Routledge Handbook of Applied Sport Psychology
A comprehensive guide for students and practitioners
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It is not necessary to start every chapter on Buddhist teachings with a quote.  
Anonymous

Within the context of this chapter, the term “Eastern philosophy” will refer to Buddhist or Taoist principles, whereas “Western influences” will refer to European and North American approaches to psychotherapy. When adapting Eastern principles, we will cite primarily general philosophical ideals for living a happy life as opposed to specific theories focusing on working within the context of psychotherapy. The purpose of the chapter is not to resolve the major differences between Eastern and Western approaches, for there are many more comprehensive treatments on this subject. The primary objective is to outline principles from Eastern philosophies (Buddhism, Taoism, and others), and to suggest how these principles relate to therapeutic processes in applied sport psychology. The amount of literature available from the last 30 to 40 years on the topic of Buddhist principles (e.g., mindfulness) applied to psychotherapy is voluminous (e.g., Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005), but there have been surprisingly few applications of these principles within the profession of applied sport psychology. Therefore, it is our goal to succinctly explore some of the ideas and the research conducted so sport psychology professionals can find their own paths in applying these principles to their work.

Common ground?

One key similarity cited between the two approaches is that Buddhism “is concerned with helping people change and with helping them overcome emotional suffering, as are the various psychotherapies” (Wray, 1986, p. 155). Eastern philosophical approaches offer insights over 2,500 years old, and provide classic lessons and principles to be applied to daily life (Reps, 1989), whereas Western psychotherapies have been developed in the context of industrialized societies founded on capitalistic principles over the last 150 years. Wray noted that because psychotherapies are recent developments, we must consider how Western cultural and social ideals helped to shape these approaches on macro and micro levels.

The primary bias within many industrialized societies is economic development, based on a variety of socialist and capitalist perspectives. In many ways, capitalism could be seen as
the antithesis of Buddhism. Within a capitalistic environment, individual needs are emphasized and citizens struggle to achieve status and gain material goods (Schumacher, 1999). Aggression and risk taking are reinforced. Buddhism focuses on the interconnectedness of collective societies and the earth, simplicity in living, non-attachment to achievements and material goods, and compassion towards others (Rosenbaum, 1999).

On a micro level, the primary bias within applied psychology is an emphasis on empirical evidence and proven treatments. In the twenty-first century, the focus on the science of psychotherapy and accountability has sharpened. Shaped by economic (e.g., insurance companies, managed health care) and governmental forces, a movement has taken shape called “evidenced-based practice,” although some professionals are skeptical of this structured, top-down approach to client care (Stuart & Lilienfeld, 2007). Practitioners of Eastern approaches value the evidence and experiences encountered when consciously engaged in the present moment. Western practitioners place emphasis instead on rational, linear thinking and the accumulation of knowledge via the scientific method (e.g., randomized controlled trials).

At their core, Eastern philosophies emphasize engaging in the present moment as the highest form of consciousness. Buddhist and Taoist proponents highlight the simplicity and clarity of the present moment, and they espouse the value of present experience over past events or future possibilities. Meditation and mindful awareness (i.e., simply being) might be the most common forms of psychological treatment that Buddhist-oriented practitioners prescribe (Rosenbaum, 1999). In contrast, some Western approaches to psychotherapy focus on past conflicts (Freudian/Jungian) or current emotional experiences (Gestalt), whereas others center on cognitive reactions to past and current experiences (rational-emotive behavior therapy) and how choices will affect future outcomes (Adlerian individual psychotherapy). These therapies typically have changing patterns of thoughts, emotions, or behaviors (i.e., doing versus being) as the medium of treatment.

In Watts’ (1961) classic essay, *Psychotherapy East and West*, he suggested that another basic contrast between the two approaches is that clinical psychologists have been concerned with “changing the consciousness of particularly disturbed individuals . . . [whereas Taoists and Buddhist teachers have focused on] changing the consciousness of normal, socially adjusted people” (p. 16). This latter description, on the surface, would suggest that Eastern approaches would be well-suited to applied sport psychology given that many athletes do not experience serious mental illness. Watts’ discussion of psychotherapy, however, must be viewed in a historical context because it largely focused on psychodynamic approaches that dominated the psychotherapy landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. In addition to these seminal approaches to psychotherapy, we need to consider the strong influence and integration of cognitive-behavioral approaches as well, given their high prevalence in the field of applied sport psychology. We’ll now explore several key principles of Eastern philosophy that may be useful to consider integrating into our practices as sport psychology professionals.

### Starting with an empty cup

As you consider each of the following principles, you may find yourself struggling to fit one of these “new-old” ideas into the structure of how you have been taught to be an effective sport psychology professional. It might be useful to try to “unlearn” – even for a moment – something you have been taught in your preparation as a therapist (Brandon, 1976) so that you may have the opportunity for growth as a sport psychology professional.
Some of the principles discussed below will appear in direct opposition to either the current cultural norms related to health care or your professional training, so it is important to start this process in the moment, or “empty your cup” as noted in the translated Zen anecdote below (Reps, 1989):

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868–1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

(p. 5)

The meaning of unsatisfactoriness, suffering, and pain

One of the first opportunities to unlearn relates to the meaning of unsatisfactoriness, suffering, and pain, from a Buddhist perspective. Nearly all Western approaches to physical or mental health care, often through a medical model of treatment, focus on symptom or pain reduction as key therapeutic outcomes. Visits to doctors often commence with a listing of current and recurrent symptoms, and end with a prescription for treating those symptoms and/or the root cause (with pharmaceuticals or psychotherapy). The focus is typically on making people comfortable and avoiding or minimizing pain and discomfort.

Eastern approaches would instead have us help the client focus on, and accept, the pain as part of experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Buddhist teachers suggest pain has meaning; there is something to be learned, and therefore, we should pay more attention to it, not less. In this context, our Western approach to medicine is nearly the polar opposite of what Buddhists might think of as “traditional medicine.” The traditional approach to healthy living taught in Buddhist texts focuses on accepting current circumstances, and healing ourselves through moderation in eating, drinking, sleep, and other behaviors (Germer et al., 2005). The most common medical intervention in modern Western society involves ingesting a manmade substance (drug) to alter body chemistry to either: (a) remove or reduce unpleasant sensations or states of mind, or (b) treat an underlying pathology. Many teaching texts of Buddhism list the “four noble truths” as the fundamental realities students should come to accept if they hope to live well. The four principles explain the central role of “suffering” in life (the first truth), the sources of suffering (the second truth), and how to stop suffering (the last two truths). The first of these noble truths of Buddhism – “life is suffering” – should be accepted as a fact of life, but not in a pessimistic sense. As Andersen and Mannion (in press) noted, there is a problem of translation of the word “suffering”.

Many Western people, when hearing the first noble truth of Buddhism, may baulk. That “life means suffering” sounds like the language of victimization. One can argue, “But life is full of joy and happiness too; this view is way too pessimistic and negative.” What the first noble truth addresses is often misinterpreted .... The actual term used in Sanskrit is dukkha, and its translation into “suffering” has caused no end of misunderstandings. The term dukkha can mean a few different things, and its translation into the more accurate expressions of “pervasive unsatisfactoriness” or “disquietude” sets the first noble truth in a clearer light. That even in moments of joy there is a tinge
of unsatisfactoriness because of the transience and impermanence of the experience. Great athletic achievements, gold medals, and such, are often followed by feelings of regret, “was it really worth it?,” and “I wish I could have that feeling again.” The whole culture of sport could be seen as a culture of pervasive unsatisfactoriness. One is not training enough (i.e., satisfactorily); one is not achieving enough. One must do more. You’re not *citius*, *altius*, and *fortius* enough.

The idea is for clients to understand that their lives will be filled at times with a certain amount of suffering and that they are not helping the situation by denying, avoiding, or over-reacting to negative life events and the dissatisfaction they cause. Fisher and Wrisberg (2005) provided an application of these concepts to career-ending injury rehabilitation. They suggested that athletic trainers (or sport physiotherapists) help their athletes develop “beginner’s mind” so they can accept their present circumstances and commit to “getting on with life as it is today” (p. 44). The concept of beginner’s mind is similar to the idea of emptying your cup, described above. To help athletes engage in mindful rehabilitation, it could be useful for them to quiet many of their thoughts related to why the injury happened and what they might be missing out on in the future. Emptying their minds of biases, irrelevant goals, and preconceived notions about the future will allow them to consider the new opportunities that lay ahead on their paths to recovery.

Expecting to encounter and accept adversity could certainly be taught as a critical mental skill for sport performance. Helping athletes interpret situations differently and accepting the “full catastrophe” of the worst parts of their lives (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) has the same outcome goal as more structured, situation-focused cognitive-behavioral techniques. As mentioned earlier, a critical difference when making these types of comparisons is that Buddhism is a broad philosophical approach offering guidance on most aspects of life and personal development, whereas each specific form of psychotherapy focuses more narrowly on mental health issues.

Athletes may have a different perspective on pain than general psychotherapy clients given the physicality of their work and the realistic expectation that they will encounter some amount of pain on a regular basis. Some sport sub-cultures embrace or sensationalize pain tolerance so absurdly that athletes who play injured are revered as the highest form of sport hero. Phrases such as “no pain, no gain” are all too common in sport environments. Such attitudes, however, don’t necessarily encourage mindful awareness and could lead to a variety of negative consequences including injuries and overtraining. People generally try to avoid pain, but high-achieving athletes may be conditioned to think that more work and effort (and pain) are always better. In sum, Buddhism would not really differentiate painful moments from pain-free moments in terms of relative importance. We are meant to pay attention, and experience these (and other) moments so we can learn to live in the present.

### The nature of behavior change

At this point, it is useful to remember that both Eastern and Western practitioners would agree that they want to reduce unsatisfactoriness, physical pain, and psychological suffering, and help clients lead fulfilling lives (e.g., perform better in life or sport). Definitions of a fulfilling life, however, might differ considerably if you asked a Western psychologist or a Japanese Zen master. Western psychologists might focus on helping their clients build self-esteem and confidence so they can become more competent in relationships, school, or work than they previously have been. They would be likely to help them set goals to lead
more productive lives, based on achievements or outcomes desired by their clients. If clients are able to achieve the stated goals of therapy, then the process may be judged a success.

Notions of behavior change differ considerably in Buddhism. The attainment of sukha (from Sanskrit for happiness, ease, pleasure, bliss), which is a central motive for change, offers an interesting example. The Buddhist notion of sukha in living has been described as ending the cycle of life and death (de Silva, 1986) or cessation of dukkha (pervasive unsatisfactoriness). The past and future are meaningless and do not hold the weight of the present moment. In sports, an example may be a shift to ending the cycle of dwelling on future and past wins and losses. Happiness is (ideally) an acceptance of, and commitment to, the circumstances of the present moment. The process involves being present, rather than striving to do something perfectly. From this perspective, each opportunity to perform may be seen as a temporal work of art that cannot be held. Some aspects of flow are similar to sukha. Some Western psychotherapies, such as acceptance and commitment therapy, come close to Buddhist concepts of change.

Buddhist approaches to behavior change and self-development are conducted with an emphasis on personal restraint, and moderation in motor, verbal, and cognitive elements of life (de Silva, 1986). In a general sense, Buddhism teaches through the open interpretation of a variety of stories and examples. Specific techniques are not necessarily offered to the practitioner, but emphasis is placed instead on guiding principles to change. In a review of many of these ancient stories and examples, de Silva identified some of the following commonly used cognitive and behavioral strategies: (a) modeling, (b) reciprocal inhibition, (c) stimulus control, (d) behavioral reinforcement, (e) social skills training, (f) thought stopping, and (g) self-monitoring through mindfulness. The remarkable overlap between techniques used to facilitate behavior change in Buddhism and Western psychology suggests that sport psychology practitioners may be able to merge ideologies to experience personal and professional growth. It is also humbling to realize that many of the “new” techniques outlined by cognitive-behavioral practitioners have been practised by Buddhist and Taoist teachers for more than 2,000 years.

Buddhist practitioners would best be described as “non-directive” – they lead by standing still. Buddhist teachers do not move towards or away from clients; they might reflect the present moment (à la Carl Rogers), or they may guide clients in meditation to help them reflect on and accept their circumstances. The modeling of non-doing or sitting still (e.g., mindful meditation, zazen) is the primary medium to encourage change.

Mindfulness in the consulting room

The sport psychologist can take a variety of stances. He can be the expert problem solver and direct the athlete to solutions. She can be the Rogerian mirror of unconditional positive regard and genuineness. He can be the irrational thought confronter; it all depends on the therapeutic model one embraces. The Buddhist suggestion for the stance of the therapist is the same one for the person in therapy: moment-to-moment mindful attention. As Wilson and DuFrene (2008) stated:

> Present-moment contact is every bit as important for you as a therapist as it is for your clients. You need to ask of yourself the same questions you ask of your clients. To the extent that you become excessively attached to a conceptualized future for your clients (“What if I can’t help them?”) or a conceptualized past (“I have done them no good at all”), you’ll be less available to interact with the small shifts in their behavior. In addition,
to the extent that you’re worried and anxious and working hard to make these painful thoughts go away, your clients may begin to help you out by expressing less distress.

(p. 63)

Wilson and DuFrene’s mindfulness of the therapist and the client (their book is titled Mindfulness for Two) has psychotherapy roots that go back, at least, to Freud.

Freud asked his clients to say whatever came to mind (e.g., thoughts, images, memories, emotions) with as little censoring as possible. He asked them to report their continually rolling internal world. Freud’s free association can be seen as an early Western mindful exercise. Freud (1912/1958) also wrote about the stance a psychoanalyst needs to take when working with clients:

As we shall see, it rejects the use of any special expedient (even that of taking notes). It consists simply in not directing one’s notice of anything in particular, and in maintaining the same “evenly suspended attention” (as I have called it) in the face of all that one hears ... . The rule for the doctor may be expressed: “He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend,” ... or to put it purely in terms of technique: “He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind”.

(pp. 111–112)

Freud’s description of how a therapist should be (not do) in a state of “evenly suspended attention” sounds mindful and positively Buddhist. There have been many arguments over the decades about what Freud meant with his evenly suspended attention. Epstein (2007) probably best summed it up as:

This attention is not just passive, receptive, empathic listening, it is a means of attending to all phenomena equally, impartially, and dispassionately with rapt interest and active close scrutiny but with a slight distance, so that one allows a thought or impulse to completely exhibit itself, noting all of the reverberations created, before acting.

(p. 118)

How is this mindfulness of the therapist helpful? This nonjudgmental state echoes with Rogers’ (1957) empathy and unconditional positive regard and provides clients with a different type of interpersonal feedback than they receive from others and themselves. This evenly suspended attention is also deeply connected to Winnicott’s (1971) concept of creating a safe, secure, “holding” environment. Perhaps sitting in these moments with a sport psychologist could help heal and might be the most compassionate act a therapist can do, to hold others in all their confusion and messiness, to be with the other. Evenly suspended attention (mindfulness) also assists in quieting our own needs to help, to find solutions, and to jump to (possibly premature) interventions.

**Teaching Buddhist principles to help clients change thoughts and behaviors**

One of the goals of this chapter is to help sport psychology professionals better understand the key Buddhist principles that may be applied, why they might be useful, and how they can influence work in the consulting room. Many skeptical readers may look beyond these
humble goals and ask themselves, “How specifically am I supposed to teach these vague concepts to my clients to help them improve performance?” Any seasoned Zen master would not provide an answer to this question, but perhaps ask students more questions meant to lead them down their own paths of discovery. Nevertheless, given our own biases and desires to write a useful chapter, we have developed the final section of the chapter to satisfy some readers’ Western urges for clarity.

Prior to implementing any of the strategies below with a particular client, we encourage readers to review some of the earlier chapters (e.g., Chapters 1, 2, 20) in this book to determine if their clients will be good matches for the strategies outlined below. Fisher and Wrisberg (2005) suggested that spiritually-minded clients may be open to adopting some of these concepts, although the timing of the consultation may be critical to success.

**Strategy #1**: Encourage enhanced self-awareness through meditation and mindfulness training. From our viewpoints, clients spending time “single-tasking,” or just sitting, may help counteract the culturally dominant strategy of multi-tasking or disastrous dissociation. Elite athletes, who often live complicated lives with many demands on their time, may benefit from the simplicity of these moments. Time spent mindfully, on a single task, may recharge their batteries and contribute positively to recovery and mental health. This benefit alone might motivate some clients to try meditation. If clients are uncomfortable trying a sitting meditation, then perhaps guide them in a walking meditation where they focus on one step at a time and let their thoughts flow by without judgment. Clients who embrace mindfulness training may eventually develop an ability to recall this calm state of mind and body when under pressure in performance situations. Learning this coping skill could be highly useful, particularly for athletes who struggle to manage their emotional states before, during, or after competitions (see Germer, 2005).

**Strategy #2**: Help clients “let go” of their attachments and live and own their own “full catastrophes.” One key characteristic of Westernized sport environments is the sheer volume of external rewards and punishments for success and failure. The high visibility and accessibility of modern sport make for a double-edged sword for the modern athlete – the rewards may be higher for success, yet the downfalls may be deeper and longer lasting. Attachment to either of these potential outcomes takes athletes out of the moment, and can lead them to establish tentative patterns of behavior where they are motivated to avoid failure at all costs. We can help athletes break their patterns by teaching them to embrace the idea that their careers will most likely include tremendous highs and lows, peaceful moments, and catastrophes. All of these experiences are parts of their stories, and adopting this approach might give them a happy, calm way of functioning within a challenging, distracting environment where pervasive unsatisfactoriness is guaranteed (see Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

**Strategy #3**: Buddhist philosophy (and all religions) is full of stories, images, and metaphors. One strategy that we have found useful in communicating Buddhist principles is to tell modern and ancient stories to capture a concept or to represent a client’s situation. For example, here is a story that might help athletes with the concepts of attachment, clinging, and letting go.

One day the Buddha was having a picnic in a lovely meadow with many monks. They noticed an unhappy farmer coming toward them. The farmer had lost his cows, and he asked the Buddha and the monks if they had seen them. They said that they had not seen any cows the whole day. The farmer, greatly distressed, said, “I’m so miserable. I have twelve cows, and now I can’t find them.” The Buddha said, “My friend, we have not seen any cows. You might look for them in another place.” The farmer thanked
him and ran away, and the Buddha turned to his monks and said, “My dear monks, you must be the happiest people. You have no cows to lose. If you have too many cows to take care of, you will be very busy. In order to be happy, you have to learn the art of cow releasing.” And then the Buddha laughed heartily. “Release the cows one by one. In the beginning you thought those cows were essential to your happiness, and you tried to get more and more cows. But now you realize that cows are not really conditions for your happiness; they are obstacles for your happiness. You need to release your cows.”

There are thousands of Buddhist stories, metaphors, and images that can be used to communicate what may be foreign concepts to athletes and coaches. As sport psychologists, we listen to athletes’ and coaches’ stories all the time, but we are storytellers too. Stories have been used for millennia to entertain, to instruct, to warn, and even to enlighten. We find the telling of Buddhist stories in therapy to be a useful strategy to begin changing maladaptive thinking and behavior. See Andersen and Speed (in press) for a discussion on stories, folktales, and metaphors in applied sport psychology service delivery.

Conclusions

There are many lessons to be learned and unlearned when comparing and contrasting Western and Eastern approaches to the practice of applied sport psychology. The contradictory messages appear, at times, difficult to merge. But when put together, just as in the yin-yang symbol, the approaches form a full circle. They need each other for balance, and there are valuable lessons within each approach. See Box 21.1 for the key points of this chapter.

Box 21.1

Key points about an Eastern philosophical approach

- Learning Buddhist and other Eastern approaches is largely unlearning, so we start with emptying our cups. If we hope to be present-moment focused in a culture that makes such behavior difficult, we will probably have to unlearn some of the sociocultural lessons or specific counseling techniques that emphasize the past and the future.
- Doing less to help may help more. Techniques vary across psychotherapies, and their success often depends on rapport and timing. Techniques lead the client to where you think they should go. “Doing” less and being present more may help clients feel accepted and encourage clients to find their own paths.
- In your work with athletes, accept that you will experience dukkha, or pervasive unsatisfactoriness. You could always have done more, said more in a session, observed more practices or competitions, consulted with the coach more often. Learning to model acceptance of a non-perfect world in your own professional life may do wonders for the genuine rapport and empathy you model in your sessions.
Help clients “let go.” Re-consider how you set goals with your clients, and how much time you spend helping them achieve. Outcome goals lead to judgments and relative comparisons that may undermine our efforts. If absorption in the moment is the ultimate objective, then trying to win or get better only detracts from one’s focus in the now. Putting energy instead into mindful training and performing encourages athletes to focus on the quality of now instead of unknown quantities and consequences in the future.

References


