

# Integrating Body and Mind

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Western cultures have traditionally maintained a significant separation between mind and body. As a result, many athletes train their bodies and then attend to mental fitness, if at all, as a separate activity. When you improve the connection between body and mind, you can more effectively develop your mental skills – skills that can give you an edge.

In the past 18 months of this Sport Psychology column, we've covered a plethora of mental skills that you can self-assess, selectively improve, and apply in your cycling:

- The **five core skills** of mentally fit cyclists: [Goal-Setting](#), [Self-Talk](#), [Managing Emotions](#), [Concentration](#), and [Communication](#).
- The **integral elements** – the building blocks – of the five core skills: [Breathing Techniques](#), [Self-Awareness](#), [Managing Your Will to Succeed](#), [Building Self-Confidence](#), [Setting and Challenging Limits](#), and [Comparing Yourself With Others](#).
- **Advanced skills**, built on the core skills, that you can use on and off the bike in responding to adversity: [Increasing Tolerance for Suffering](#), [Recovering from Injury](#), [Sustaining Motivation](#), [Handling Pressure](#), [Beating the “Winter Blues,”](#) and [Balancing Self-interest and Cooperation](#).

(For those of you new to Pez, words in blue are links. And welcome to Pez!)

Now that we've covered so much ground (and road), it's time to step back a bit.

Last week, I went to a performance by the brilliant fingerstyle guitarist Pierre Bensusan. He told a story of being offered a contract to perform in Spain; the only condition in the contract was that he improvise the entire show. Being a master of improvisation, he signed, but as the date of the show approached, he became increasingly nervous. Finally, he sought the counsel of a friend. “Look at it this way,” said the friend, “you won't forget anything.”

What a relief it is when the burdens our minds create...disappear. To be sure, much of mental skills work in sport – and in the performing arts – is about “using your mind on your mind,” and that certainly can be effective. But it's not the only way to master the mental obstacles to optimal performance.

As may be true for many of you this summer, I recently competed in an epic road race. Intense heat, dozens of unavoidable potholes, bottles flying, flats left and right, gravel sections, cramping, and even a bee sting at a critical moment – it was a huge challenge, physically and mentally, just to finish. I was asked, some days later, this question: “Why did you do it?” Why, indeed? Why do we take on the challenges of this physically demanding sport, challenges that call on us to use – and learn – these mental skills? Why do we willingly take on the suffering, the disappointments, the adversity of tough races, long rides, and brutal training?

For the hotties that flock to us after we cross the finish line, I know, but besides that?

One of the reasons, even if we're not aware of it, is frequently this: The body is the Great Equalizer for the mind. When the mind is too dominant, we're out of balance. And then we often pay the price – with anxiety, runaway thoughts, and so many other kinds of distress. But when we draw on the power and wisdom in our bodies, we can restore balance, bring mind and body closer, and relieve the burdens that our rampant minds so often create.

In Western cultures, philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes have had a huge impact on the particular kind of *dualistic* view that separates mind and body. But in the last 50 years, Western civilization has been first inching, and now crawling (or perhaps toddling) toward a more integral view of personhood. Fortunately, it's been Toddling Under the Influence of Eastern philosophies, among other forces. So when I use the phrase “power and wisdom in our bodies,” I'm not talking about wattage and facts. I'm suggesting that your consciousness – your experience of yourself – is not located only in your noggin. Your emotions, sensations, past experiences, self-awareness, and even your thoughts all have a *physical* component. Discovering and *living* the physical in everything you experience – what is sometimes called *being more in your body* – can be the key to better mental fitness, and a better experience on the bike. But how?

## Mind-Body Techniques

Led by [Dr. Herbert Benson](#) and others, mind-body medicine has begun to guide what Dr. Benson calls the “third modality” in health care – in addition to pharmaceuticals and surgery – for maintaining health and well-being: self-care. And so, over the years, health care practitioners, researchers, and the athletes they’ve worked with have identified a number of things you can do to better integrate mind and body for sport performance, including:

- **Improving your emotional awareness.** Emotions affect health, energy, and strength, and of course the reverse is true as well. If you have even occasional difficulty answering the question, “How do you feel about that?”, you may need to look to your body for the answer rather than your mind. For example, when you’re anxious or stressed or fearful, where do you feel it in your body? Does your chest tighten? Does your breathing get shallow? Do you get knots in your stomach? (Don’t feel alone in this, guys; contrary to popular belief, there are women who have trouble with this, too.) Biofeedback can build your awareness and skill here. As you strengthen all the pathways to and from your emotions, you give yourself a better chance to handle your emotions, experience them, and use them.

- **Grounding yourself.** No, I’m not talking about banishing yourself to your room. If you want to be more in your body, becoming more conscious of your physical connection with the Earth is a great way to drive your consciousness downward from your head. In other words, gravity works! So sometimes, when you’re sitting, standing, or walking, practice paying attention to the contact of your feet (or shoes) with the ground. Gardening can work wonders, too. There was a great episode of *The Cosby Show* where one of his kids asks Bill Cosby what he was doing outside in the family’s garden. “I was putting my hands in the life!” he replies, with obvious delight. And finally, there’s nothing more grounding than paying attention to your breath – the place, perhaps, where Body and Mind meet.

- **Cultivating your spiritual life.** Speaking of the breath, thousands of years of many meditation traditions – not to mention present-day research on the physiological and psychological benefits of meditation – have shown how simply following the breath can be so...enlightening. And notice how spiritual practice can be so physical in many spiritual traditions; for example, the ecstatic Zikr in the Sufi tradition, the prostrations in Buddhism and Islam, the bowing and trance-like swaying in Jewish *davening*, the *asanas* of yoga, the Eucharist in Christianity.

- **Being conscious about what you put in your body.** Paying more attention to what you eat and drink – the choices you make, the impact those choices have, but also the actual moment-by-moment experience of eating and drinking – can be a great way to narrow the mind-body gap.

- **Exploring psychotherapy/counseling.** Conventional “talk therapies” can be very helpful in closing the mind-body gap, and there are also innovative body-oriented psychotherapies – such as [Hakomi](#) and [Focusing](#) – that may be a better fit for you.

- **Continuing to discover your physical potential.** There is amazing transformative power in physical, body-focused experience. You can use your cycling in overcoming abuse, shame, or embarrassment. You can use your cycling to learn what’s possible for your mind and body to achieve. Yet as you stretch your physical limits, perceived or real threats to your body may raise visceral fear and anxiety, perhaps evoking the fundamental mortality that underlies every moment of life. But in facing that challenge by drawing on everything within yourself – from mind, body, and spirit – you go through a crucible and a stronger person emerges.

Many of the most successful athletes – in any sport, at any level – are set apart from competitors by mental strength. And your mind will be much stronger when it has a good connection, good communication, and good balance with your body. Be (and ride) well!



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