourself. They open up a channel within you where you can simply observe and look at your life, your goals, and your state of mind from a 10,000-foot view. If you practice walking meditations along the golf course, it makes for a much more rewarding experience.

Note the number of steps you take as you breathe in and out. You can practice walking meditation by counting your steps. When you walk, there is no need to rush—unless you play slow and the group behind you is asking to play through. As your lungs fill with oxygen, remain conscious of each step. Then be aware of how many steps you take as your lungs empty. Count both your breath and your steps.

The power of pause during a round—or even just a few minutes per day—is also an invitation for grace, introspection, and creativity. Take time to imagine your next shot, to check in with your body, to hydrate or nourish yourself. It is all too easy to get hung up on stress, anger, and disappointment. Instead, chill out, smile, and breathe. Your grin will create a sense of joy and calm, which helps keep you focused.

While you're out in nature, take note of all the beautiful living things that surround you in the moment. Allow gratitude and happiness to fill your soul. No matter what is going on in your world, use this time to be your best self. If we focus solely on the destination, we lose the fun and adventure of the journey itself.

Don't waste your time fretting about how you're playing or what your opponent is doing. Stay within yourself and gain perspective. Think about it: you usually don't have the time to practice, so when you *do* have that moment to yourself—man, what a cherished time to just be present and enjoy each ball you hit!

The mind is a powerful instrument. It can spin out of control with fear and anger, or it can destroy your entire practice session or round. But if we walk on the earth with a sense of love and appreciation, we can generate the energy of mindfulness, creating

peace and compassion in our body, mind, and soul. This is where transformation occurs. This is happiness in a bottle. This is the way to sustained improvement and better scoring.

Incorporate these basic practices into your golf game. You will come to know the balance of breathing and walking, pausing and imagining, smiling and swinging, enjoying and being. You will come to know that golf is not just a game—it's a way of life. With each breath, each step, and each swing, we fully arrive in the present moment.

EDIE AND FERNANDO'S POOL

The lush backyard was finely manicured with blue spruces, blooming flowers, and the scent of freshly cut grass. An array of pine trees lined the property—pitch pine, pond pines, red pines—all along the fence, going downhill, bordering the neighbor's yard. An endless barrage of automobiles driving on the Garden State Parkway echoed in the distance.

The scenes of a New Jersey summer at 3 Rota Drive always included my grandfather hitting a bucket of balls against his fifteen-foot net in the yard, set up in front of the red shed where he stored his tractor and tools. As a kid, I used to always grab a club and hit dozens of balls into the net. What eleven-year-old wouldn't bang a few balls when the adults are in the house talking BS while sipping coffee?

Next door at 1 Rota Drive lived Fernando and Edie, a lovely

couple who were friends with my grandparents for years. They had a beautiful in-ground pool surrounded by flagstone in a jungle-like setting where we used to swim quite often. Their place was a full wedge away, about 111 yards downhill from the practice net.

Hitting into the net got monotonous, and out of boredom, curiosity, and a small need to find a bit of trouble, I would aim toward the pool, check if any adults were watching, and fire pitching wedges over the line of richly-colored pines. It made sense to me. I wanted to see my ball in the air and know how far it actually traveled.

The pool was my “green.” It was a blind shot, so I relied on the sound of the ball landing to know where I ended up. I’d swing and wait five seconds for the *bloop* of the ball hitting water. If I heard it, I knew it was on the green in regulation (GIR). If I missed, I heard clicks off the stone, bangs off the side of the house, followed by throwing my club and sprinting to safety. Don’t worry, no one was ever injured or killed.

Days later, Fernando would come over and tell my grandfather that his grandson was hitting balls again, then hand him the dozen he found in and around his pool. Fernando never seemed that angry. My grandfather would tell me not to do it again, then wink. That subtle green light let me know he trusted me—a great confidence boost for an adolescent.

I continued to hit balls in Edie and Fernando’s pool whenever I visited my grandparents. It certainly helped my ball striking. The repetition created a rhythm in my swing, consistent one hundred-yard shots, over the tallest spruce, waiting for the splash.

The more I played, the more *bloops* I'd hear. I had the shot down.

Most importantly though, swinging the club outside in nature with an element of danger and challenge, marked the beginning of my love for the game of golf. It helped me see how getting better can be an enjoyable process. Practicing is often more fun than playing.

GO WITH WHAT YA GOT

The funny thing about golf is how on any given day, your swing can be *slightly* different, you can have a totally altered ball flight, trajectory, or feel than what you are accustomed to. It is not what you expect and *many times* it's unlike the day before. It can be frustrating and downright scary.

It is what it is.

This is a lesson in acceptance and adapting to *what is*. Time to improvise and own your swing of today. It could fly low or high, it can be a hook or a slap-dick willy slice. You simply do not know until you hit a ball. Adapt and adjust your game to how you are hitting at the time. Compensate and aim where appropriate. Your regular ball flight may come back during the round, perhaps your swing starts feeling more fluid, but you gotta go with what ya got while you work out the kinks.

One way to get a grip on your game and manage the stress is to do a simple breathing technique. Returning to your breath is returning to the essence of yourself. When it's hard to find your

swing, the best thing to do is find yourself first. Recenter, improve your concentration and, of course, find your tempo.

Box breathing is also known as four-square breathing and involves four steps that are easily visualized in the illustration to the right. Make sure that you are breathing deeply, allowing your stomach to rise. Being aware of your breath is crucial to attaining your inner calm.

- **Step 1:** Breathe in slowly while you count to four. Feel the oxygen enter your lungs. Take notice of the rise in your chest and stomach.
- **Step 2:** Hold your breath, keeping your lungs full of air for four seconds.
- **Step 3:** Slowly exhale through your mouth, keeping your lungs empty for four seconds.
- **Step 4:** Repeat Steps 1 through 3 until you feel more relaxed.

While you are on the course, you can find a minute or two to practice box breathing and experience the immediate benefits of a calm body and a serene mind. If you have the time, maybe while you wait to tee off or you're grabbing lunch at the turn, you can practice for several minutes and experience longer-term benefits akin to meditation. The longer effects allow you to have a bit more resilience to stress and help increase the positive flow in your mind.

Remembering to breathe is the simplest way to bring you back to the here and now. It is so easy to forget when you're



struggling and stressed, when your shots are flying all over the fairway and you feel like you are spending more time looking for your ball than hitting it toward a flag. We've all felt that anxiety and embarrassment. We tell ourselves, "I am so much better than this!" All the more reason why this technique is so important. When you slowly inhale oxygen, it helps you to recall that you are out on a beautiful green field playing a game you love.

Breathe your way through it. Go with what ya got. You have no choice but to work with what you have on the day.