Zen Buddhism Essay, Research Paper

Buddhism is a major Asian religion studied and practiced in countries such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. Although Buddhism is a growing religion throughout the world, in particular, the practice of meditation is spreading in the West. The United States has a center for Buddhists in Hawaii and New York and also a Buddhist community has been established in California. (Hewitt, 13-14) But even closer to home for most is the practicing of Zen Buddhism on the basketball court by former Chicago Bulls and present Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson. In this essay I will discuss how Jackson has incorporated some of the practices of Zen Buddhism into his and the players of his teams lives and how it has been effective for the game and the lives of those involved. I will also touch on his use of combined Zen and Christianity along with his extended interest in the Lakota Sioux.

The Chicago Bulls Buddha-like guru Phil Jackson inks the richest coaching deal in N.B.A. history ($6 million for one last season [with the Bulls]) (Notebook, 11). There may be some sound reasoning behind this. Michael Jordan was quoted on how some team members are starting to use Jackson s religion to help them win, It s that Zen Buddhism stuff. We re practicing smiling when we may be frustrated inside so we can relieve some tension. It s an art form (Quotables, 1). Jackson speaks in depth to his team about ejecting selfishness and egotism (Eckman, 3). He describes Jordan in the late 80 s as a player who tried to beat the other team by himself (Zen Teamwork). He not only helped lead Jordan to play like a star but led the Bulls to be a winning team. He and several of his former players believe that this is partially due to what they practiced in the years Jackson was coach. Not only did they study basketball, as writer Frank Deford for Sports Illustrated noted in a cover story on Jackson, they took part in group meditations and pregame nap time (84). Not to mention poetry and assigned books (83). These things may sound odd but as one of the beliefs of Zen says, Don t get caught up in only one way of doing things; and don t look at things from just one point of view. If you try another way, or change your point of view, the results will always be different (Chung, 99). Jackson definitely looks at and coaches basketball from a different point of view then most coaches, and his outcome with the Bulls was definitely different.

Speaking on the art of coaching on page 79-80 of his book Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior Jackson explains that,

One of the main jobs of a coach is to reawaken that spirit so that the players can blend together effortlessly. It s often an uphill fight. The ego-driven culture of basketball, and society in general, militates against cultivating this kind of selfless action, even for members of a team whose success as individuals in tied directly to the group performance. Our society places such a high premium on individual achievement, it s easy for players to get blinded by their own self-importance and lose a sense of interconnectedness, the essence of teamwork.

In this passage Jackson incorporates some very important fundamental Buddhist ideas. One of the aspects of the Eightfold Path, or the Middle Way , which Buddha said was the cure of suffering, Right Thought is the basis of this statement. In the introductive book Buddhism Catherine Hewitt spends three pages (4-6) discussing the aspects of the Eightfold Path. She says that Right Thought is when Buddhists, strive to think unselfishly and compassionately. Jackson is saying that in our Western way of living, the self is everything. We are constantly worried about how things will effect us (ourselves) instead of as a community, society, or team; where we are going and for others to get out of our way not thinking that they might have somewhere to be too; and also in reflection of the team structure, how we are going to make that three point shot instead of thinking about how the team will or how we could help someone else.

Jackson s interest in Zen also helped incorporated the triangle offense as the structure of the game. Fortune Magazine states in their article titled Zen and the Art of Teamwork the triangle offense is when, Three players all must be in a particular place on the floor, but each has the freedom to act. And Fortune quotes assistant coach Jim Clemons as saying that, In this particular offense, the cuts and passes aren t programmed. You have to know instinctively where everyone is going to go. This gets everyone involved, and the players end up working like five fingers on a hand. Another aspect of the Eightfold Path is used here. It is Right Mindfulness. Hewitt says that Right Mindfulness is when Buddhists, try to be mindful, which means being alert and aware of what they are thinking, feeling, and doing, so that they do not behave in a way that they will later regret (5). The players must be aware of everything around them including themselves. This technique has proven useful to many teams not just Jackson s.

Jackson also believes and tries to takes on court another aspect of Buddhism. This is the fourth in the Eightfold Path: Right Action. They try to be thoughtful and kind in all they do, explains Hewitt of Buddhists who practice it. Jackson elaborates on that and says that Right Action is, the capacity to observe what s happening and act appropriately, without being distracted by self-centered thoughts (69). He says this when discussing how he controls his players rage and his temper toward them. He says that,

In Zen it is the gap between accepting things the way they are and wishing them to be otherwise is the tenth of and inch of difference between heaven and hell. If we can accept whatever hand we ve been dealt no matter how unwelcome the way to proceed eventually becomes clear (69).

By drawing his mind away from what is going wrong or right, he is able to focus on the real goal instead of letting emotions override. Again this ties in with having unselfish thoughts and compassion as the Eightfold Path says.

The way Jackson has his team members perform drills also resembles Zen practice. So that they are able to move like five fingers on a hand they must perform a repetitive series of drills that train the players just as the Eightfold Path must be performed in order to reach Enlightenment. Jackson says this is done on not only an experimental level but an intellectual one as well. Because of this They develop an intuitive feel for how their movements and those of everyone on the floor are interconnected (Jackson, 91). Not only does Jackson have a tedious set of drills including mediation, poetry, and naps, but he has also developed an undoubtedly clear doctrine to use on everyone to minimize conflict created by the critiquing of the players (91). Here Jackson uses Right Speech to tell the truth and speak in a way that is helpful (Hewitt, 5).

Not only does Jackson use the teachings of Buddhism, but has officially become a Zen Christian. As already mentioned, a goal of Zen is to open the heart — compassion. This comes with awareness that allows us to see the world and ourselves as they are, without selfish and unneeded judgments. Jackson believes that it is this aspect of Zen and the philosophical nature of Christianity. Love (Deford, 91), that appeals to him. He also believes this should be practiced on the court not only should the players be teammates but know each other on a personal level. The players should give their whole selves to the team Jackson says, The point is to build respect, to help one another (Deford, 89). If you know whom you are playing with it is easier to understand where they are coming from. Not as much tension is built with friends as it is with strangers.

To add to the remarkable character of a man, Phil Jackson incorporates yet another system of beliefs into his life and coaching. He says in his interview with Deford, Institutionalized religion doesn t attract me (91). The Lakota Sioux have also become an interest of Jackson s. He applies their beliefs not only by filling and decorating the locker room with Sioux symbols and d cor to set a certain balance and mood in the room but by formulating a vision specifically for the Bulls that fit every player. Jackson says in Sacred Hoops, I had learned from the Lakota and my own experience as a coach that vision is the source of leadership, the expansive dream state where everything begins and all is possible (98). Not only do artifacts and visions surround him and the teams he works with, but the image of the Lakota warrior also holds a deep reverence and guide in his coaching. To a Lakota warrior, everything is sacred including the enemy. Everything is part of the Great Spirit (109). Therefore to Jackson the enemy team helps them to win the battle. The enemy gives up their chance to win in order for them to win, therefore thanks must be given respect, living unselfishly, and compassionately, as the Buddhists believe.

All three of the religions that Phil Jackson respects, lives, and teaches interrelate. Jackson has found the perfect relation between the three and created something enlightened, awesome, and sacred in the past and hopefully for him and also the Los Angeles Lakers in the future. As an attention getter to his team before a big game when they are wondering if the meditating and poetry will pay off or if they are just wasting their time, Jackson reminds them of his awareness by saying, It s like you re going along at 65 miles an hour, listening to your hip-hop music, and your cell phone is ringing, and you re eating a Big Mac, and you spill ketchup on your shirt. You look down. And when you look back up: right ahead of you, it s all red lights. There s just too much going on in your lives (Deford, 84)

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