Fritz Allhoff and Anand J. Vaidya

THE ZEN MASTER AND THE BIG ARISTOTLE

Cultivating a Philosopher in the Low Post

Philosophy, Bullshit, and Basketball

IT IS OFTEN HARD to see how esoteric philosophical speculations have anything to do with everyday practical concerns. The dense abstractions of Aristotle and the cryptic and poetical musings of Lao-tzu can easily seem irrelevant to our supercharged world of deadlines, day care, and cell phones. However, this conception of the relation between philosophy and everyday life is deeply mistaken, as the following analogy bears out.

As we write, philosopher Harry Frankfurt's book *On Bullshit* (2005) is a New York Times Bestseller. Although Frankfurt's book is a first-rate work of (semi-)serious philosophical analysis, many people probably buy the book only because they get a kick out of the title. Lots of people, in fact, think that that's exactly what philosophy is: bullshit.

Philosophers are happy to accept the unintended compliment. It's true that bullshit in itself is unattractive and useless—in fact, worse than useless if you step in it. But as third-world subsistence farmers know, cow dung fertilizes plants and can be used as fuel. Philosophy is much the same. Although it may initially seem useless and unappealing, philosophy promotes wisdom in our lives, nurtures the growth of the human spirit, and fuels our imaginations. Through engagement with the great thinkers of the past, philosophy opens our minds, disciplines our thinking, helps us overcome obstacles, fortifies us against adversity, and expands our sense of what is possible. Even philosophy that seems hopelessly abstract or esoteric may have surprising applications in other disciplines, as shown, for example, by advances in physics, mathematics, psychology,

and linguistics by philosophers such as Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Russell. In addition, philosophy has led to extremely practical applications in fields such as computer technology, artificial intelligence, and democratic theory, not to mention Monty's Python's immortal "Philosopher's Drinking Song."

On the face of it, philosophy would seem to have little relevance to basketball. Unlike baseball, basketball isn't usually perceived as a "thinking person's game." Basketball is a relatively simple game with simple rules and a simple objective that stresses proper execution of a small number of basic skills (dribbling, shooting, passing, guarding, and rebounding). A fifth-grader can understand the fundamentals of good basketball. So what could tweedy philosophy professors possibly add that wouldn't be simply "bullshit"?

Well, as Kant and Dennis Rodman liked to say, appearances can be deceiving. Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson, often called the "Zen Master," actively uses philosophy to improve players' performance and to motivate and inspire his players and fellow coaches, both on and off the court. In fact, Jackson has so integrated philosophy into his coaching and his personal life that it's difficult to distinguish his role as a basketball coach from his role as a philosophical guide and mentor to his players. In this chapter we examine how philosophy has helped Jackson become a great coach and one of Jackson's star pupils, Shaquille O'Neal, become an MVP-caliber player.

Now and *Zazen*

Although Jackson was raised as a Pentecostal in a very religious family, the philosophical insights he brings to basketball mostly come from outside the religious tradition in which he was brought up. Among the philosophers Jackson has been most strongly influenced by are Aristotle, William James, Jiddu Krishnamurti, Pir Vilyat Khan, various Native American thinkers, and Carlos Castaneda. But the philosophical outlook that has most shaped his coaching style and personal life is Zen Buddhism. One work of particular importance is *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* by the late Japanese Roshi, Shunryu Suzuki. Jackson has recommended this book to several of his players over the years.

Zen philosophy originates from the teachings of the Buddha (566 - 486 BCE), which are centered on the problem of human suffering. One of the most basic truths of human existence, Buddha taught, was that humans find themselves in a world of pervasive suffering. At a physical level, humans can suffer because of physical injuries or unsatisfied bodily desires, such as hunger, thirst, and desire for sexual pleasure. Socially, humans suffer from the problems caused by social desires related to the ego, such as status and attachment to material objects. Buddhism focuses on how to eliminate the suffering that is due to frustrated desires. Zen is a Japanese variant of the meditation branch of Buddhist philosophy, constructed out of a mix of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism. One central element of Zen is the idea that religious dogmas and creeds are irrelevant to learning the eternal truths of reality. Rather, one must directly experience these truths. The deepest truths of reality cannot be grasped by the intellect or expressed in language. The best way to encounter these truths is not by relying on texts or rational thought, but by practicing meditation under the guidance of an acknowledged Zen master, or *sensei*. In fact, words and concepts are more or less obstacles to understanding the deepest truths of reality, including the ultimate truth that reality is one.

One practice that Jackson often shares with his players is a type of Zen meditation known as "zazen." In the form of zazen Jackson practices, a person sits completely still on a cushion with his eyes open and focuses on his breath. The goal of this exercise is to achieve "mindfulness"—complete awareness of the present moment—by concentration on one's breath and posture. By practice, one learns not only to relax, but more importantly, to live in the present, empty the mind of limiting self-centered thoughts, and simply *be*.

How is *zazen* important for Jackson and his players? For starters, the ability to have a clear mind and relaxed state during moments of increased pressure allows one to execute the task at hand with complete concentration. Imagine how much easier it would be to make a clutch free throw in the closing moments of a championship game if one could only block out such thoughts as: *I have to make this shot; everything is on the line; I will lose my contract and the championship if I don't make this shot; I wish the fans would just shut up and stop waving those ri-*

*diculous things. . . . And what the *!#*! are those things, anyway?* Blocking out thoughts like these would allow you to focus on the task at hand: making the shot.

In basketball, as in many other sports, too much thinking can interfere with maximum performance. As Jackson remarks:

> Basketball happens at such a fast pace that your mind has a tendency to race at the same speed as your pounding heart. As the pressure builds, it's easy to start thinking too much. But if you're always trying to figure the game out, you won't be able to respond creatively to what's going on. Yogi Berra once said about baseball: "How can you think and hit at the same time?" The same is true with basketball, except everything's happening much faster. The key is seeing and doing. If you're focusing on anything other than reading the court and doing what needs to be done, the moment will pass you by.[1]

Zazen also helps Jackson and his players relate better with one another, the referees, and the media. The images of a coach screaming from the sidelines at a referee and a player getting into a brawl with an opponent are iconic in the minds of sports fans. Jackson believes that the regular practice of *zazen* helps him and his players gain control of a situation, calm angry or egotistic thoughts, and concentrate on the immediate task at hand.[2]

Another aspect of Jackson's Zen-inspired philosophy is a focus on selfless play. Players are taught to put team goals ahead of purely personal ambitions. Perhaps the best example of this is the episode in which Jackson told Michael Jordan—then coming off one of the best offensive seasons in NBA history—that he would have to take fewer shots the next season in order to bring out the best in his teammates. Jordan agreed and became a consummate team player. He went on to lead the Bulls to six NBA championships—and in the process became the richest and most famous athlete in the world. Still, it can be asked: Why is unselfish play important in an era when high-scoring superstars get all the big sneaker contracts and mostly only acts of flashy individual showmanship make the ESPN highlight tape?

Jackson believes that NBA defenses are so good that no team with only a single dominant player can consistently win championships, and that selfish play leads to resentment amongst players and lower team morale. To win championships consistently, as the Celtics, Lakers, and

Bulls have done in recent decades, each member of the team must feel valued in a way that facilitates focus on the common goal: winning the game. As Aristotle would put it, what's important is for each player to understand his or her proper role or function (*ergon*) on the team, and work unstintingly to fulfill that role. Not only does selfless teamwork win championships; it also makes the game more fun. As Jackson writes: "The beauty of [team-centered basketball] is that it allows players to experience another, more powerful form of motivation than ego-gratification. Most rookies arrive in the NBA thinking that what will make them happy is having unlimited freedom to strut their egos on national TV. But that approach is an inherently empty experience. What makes basketball so exhilarating is the joy of losing yourself completely in the dance, even if it's just for one beautiful transcendent moment."[3]

In the case of Michael Jordan, Jackson's request for more selfless play on his part was crucial to the Bulls' spectacular success. In particular, Jordan's adjustment from point-maker to play-maker empowered his teammates to take on certain roles that they had turned over to his stunning abilities. With Jordan focused solely on scoring, his teammates didn't develop their own skills and often complemented Jordan more as spectators than as contributors.

A second example of Jackson's philosophy of selfless play comes from the kind of offense he has employed for many years: the triangle (or triple-post) offense. The triangle offense was first developed by Tex Winter in the 1950s and not used by the Bulls until Jackson became head coach. Jackson adopted the offense, which can take years to perfect, because it makes every player a threat and facilitates selfless, team-centered play. As Jackson says, the offense looks like a five-man *Tai Chi* performance and demands that all players work in unison, as a group. The point of the offense is not to attack the defense head-on, but to get it off-balance and overextended through a carefully orchestrated series of moves. For the offense to work, players must surrender the "me" of personal glory for the "we" of coordinated free-flowing team movement.

Two principles of selfless play lie at the core of the triangle offense: (1) the offense must give the player with the ball an opportunity to pass the ball to any of his teammates; and (2) the offense must utilize the players' individual skills. The first principle holds that by opening up more opportunities to pass the ball one can increase the probability that the

defense will become unbalanced, leading to a better shot for the offense. The second principle expresses the sensitivity of the system to the skills of the players on the court. Each player must see for himself how best to function in the triangle offense, and what skills to employ to find weaknesses in the defense and take advantage of them. The obligation is partly on the player to see how he can contribute best to the offense. In some cases, this may require being a play-maker rather than a point-maker.

Jackson's involvement with his players goes well beyond his role as a coach. He also takes a genuine interest in their personal lives and fosters their growth as individuals. For some coaches, involvement in a player's personal life is thrust upon them. For instance, if a player has a drug problem and gets caught, the coach must become involved in the player's personal affairs. Some coaches no doubt wish that their interactions with their players ended with games and practices. But for those like Jackson who have taken philosophy to heart, it is difficult to neatly separate one's role as coach from one's role as spiritual mentor and friend. Jackson's approach to basketball flows from philosophical underpinnings that are foundational to his own life. They force him to take the needs of his players as individuals on and off the court into perspective, recognizing that basketball is only an extension of their lives, not the whole of it.

Jackson's Star Pupil

Philosophy has strongly influenced Jackson's coaching and personal credo, and Jackson, in turn, has powerfully influenced many of his players. Michael Jordan's transformation from individual superstar to team player is one prime example; another is the effect Jackson had on superstar center Shaquille O'Neal. Before Jackson arrived in Los Angeles, the Lakers had long underachieved. Despite having two of the most potentially dominant players in the NBA, O'Neal and Kobe Bryant, they were swept in the 1998–99 Western Conference Semifinals by the San Antonio Spurs. After Jackson's arrival, they promptly won three titles in a row (Jackson's third three-peat of his career) and cemented their legacy as one of the great teams in NBA history. How was Jackson able to effect such a change and help his players realize their potential?

Jackson's success centered on O'Neal, one of the most dominant big men in NBA history. While Kobe Bryant's talents were essential to the

Lakers' championship runs, there is no doubt that O'Neal was the true catalyst for the team. By Shaq's own admission, Jackson played a major role in establishing O'Neal's dominance, and much of that occurred off the basketball court. As every basketball fan knows, O'Neal has never been very good at free throw shooting.[4] In fact, he is one of the worst in NBA history, rivaling Wilt Chamberlain in this regard. Over the course of his career, O'Neal averages 53.1 percent from the free throw line, but during the 2002–2003 championship season he averaged an astounding (for him) 62.2 percent.[5]

What does any of this have to do with Jackson? Again, we return to the role that philosophy plays in Jackson's approach to coaching and his interaction with his players. One year Jackson gave O'Neal a copy of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as a Christmas present. In this classic text, Aristotle argues that sustained excellence is achieved through habit and repetition. For Aristotle, this is the central dictum of moral education and personal growth. O'Neal has cited the mantra of habituation to explain his improved free throw shooting: by continuously practicing proper habits, he was able to internalize those techniques and perform better, especially under pressure, when the maintenance of subtle mechanics is more difficult. Indeed, he even went on to dub himself "The Big Aristotle" because of the influence of Aristotle's teachings.

Admittedly, even those of us who are not sports psychologists won't find this advice particularly novel: practice excellence and you are more likely to achieve it. But paying lip service to the dictum and truly owning it are completely different, and O'Neal was able to own it; Jackson certainly deserves credit for educating his star pupil in the ways of the philosophers. (Kobe Bryant, by the way, once said, "I don't know why Phil keeps giving me those books; he knows I'm not going to read them." As if we needed more reasons to favor O'Neal over Bryant!)

Further, the relationship between Jackson and O'Neal has always been characterized by warmth and mutual respect. In his most recent book, *The Last Season,* Jackson defends Shaq against his many detractors and notes that for "all his bravado, Shaq is a very sensitive, fragile soul who appreciates any sign of tenderness."[6] The mentoring relationship between Jackson and O'Neal clearly helped Shaq become a better team player and contributed greatly to the Lakers' three consecutive championships.

Giving Back

Surely there is life beyond the basketball court, and this is another way in which Jackson's coaching may have influenced O'Neal. As we noted earlier, one of the chief tenets of Jackson's philosophy is that of putting the team over the self; this was evidenced in his request that Jordan be willing to score less in order to make his teammates better (and, of course, to win those six championships). Today, O'Neal is unquestionably one of the most generous and unselfish professional athletes. Whether this owes more to Jackson's influence or the big man's big heart, we can't be sure; most likely it's a combination of both. Three recent events attest to O'Neal's generous spirit.

First, after being traded to the Miami Heat, O'Neal returned to Los Angeles on Christmas Day 2004 to play his former teammates. While this was certainly a big game, and all eyes were on his dramatic reunion with Bryant, O'Neal spent the morning giving to charity. Not only did he purchase presents for disadvantaged youth with his own money, he donned his Shaq-a-Claus outfit and handed them out personally. Then he went on to beat Bryant and the Lakers.

Second, following the 2004–2005 season, O'Neal's contract was up for renewal with the Miami Heat. He had been scheduled to make $30.6 million during the 2005–2006 season, but renegotiated his contract to make $100 million over the next five years or, on average, $20 million a year. Why would O'Neal leave $10 million (at least) on the table? In his own words: "This contract allows me to address all of my family's long-term financial goals while allowing the Heat the ability to acquire those players that we need to win a championship."[7] O'Neal certainly could have had more money, but he sacrificed personal earnings to give his team the chance to acquire the players that would give them the best chance to get past the Detroit Pistons and the San Antonio Spurs for the championship in 2005–2006. This extra money has allowed the Heat to acquire Antoine Walker, Steve Smith, and Jason Williams in the off-season. To be sure, O'Neal won't be struggling for money, but $10 million per year is a large concession and one that shows his commitment to his team, his teammates, and to winning championships. Again, this sort of selflessness is exactly what Jackson tried to instill in Jordan on the basketball court, and we now see it reflected in O'Neal's contract negotiations as well.

As a final example, in the summer of 2005 O'Neal took an active role

in disaster relief for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Along with his wife, Shaunie, he has personally lobbied the residents of South Florida for contributions, whether monetary or material, for those displaced by the hurricane.[8] O'Neal also challenged Heat president Pat Riley to make a contribution to the relief program, and Riley came through by announcing that all proceeds of the preseason game against the San Antonio Spurs would be donated to Katrina relief programs.

Again, the extent to which Jackson deserves credit for O'Neal's bigheartedness is open to question, though it is noteworthy that one heard far fewer of these stories during O'Neal's pre-Jackson tenures in Orlando and Los Angeles. At a minimum, Jackson brought Aristotle into O'Neal's life, and there is a suspicious connection between Jackson's advocacy of selflessness and O'Neal's displays of it.

In this chapter, we've explored how philosophical ideas can be translated into real-world success through the example of Phil Jackson's coaching and the play and character of Shaquille O'Neal. One of our targets has been the skeptic who thinks that philosophy can't be of practical value. This critic stands refuted in light of how philosophy has contributed to the winning of nine NBA championships by Jackson and Jackson's positive influence on both Michael Jordan and Shaquille O'Neal. Now anytime somebody asks Jackson what you can do with a philosophy degree, all he has to do is point to his trophy case. Nine NBA championship rings ain't bullshit!

Notes

1. Phil Jackson with Hugh Delehanty, *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior* (New York: Hyperion, 1995), 50–51.

2. Jackson also regularly encourages team discussions of ethics centered on the Ten Commandments. Jackson, 124.

3. Jackson, 91.

4. For O'Neal's own take on his poor free-throw shooting, see Shaquille O'Neal, *Shaq Talks Back* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 87–91.

5. http://www.nba.com/playerfile/shaquille_oneal/index.html, accessed September 12, 2005. Since the 2002–2003 season, Shaq's free throw percentage has dipped below .500 every year.

6. Phil Jackson, *The Last Season: A Team in Search of Its Soul* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 79.

7. *Contra Costa Times* (online): http://www.contracostatimes.com/mld/cctimes/12279972.htm?template=contentModules/printstory.jsp.

8. http://www.nba.com/heat/news/shaq_hurricane_050907.html.