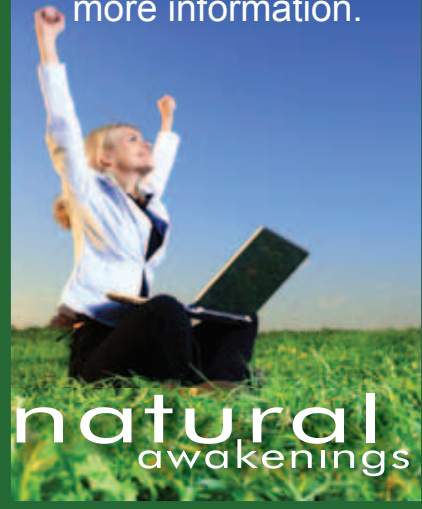


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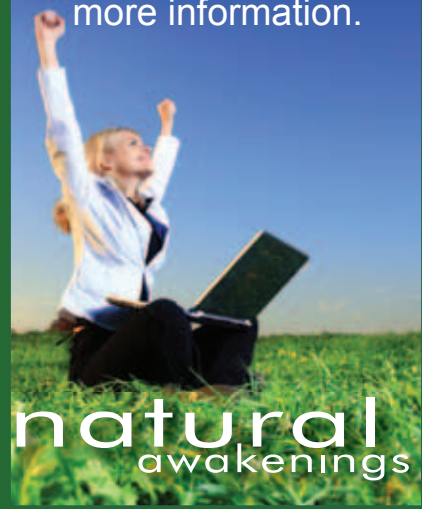


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# Play the Inner Game

## Quiet the Mind to Learn, Excel and Have Fun

by Linda Sechrist

Performance equals potential, minus interference, is the easy-to-remember winning formula explained in Tim Gallwey's seminal book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. To enhance any player's performance, he recommends either growing personal potential or decreasing interference, or both.

"Whether on a sports field, at work or in some creative effort, we've all had moments in which our actions flowed from us with a kind of effortless excellence," he notes. "This is referred to as 'being in the zone,' when self-interference is at a minimum and the mind is quiet and focused."

Gallwey discovered how to promote this valued state of being while serving as a tennis professional in Seaside, California, during a sabbatical from his career in higher education. In the midst of a tennis lesson, he had an epiphany about his style of teaching—many of his tips were being incorporated into the students' minds in what he calls a "command and control self-dialogue" that significantly interfered with their ability to learn and perform better.

"When I discussed this with my

students, I discerned that most of their thoughts while playing were preventing their true focus of attention. This resulted in my exploring ways to help players quiet the mind, as well as focus on our direct and non-judgmental observation of ball, body and racquet positions in a way that would heighten learning, performance and enjoyment of the process," says Gallwey.

Since then, he's built his practical training ideas related to awareness, concentration, breaking bad habits and learning to trust one's self on the court upon a foundation of Zen thinking and humanistic psychology. He offers a simple explanation of his inner game concept.

"Every game is composed of two parts. Self-1, the ego-mind, plays the outer game against opponents, is filled with lots of contradictory advice and is linked to external rewards and goals. The inner game is played within a player's mind by Self-1, whose principle obstacles are self-doubt and anxiety," explains Gallwey. Laden with self-criticism, judgment and the fear of looking foolish or wrong, as well as lapses in concentration, Self-1 is counterproductive and negatively impacts external performance.

"Self-2, on the other hand, is the player's natural ability—the doer of the actual movement of the muscles to hit the ball. Our best effort requires us to quiet Self-1 and let Self-2, which likes images and pictures, do what it knows how to do."



As many players know, the right mental approach is as important as a good backhand; essential in overcoming self-doubt, nervousness, anxiety, detrimental playing habits and lapses in concentration. Gallwey offers the example of a player who isn't hitting the ball in the center of the racquet.

"The ordinary tennis pro will analyze the mechanical reasons for why this is happening," he says, "such as not stepping into the ball, not looking at it or hitting it too late. An inner game instructor 'observes' where the ball hits the racquet and makes suggestions. The body makes its own adjustment to hitting the ball in the middle of the racquet without trying to digest instructions, simply because it feels and works better."

Gallwey likens it to the natural learning process we use as children before it becomes clouded with shoulds and should-nots as adults. He further points out that it's wise not to attempt to quiet the mind by telling it to shut up, argue with it or criticize it for being self-critical. "A good first step is focusing on only those aspects that are needed to accomplish the task at hand," he counsels.

Joe Dyer, the tennis professional at the Sterling Oaks residential community, in Naples, Florida, has adopted and shared Gallwey's inner game principles, enhanced by insights from complementary sources such as *Breath by Breath*, by Larry Rosenberg and *Chop Wood Carry Water*, by Rick Fields, and from practicing yoga, meditation and breath work.

"I had to develop a regular practice method that helped me to quiet Self-1," advises Dyer. "When I play from my inner game, I get out of my own way and let my best game emerge. I feel more like an observer—the ball looks bigger, my feet are lighter on the court, I move faster and quicker and I'm energized when I've finished a game, instead of feeling depleted."

Observing behavior without judging it as positive or negative, right or wrong, good or bad is the key. "Habits change when you become aware of them," concludes Gallwey.

*Linda Sechrist is a senior staff writer for Natural Awakenings magazines.*

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