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MINDFUL CHESS

*The Spiritual Journey
of a Professional Chess Player*

New In Chess

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Contents

Preface 7

Introduction 9

Setting up the pieces

About chess 15

About mindfulness 21

About the unknowable 30

The Opening

Getting hooked 37

Help! 43

Logic 50

Being in control 54

Nothing won, nothing lost 61

Nonduality, the black hole 66

The Middlegame

- Boredom and loneliness 71
- Fear, come and guide me 78
- The real cake 83
- The power of concentration 87
- Can we have quiet, please! 99
- Chess is my life 105

The Endgame

- Facing the double-edged sword 111
- The gateway to the unknown 115
- The Afterlife 119

Epilogue 122

Recommended further reading 125

Acknowledgments 127

Preface

To begin with, let me introduce myself. My name is Paul van der Sterren. I was born in 1956. I'm a Dutch citizen, and I live near Amsterdam in Holland. Throughout most of my adult life I have been a devoted and professional chess player. I won the Dutch Championship twice (in 1985 and 1993), became a Grandmaster in 1989 and represented my country in eight Olympiads from Lucerne 1982 until Istanbul 2000. My best year was 1993, when I won the Zonal Tournament in Brussels, then came second in the Interzonal in Biel and by so doing qualified for the Candidates Matches, the final stage of the then three-yearly cycle to select a challenger for the World Champion. There I lost my first-round match to GM Gata Kamsky in Wijk aan Zee 1994 2½-4½.

I have also been a prolific writer on chess.

PREFACE

During my active years I confined myself mostly to game analyses and short articles for chess magazines. When I quit playing in 2001, larger projects became possible and I wrote a number of books, the most successful of which has been *Fundamental Chess Openings* (published by Gambit in 2009).

In 1998, while still a professional player, I took up meditation, and in the next eight years or so I must have spent thousands of hours on the cushion and an equal amount of time in my study reading Buddhist literature. I was also a meditation teacher for a couple of years.

I'm often asked what the effect of meditation was on my chess and whether I would recommend it to other chess players. This is a difficult question, and only a *very* short answer or a *really* elaborate one can have any degree of validity. Having noticed that the short answer ('I don't know') is rarely found acceptable by those who ask, I have at long last decided to try my hand at an elaborate one. Hence this book.

Introduction

It's so easy to say nothing. And so true. For saying nothing *is* speaking the truth. But once it is clear that truth can never be harmed by whatever you say or don't say, it becomes easier to speak. Words can never be true, never be final, never be immune to criticism or praise. But words can *point* to the truth. In fact, they always do. When this becomes clear it is also understood that *everything* points to the truth, 'everything under the sun', to quote a well-known verse by an unknown author known as Ecclesiastes. And probably everything above the sun as well.

And so I speak. Not because what I have to say has any more truth in it than a telephone directory or a restaurant bill, but because it *is* truth. Truth, expressing itself in a way it hadn't thought of before and will never think of again. This is

INTRODUCTION

what truth does all the time, whether we notice it or not.

As a boy I became fascinated by chess and, gradually, almost without my noticing it, my life turned into that of a professional chess player. There I experienced both victory and defeat, much joy and much suffering, as Theodore Roosevelt puts it in a famous quote. But as I grew older, it became increasingly difficult to cope with those emotions. Victory was still fine, of course, though the formerly unknown sensation of empathy toward beaten opponents dimmed much if not all the enjoyment. Defeats started to bring with them not just the long-familiar forms of suffering (gloom, self-loathing, despair), but deep, fundamental doubts as well. Am I past my prime? Is this what the future holds: slowly spiralling downward until I'm no more than a pathetic has-been? I reached a point where the only emotionally acceptable outcome of a game was a draw. No winner, no loser, no bad feelings. But this, of course, was not very good for my professional career, which depended on my winning as many games as possible.

Then I started to meditate. Through a friend of mine who was both a chess player and a meditation teacher, I became involved with *vipassana* meditation, an ancient Buddhist practice that

INTRODUCTION

was then becoming popular in the West and has since firmly established itself in our culture under the new name of mindfulness. I approached meditation with the same total devotion as I had approached chess, so within a few years my self-identification as a chess player had become strongly mingled with the feeling of being a meditator and a student of Buddhism.

Did it help my chess? Maybe not, though it did make my life easier as a professional chess player in the few remaining years of my career. For though there were perhaps no significant improvements in my results, there was a marked improvement in my feeling at peace with myself, whether I won or lost. It became clear to me that it was only natural that a career as a professional sportsman, which is after all what a professional chess player is, must necessarily come to an end. A painful realization, certainly, but a natural one. Mindfulness, as I will call it from now on, helped me to end my career with only a minimum of emotional negatives. I found out that life without chess was not only possible (which was a surprise!), but actually very interesting. Many things I had pushed aside in my mind for decades were now allowed to roam free, and I became a different person in many ways. Then, a few years after I had withdrawn from chess, I quit meditation as

INTRODUCTION

well. Or perhaps I should say that by then I had internalized mindfulness so completely that I felt no need to continue my well-worn routine of formal meditation, which included daily sittings and several long retreats in a meditation centre each year.

Again, a new phase in my life opened up, one in which I was no longer a chess player or a practitioner of meditation. I did a lot of reflection, both on my past as a chess player and on my years on the meditation cushion. But was it reflection or was it something else? A shedding of identities, perhaps? A shift from thinking to just being aware? Reflection implies a thought process, yet thinking has strangely lost much of its former importance in my life. It's still there, of course, but somehow it no longer seems to boss me around. Nowadays, I would compare thinking to the weather. If there is bright sunshine, there is bright sunshine. If thick clouds darken the sky, then thick clouds darken the sky. If there is thinking, there is thinking. Who cares?

Yes, who cares? Or should I say: who is it that cares? That is the question this book revolves around. It is the question I dealt with in my life as a chess player and then again as a meditator. It is the question everybody has to deal with sooner or later. Who am I? What is I? Delving into this

INTRODUCTION

matter is an adventure with a wholly uncertain outcome. It demands courage, perhaps even desperate courage. But don't worry, it's not you who decides to take the plunge (or not). It is life itself.

Setting up the pieces

About chess

*Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win
glorious triumphs, even though checkered by
failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits
who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because
they live in the gray twilight which knows not
victory nor defeat.*

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Life was pleasant in the small Dutch town where I grew up. A regional administrative and commercial centre right on the German border, Venlo had been all but destroyed during the final stages of the Second World War, but that was now a thing of the past. By the early 1960s, post-war poverty was gradually making way for affluence. There was also a change in mentality going on in these years, creating room for other than traditional

SETTING UP THE PIECES

lifestyles. So when I made it clear to my parents and my school teachers that I intended to take my chess seriously and that this might well result in my becoming a professional player, nobody raised any serious objections. With hindsight, I find this remarkable, given that none of the people involved had any idea what this decision actually meant, least of all myself.

But that, of course, is youth at its best: follow your star without knowing where it may take you. So when I was eighteen, I moved to Amsterdam and began a new life in the big city, the life of a chess player.

Chess is a wonderful game. It involves both struggle and beauty — the struggle to overcome your opponent and the beauty of creating something new within a strict set of rules. The rules, or, as they are sometimes called, the laws of chess, are what paint is for a painter, language for a writer, sound for a musician and any type of material for a sculptor. They set the limitations and provide the necessary stimulus to become creative. To stay within the rules, yet to somehow bend them to *your* will rather than to your opponent's will, that is the challenge. For chess is a battle of wills. Though a solitary occupation at first glance, the essence of chess is that it requires two opposing players. And that's where a game

ABOUT CHESS

becomes something much more intimate — it becomes a fight. A fight between two brains, two minds, two personalities. But it must be a fight to the death, a gladiator fight. For only when put under the utmost pressure will a chess player find the strength to play at his very, very best. To a chess player, losing has to feel like dying. To be able to play at your best, you have to feel that you are fighting for your life.

And your opponent needs to be as serious about the game as you are, or else it won't work. I remember a game I played against my father when I was ten years old. My father was a hard-working man whose sole passion was all things technical. He disliked games, so obviously he had never played chess before. In fact, he didn't even know the rules, but for once he was in the mood to spend a little time with his son at his favourite game. Naturally, I took full advantage of this rare opportunity. He wasn't normally a patient man, but on this occasion he patiently let me explain the rules to him while playing. The result was a lot of talking, a lot of taking back of moves, and a total loss of focus on the part of the young chess player suddenly turned teacher. My father was also an intelligent and a highly practical man. To keep things as simple as possible, I hadn't explained the concept of checkmate to him. What