

# **Going To The Net**

Bill Bishop

*The mind is the forerunner of all things*

Siddhartha Gautama

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE NEW RULE

It was the same old story.

I was up 4-1 in the third and final set. Up to that point, I'd been feeling confident and totally in charge of the match. But as we changed ends, I got a sick sensation in my gut, and a deep fatigue came over me. It was the same feeling I had experienced a thousand times before.

That's when the momentum shifted. I began playing defensively, hitting the ball more cautiously and hoping my opponent would make a mistake. On the other side of the court, with nothing to lose, he took charge. He started hitting harder ground strokes and rushed to the net at every opportunity.

Coming off the court a short time later, I was really angry with myself. I had blown the match, losing the last five games in a row against a weaker player. My opponent had played well, but I had played better, up until the last five games. Right up until it mattered. It was the same old story because it wasn't the first time I had blown it in the final stretch of a match.

At 45 years of age, I had always been a good tennis player. I had played junior tennis tournaments starting at age 10. People thought I had a lot of talent. But I never won a tournament. I was in the finals a few times, and yet I had never won the final match.

At best, I was a perennial runner up.

As I thought back over 35 years of tennis, I felt I had never achieved my full potential as a player. In fact, at age 25, after teaching tennis for five years, I gave up the game completely. I just couldn't handle the frustration. Now, as I was approaching middle age, I had decided to take up tennis again, and perhaps play in some senior tournaments. But I was still confronting the same old problem: I kept losing matches by blowing a lead.

At that moment, sitting by the courts in Palm Springs, California, chugging back a cold bottle of Gatorade, I became convinced the problem wasn't just my tennis game, it was about me and my life. I thought: *Maybe I'm just a second-rate person.* A few years previously, I had gone through a painful divorce. My marketing company was earning me an okay living, but I wasn't rolling in money.

My tennis game seemed like a mirror of my life: I wasn't winning tennis matches, and I wasn't winning at the game of life. *Maybe, I thought, I am just a loser, period.*

Fortunately, my despondency and self-doubt were about to end. I didn't know it at the time, but I was at a watershed moment, a turning point in my life and my tennis game.

Later that evening, I had dinner with my girlfriend Ginny. We had been together for a few years, and our relationship was going great. She was the perfect woman for me: smart, kind, and beautiful. There was only one problem. I was worried I would screw up our relationship while things were going well, just like I

did on the tennis court.

We had come to the tennis resort in Palm Springs so Ginny, a doctor and psychotherapist, could attend a conference on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which was a relatively new and increasingly popular way to help people deal with their personal issues. I had decided to come along to play tennis while she attended the conference.

Ginny was very excited about what she was learning about CBT, and had lots of ideas on how the new approach could help her patients. I asked her to explain how CBT worked.

“I could tell you in scientific terms, but to really understand CBT, you need to experience it,” Ginny said. “Do you have an issue that keeps coming up in your life?”

My tennis problem came to mind. “Every time I play tennis the same thing happens. When I get ahead in a match, and I’m just about to win, I give up and let the other guy win. This week, I realized I’ve been doing it all my life.”

With a knowing but empathetic look, Ginny said: “I see. So what are you feeling when you get ahead in a match?”

“It happens when I’m a few games away from winning. I get a sick feeling in my stomach and feel really tired.”

“When that happens, do any thoughts keep coming up? In CBT, we call them hot thoughts.”

I wasn’t sure how to answer Ginny’s question. I was aware of my physical sensations, but my thoughts were a different matter. I’d never thought about thinking about my thoughts. Then it came

to me.

“I know! I think that I’m a bad person, that I’m a bad person for trying to beat the other guy. I guess that’s my hot thought.”

“Do you really think you’re a bad person if you beat your opponent?”

“Not really. I know it’s just a game. But it’s interesting because even though I know that rationally, I can still feel bad if I try to beat someone.”

“That’s because you have an underlying assumption that beating someone in a game makes you a bad person.”

Feeling a little out of my league in the discussion, I said: “What’s an underlying assumption?”

“It’s a deeply held, often unconscious conviction or rule that governs how you think and behave. It’s a rule that you might not agree with rationally, but you still act on anyway.”

“Why is that?”

“Because we form these rules during childhood to help us deal with the world around us. This conditioning then governs how we see the world as an adult. For example, you might have formed an underlying assumption that says: ‘If I take a chance, I’ll get hurt.’ So you’re ultra-cautious. Or you might have an underlying assumption that says: ‘If I try hard, I’ll fail and look stupid.’ So you don’t try hard. Or you have an underlying assumption that says: ‘If I trust someone, I’ll be betrayed.’ So you don’t get close to people.”

“But how do we form these rules?” I asked, wishing I hadn’t

dropped Psychology 101 in college.

“Like I said, it’s all about conditioning. When we’re young, we experience the world in a certain way. If the environment is dysfunctional, we form rules in order to deal with the situation. Sometimes, we simply absorb the rules being communicated or followed by our parents or other important people in our lives. That’s why these rules are often unconscious and not articulated, which is why we usually don’t know we’re using them.”

Ginny’s words made a lot of sense. But I still couldn’t see where the discussion was headed. I said: “Okay, I think I get that. But how can I deal with my underlying assumption so I can win more tennis matches?”

“We have to come up with a new underlying assumption to replace the old one; a new rule that is more positive. For example, instead of thinking: If I try to win, I am a bad person, you could say: I can try to win, and still be a good person.”

“How will that work?”

“The next time you are ahead in a match and you start feeling bad, repeat the phrase: ‘I can try to win and still be a good person. I can try to win and still be a good person.’”

For the rest of the evening, I kept thinking about what Ginny had said. I wrote down my new rule, but I wasn’t convinced it would work. It seemed too simple. Still, I went to bed that night determined to give it a try.

The next morning was another beautiful day in Palm Springs. Not a cloud in the sky. The perfect temperature. No wind. The pros

at the club had set me up to play with a guy named Norm. He was retired and lived in Palm Desert, a sister community right next to Palm Springs. He was one of those guys who play tennis every day. He was 20 years older than me, but looked fit and tough. He had reddish hair, a sunburned face, and muscular arms. He seemed like a good guy.

During the warm-up, I noticed Norm had a consistent strong forehand but a weak, inconsistent backhand. He kept dropping the head of his racquet on his follow-through, sending balls into the net. Because he didn't practice his volley during the warm-up, I also guessed Norm was a baseliner who didn't like coming up to the net.

The game got off to a good start. I was serving well, and hitting my ground strokes with confidence. All the rallies were long, drawn-out affairs, but I was able to win a lot of points when Norm made unforced errors on his backhand. I also hit a lot of drop shots, forcing Norm to the net. I would then pound a passing shot right at him, or lob over his head.

After half an hour, I was up 4-2 and things were looking good, but then the bad feelings started. Sure enough, I felt like a bad person. After all, Norm was older than me. If I kept running him all over the court, he could have a heart attack. Maybe it was mean of me to keep pounding away at his backhand, and hitting drop shots. I thought Norm was a good guy. I wanted him to like me. These thoughts gave me the usual ache in my gut and the deep fatigue. *Here I go again*, I thought.

But then I remembered what Ginny had told me to do. I repeated the new rule under my breath: “I can try to win and be a good person. I can try to win and be a good person.” I didn’t believe it would work, but I kept saying it anyway.

Guess what happened? It worked. On Norm’s serve, I clobbered my returns at his backhand, and kept moving him around the court. I spiced things up with a few drop shots and lobs, and broke his serve at love. At 5-2, I aimed most of my serves at his backhand, and kept him running all over the court.

Norm was getting exhausted. Sweat was pouring down his freckled face. I expected the heart attack at any moment. But I just kept repeating: “I can try to win and be a good person. I can try to win and be a good person.” And sure enough, I won the set.

Walking off the court, I didn’t feel like a good person, but I didn’t feel like a bad person either. I felt kind of neutral, yet also happy that I had won.

Off the court, the power of my new underlying assumption was reinforced when Norm said: “That was a great set. Do you want to play tomorrow?” We then spent an hour sharing stories about our lives, and became fast friends. It seemed obvious that even though I had tried to win, and did win, I was still a good person.

That evening Ginny and I had a drink at a restaurant and watched the sun set over the desert. Excited, I told her all about my match with Norm: “It was great. This underlying assumption thing really works. When I got the bad feeling, I kept saying the new rule, and then I closed out the set.”

Impressed that I followed her advice so assiduously, Ginny said: “So what lesson have you learned from this experience?”

“I guess I learned that unconscious rules can sometimes really screw up our lives. That it’s important to know what rules we are following because they may be working against our best interests. That seems really obvious with this tennis thing.”

“Do you think you’ve been using this particular rule in your life in general?” Ginny asked, looking very interested.

“I’ve got a theory,” I said, sipping my frosty pina colada. “Maybe I have an underlying assumption that says: ‘If I am successful, I will be a bad person.’ So even though I work hard and have done well in my career, I’ve pulled up short because I don’t want to become a bad person. Just when I’m about to succeed at something, I sabotage it.”

Ginny nodded her head in a way that made me a little uncomfortable. I felt like she was really seeing me for who I was, and it wasn’t good. Then she said: “Did this insight teach you anything about tennis?”

“I’ve learned that I can carry underlying assumptions about my life onto the tennis court: Also, that playing tennis is a way to learn more about myself, and about my life.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve always thought tennis was separate from my life. I thought it was all about beating the other guy. But now I realize that tennis is a reflection of my life, and by thinking about what’s happening on the court, I can learn a lot about my life.”

“Do you think you have any other underlying assumptions or unconscious rules that might affect your tennis or your life?”

“Actually, yes. I realize that I operate from the assumption that if I go to the net I will lose the point; that I am no good playing at the net. So for the most part, I just hit from the baseline, and wait until my opponent makes a mistake. I’m afraid to go to the net and take charge of the point.”

“Do you think you also apply that rule in your life?”

“Oh yes. I think I’m afraid to engage life fully. I’m scared to take charge and make my life happen. Even though I might put on a big show about being ambitious and all that, when I look at it objectively, there is no doubt that I’m playing life from the baseline. I’ve got an unwritten rule that I will lose if I go for it. It’s like I’m playing my life like a pusher—like a tennis player who just hits the ball back and never goes for it.

“Once again, I can see how my tennis game can teach me something about myself and my life. I just have to be honest with myself about me.”

I could tell Ginny was glad I was having these insights. I realized she had been worried about my self-sabotage tendencies. She had also been through a painful divorce, and she didn’t want to go through another breakup. Watching the sun fade beneath the horizon, I felt confident that I wouldn’t screw up this relationship. I knew I had a lot more to learn, but I believed I had embarked on a journey of self-discovery. I also dreamed about what it would be like to go to the net, both on the court and in my life.

## CHAPTER 2

### THERE'S ALWAYS A BETTER PLAYER

When I got home from Palm Springs, I signed up for an over-40 tournament at my club. I was ready to try out my new underlying assumption: That I could beat my opponents into submission while still being a good person. What could be better than that? When I looked over the draw, I was convinced I could win. I knew most of the players, and I thought I could beat all of them handily.

I made my way easily through the early rounds, winning each match in straight sets. I was winning and feeling like a good person. It was great! I could feel the trophy in my hands. I could see the adulation of everyone as I stood in the winner's circle. My time had come.

But then in the semi-finals I played Karl, a new member at the club. Even though I'd heard he was a good player, I still assumed I could beat him. After all, I had my underlying assumption thing going for me. Nothing would stand in my way now.

In the match, Karl took the lead immediately by breaking my serve, and he never looked back. Within 40 minutes, I found myself walking off the court after losing 6-0, 6-0. Bagel, bagel! I didn't even get the chance to chant my mantra about trying to win and still being a good person. Karl never gave me a chance.

Crestfallen and discouraged, I drifted home in despair. My new underlying assumption didn't work. Now I would never win a

tournament; I would never be number one. Although I loved tennis, I thought about giving up the game altogether. After all, what was the point?

I moped around for a few days, and then came out of my funk. I vowed to soldier on. I decided to look for a new tennis coach, and not just any coach. I wanted to work with someone who understood the technical side of the game, but also appreciated the deeper, more personal issues involved in the sport. I needed someone who understood the underlying assumption game. After asking around and searching on the Internet, I came across someone I thought might fit the bill: Coach Conrad.

Conrad was a former Davis Cup player who had played briefly in the pros before becoming a tennis coach. The biography on his website said Conrad had spent many years travelling in the Far East, and had a philosophical approach to teaching tennis that transcended the basics of strokes and strategies.

Intrigued, I called Conrad and set up a time for a lesson. He told me his first lesson would simply be a conversation. We wouldn't be playing any tennis.

Later that week I met Conrad for our conversation. I was a little nervous because I didn't know what to expect. But his relaxed and affable manner put me at ease. He was about 60 and had sandy blond hair. He looked physically strong. Still, what most impressed me about him was his deep sense of calm. He seemed like an old soul.

"I like to get to know my students before I start teaching them

on the court,” Conrad said. “I want to find out what they’re trying to accomplish by playing tennis. I also have to make sure I want to work with them. I don’t take on everyone who asks to be my student.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, perplexed and worried.

“I want to know why you play tennis. What are your reasons for playing the game?”

I had never really thought about that before, so I made something up: “I guess I like to compete.”

“Why do you like to compete?”

“I want to prove myself by beating the other guy. I want to prove I’m better than the other guy.”

“So how is that working out for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, have you been proving yourself better than the other guy?”

“Not really. That’s why I’m frustrated. I thought I was going to win a tournament, and then I lost to a guy named Karl. He slaughtered me. I was hoping you could teach me something that would help me win more big matches, and beat someone like Karl.”

“We need to start with your reasons for playing tennis,” Conrad said, looking more and more serious. “What do you think you’ll accomplish by beating the other guy?”

“It’ll prove that I’m better than they are.”

“Why do you want to prove that you’re better than the other

guy?”

“Well, isn’t that the point? I’ve hit a million tennis balls in my life, and I’ve hit each ball trying to get to a higher level—to rise above the rest of the players out there. That’s why I take lessons and play in tournaments. I’m trying to prove I’m better than everybody else; to be the winner, to get to the top of the heap.”

Coach Conrad listened to my rambling answer with a steely reserve. He didn’t respond right away, but kept looking at me. I thought my answer was reasonable, though I knew it wasn’t the answer Conrad was looking for. I shut up and waited for him to respond. After a long pause, he said: “I call that vertical relating.”

“What’s that?”

“That’s when you look at your relationships with people on a vertical scale. You see people who are below you, and people who are above you. When you use this way of thinking, you’re always trying to get higher up on the ladder. This is very common in competitive environments like tennis clubs, but it’s also the way most people view all their relationships.”

“So what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s a perfectly natural way to look at things. We all do it sometimes. But it isn’t going to make you happy, and it isn’t going to help your tennis game.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because there is always somebody better. You might work really hard to get to the top of the ladder, and think you’ve got it made, but then someone better comes along. It’s inevitable. No

matter how good you get, and how many tournaments you win, someone will always come along who is better than you.”

“But what about the number one player in the world? No one is better than that person.”

“Even the top player in the world is eventually dethroned,” Conrad said. “Nobody stays on top forever.”

“So what are you saying? Are you saying I shouldn’t compete?”

“Not at all. But you have to look at what’s driving you to compete. If you play tennis because you want to get to the top, you’ll never be happy—because someone will always come along who is better than you.”

“I suppose you’re right. But what about my club? There’s a guy who has won the championship for the last five years.”

“But that’s just your club. If he plays at the national level, he might not even make it through the first round.”

“I see what you mean. No matter how well I do at my club, there is always another level, and then another level after that. I guess I have to give up this fantasy that I’m going to play Wimbledon some day.”

“There’s nothing wrong with striving to play at the next level. You just have to put things into perspective. Otherwise you will never be completely happy, either in your tennis game, or in your life.”

“What do you mean?”

“Most people spend their whole lives trying to get ahead of the other guy. Not just in sports. They look at their friends and

associates, and see people who they think are below them, and others who they think are above them. They think about their car. It's nicer than Fred's, but not as nice as Stan's. They think about their job. It's better than Susan's, but not as good as Nancy's."

"Is that what you mean by vertical relating?"

"Absolutely. You can see the whole world that way. And if you do, then you'll never be happy, because no matter how hard you strive, there will always be someone out there with a better car or a better job. It's like climbing a ladder that never ends. It just goes up and up."

"So you think I'm doing that with my tennis game?"

"I don't know, what do you think?"

"I think I've been vertical relating in tennis my whole life. Every player I meet, I think about whether I'm better or worse than him. If I think I'm better than him, I get a boost, and if I think I'm not as good, I get a depressed, scared feeling."

"That's your ego talking."

"What do you mean? Are you getting all Freudian on me now?"

"Yes, Freud talked about the ego, but I'm using the term ego in a more general sense. You could also call it the persona or the personality. The ego is the idea we have about ourselves, about who we think we are. The ego is obsessed with vertical relating because it's always trying to define itself. That's the ego's number one job. In order to define itself, it compares itself to others. So it says: 'I'm better than that person and worse than that person. I'm richer than so-and-so and poorer than that other person. I'm better

looking than her and uglier than that other woman.”

“I have to admit, I get caught up in that.”

“Don’t worry, everyone does it. But if your ego is running your game, you are never going to get better at tennis, and you’re never going to be truly happy in your life.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean by my ego. You make it sound like a separate thing. Isn’t my ego really just me?”

“That’s a great question. Actually, your ego is a fiction. It’s just a package of words and ideas you have about yourself. It isn’t real, it’s just made up. But we tend to forget that it’s a self-made construct, so we think our ego is who we are.”

“That’s pretty wild. So what are these words and ideas you are talking about?”

“Your ego tells you: ‘I’m smart. I’m a good tennis player. I’m successful.’ Or ‘I’m stupid. I’m a bad tennis player. I’m a failure.’ We create these definitions to figure out who we are. But these definitions are created primarily by comparing ourselves to others. We are saying: ‘I’m smarter than that guy. I’m a better tennis player than those people. I am less successful than my brother-in-law.’ That’s why we get so caught up in vertical relating. It’s our ego trying to define itself.”

“I don’t know. I guess you’re right. But what’s it got to do with tennis?”

“We have a lot more lessons to learn first,” he said with a wink.

“We can pick up this conversation next week out on the courts.”

“So you mean you’ll take me on as a student, even though I’m

caught up in ego and vertical relating and all that stuff?”

“Absolutely. As long as you have a good attitude and are willing to look honestly at yourself, I think I can help you. See you next week.”

## CHAPTER 3

### IT'S NOT ABOUT HITTING THE BALL HARD

Although tennis was my passion, I also had to make a living. I owned a marketing company. And even though the company was successful, running the business wore me out. I was a classic workaholic. I put in 14-hour days; sometimes working nights and weekends. I thought the only way to succeed was to drive myself and my team to the limit of our endurance.

But one Friday night, after a long work week, I came down with the flu. I had suffered through many colds in my life, but this was something else altogether. I was down for the count. I couldn't lift my head off the pillow for three days. And then, just when I thought I was getting better, I came down with a second strain of flu. It was like getting hit twice in a row with a baseball bat.

To make matters worse, I worried the whole time about my business. I lay in bed fretting that my company would go bankrupt because I wasn't there to man the ship.

It took me three months to recover from this double-bill. Following my initial recovery, it was discovered that I had also contracted pneumonia. I coughed for two months.

Of course, my illness didn't help my tennis game. It was difficult to play at peak performance while hacking and coughing and sneezing. Although one time it did give me an advantage. In one match, I came up to the net while coughing and spewing

phlegm like a snorting stallion. My opponent was so totally freaked out by my Tuberculean offense, or perhaps utterly disgusted by it, that he completely fanned on his attempted passing shot.

My three-month illness also depleted my stamina and strength. I lost a lot of muscle mass and endurance. I felt old. I could no longer keep up physically with the younger guys, or even some of the older guys. I huffed and puffed around the court. During extended rallies, I felt dizzy and dazed. My arms were flabby and my shots had lost their zip. My once powerful backhand just fluttered over the net, landing anemically near the service line. My once booming serve floated through the air like a sick butterfly that had lost its way.

Depressed, but not resigned, I took a lesson with Coach Conrad. I hoped he could help me get back my high-voltage ground strokes and my locomotive serve. Determined to show him I was no mini-mouse, I blasted every shot as hard as I could. I wanted Conrad to know that I was a powerhouse, not some lily-laced ball pusher.

After I'd spent about 10 minutes hitting bone-crushing forehands and backhands, Conrad called me to the net.

"How is it going?" he said "I heard you were sick! You okay?"

"Sure, why do you ask?"

"You're really pounding the ball. I was wondering if there is anything wrong."

"No, I feel great. I feel like I'm getting my game back again."

"But do you know that half of your shots were either long,

wide, or in the net?”

“I wasn’t really keeping track, but maybe you’re right,” I said, sensing that Conrad’s real lesson was about to begin.

“You know, tennis isn’t just about hitting the ball hard. Too many players think that’s what they are supposed to do: pound every ball. They watch the pros hit 150-mile-an-hour serves and they think that’s how the game is played. But they don’t realize the pros can do something they can’t do: hit the ball like a cannonball and still get it in.”

Standing at the net, puffy-faced and out of breath, I felt confused by Conrad’s comment. I had always thought tennis was a power game. You are supposed to hit the ball as hard as possible on every shot. That’s what a real player does. My tennis buddies and I had always heaped scorn on the ball-pushers at the club who just tried to keep the ball in play.

“What are you saying?” I asked incredulously. “Are you saying I shouldn’t hit it hard?”

“Sometimes it’s appropriate to hit the ball hard. If you want to keep your opponent away from the net you might have to hit hard, deep ground strokes. Or you might have to hit a hard passing shot when he comes to the net. But most of the time you have to make sure you place the ball and get it in. There is no point in blasting every shot and hitting two out of three out.”

I felt my world crumbling beneath my feet. Conrad was challenging one of the basic cornerstones of my game. If not hard, then what?

“So what should I do differently?” I asked, wishing at this point that I hadn’t booked the lesson with Conrad.

“It’s about getting the right result, not about power. The goal is to get the result you want, using just the right amount of power, no more, no less. Watch someone like Roger Federer. He hits the ball hard, but he never uses more power than he needs. For example, there are players with faster, harder serves, but Federer usually gets more aces than them. And he knows that an ace at 120 miles per hour is better than an ace at 150 miles per hour.”

“I don’t get it. Isn’t a 150-per-hour serve better? Isn’t that why they have those speed guns at tournaments, to see who has the fastest serve?”

“Sure, it’s fun to see who has the fastest serve, but it’s not the objective of the game. They don’t give out trophies for the fastest serve. The objective is to win. Players who use an extra 30 miles per hour they don’t need to serve an ace aren’t farther ahead. In fact, it’s the opposite. They use up their energy faster and wear down their body. That’s why some big hitters often make a splash overnight in the pros before suddenly disappearing as quickly as they appeared.”

“I’m hearing what you’re saying, and it makes sense, but I don’t want to turn into a pusher,” I said adamantly.

“No one is saying you should push the ball. That’s just as bad as blasting every shot. Pushing the ball means you’re being too careful and not using enough power. The trick is to use the right amount of power for each particular shot.”

I knew Conrad was right. For 35 years, I had been trying to either pepper the ball or play it safe, depending on my mood. I realized that either way wasn't natural, yet I didn't understand why I was doing it.

Conrad could sense I was having an epiphany of sorts.

"It's the ego at work again," he said. "We blast the ball because we want to prove we are stronger and more powerful than the other guy. Or we push the ball because we are afraid of losing and looking bad. Either way, it's the ego defending its turf."

"Can you explain this stuff about the ego again?" I asked.

"Everyone has an ego. It's part of being human. You just have to decide if you want it to play the game for you. When you go out on the court, you actually take two people out there: Your natural self and your ego self."

"You mean I'm really two people?"

"Kind of like that. Our natural self knows what needs to be done to get the desired result. It's not trying to impress anybody or protect anything. It just enjoys the moment and stays focused on the fun of the game.

"On the other hand, the ego is constantly coaching and commenting from the sidelines. Watch the ball. Hit it harder. You idiot. You better not lose. I can't believe you missed that volley. The ego wants to be in charge because it thinks it knows better. It is also very concerned about its image. It wants to be more powerful than the other player. Or it starts pushing the ball because it starts worrying about making a mistake."

“You don’t have much good to say about the ego,” I said. “Is it really that bad?”

“Like I said during our last lesson, the ego is a false self. Because it’s not real, it spends all of its energy trying to prove its existence. It does this by comparing itself to others and by trying to surround itself with possessions and achievements. It also sets the stakes very high. It can make a tennis game into a life or death struggle.”

“So how do I know when it’s my ego in charge or my natural self?”

“It takes a certain degree of self-awareness, but you start to notice a two-way conversation going on in your head. This is the ego telling you what to do.”

“Should I stop listening to my ego?”

“No. At this point, it’s insightful to listen to what the ego is telling you. Then you can decide if you want to take orders from your ego and act on them.”

“What is my ego telling me to do?”

“Well, you tell me. It’s your ego,” Conrad said with a grin.

“Well, I guess my ego has been telling me to pound the ball, to show people that I am strong and powerful.”

“Do you want to obey that order from your ego?”

“Not really. Obviously if I am hitting two out of three shots out, I’m not going to get the results I want.”

“And what are the results you want?”

“I want to win the game and do it with just the right amount of

effort and power, no more, no less.”

“Okay, so let’s play a set and see what happens.”

For the next half hour, Conrad and I played a match. My ego was telling me to hit the ball hard and put on a big show, but I decided not to obey. I turned down the power a few notches. I concentrated on hitting the ball deep, rather than just hard. I aimed for wider angles, and spiced up my shots with some spins and drop shots. I threw in a few lobs, and occasionally I decided to hit a surprise cannonball return.

Walking off the court, Conrad asked: “So how was that?”

“It was fantastic,” I said, beaming. “My ego was jabbering away at me to hit the ball harder, but I didn’t obey. On each shot, I focused on getting the result I needed with just the right level of power. It was actually easier.”

“That’s what people find. When we stop taking orders from our ego, we stop striving so hard. Then we get better results with less effort.”

“I know. I played way better and it seemed like less work.”

Heading back to the office, I thought about my experience out on the court, and realized I had also been letting my ego run my business. I was trying too hard. I made the whole operation a big struggle. My ego told me that if it wasn’t hard, and I wasn’t pushing myself to the limit, then I wasn’t going to be successful. I had always believed a saying someone told me: “Work is hard, that’s why they call it work.”

But maybe not. From that day forward, when at work, I made it

my intention not to take orders from my ego. I endeavored to get better results with less effort. And just like on the tennis court, it worked.

I spent more time building relationships with my staff and my clients. I focused on the joy of work, rather than just the money. I took my time and paced myself. And I noticed I had more energy at the end of the day, and looked forward to work when I got up in the morning.

Although I occasionally forgot Conrad's lesson and started obeying my ego again, I was able to catch myself at it. Sometimes I would go a whole week, pushing myself and my team, and then wake up and notice what I was doing.

I realized then that this was a practice, more than just a lesson you learn once and apply. You have to keep catching yourself falling back into the ego trance, and put yourself back on the right path.

I also had more fun on the tennis court. I was less concerned about winning or losing, and more interested in the game itself. I noticed how ineffective some of the other players were because they were hitting the ball too hard. I could see that their ego was in charge on the court, and how it was hurting their game. I could also see that they didn't even know they had an ego and that it was running their game, and their life.

A few weeks later, I told Conrad about my new-found approach to tennis and life. He was pleased and happy for me. "You know," he said, "people think the ego is powerful and full of itself, but the

opposite is the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

“The ego is profoundly insecure. Because it’s not real, it doesn’t believe in itself. So it does everything it can to prove to the world that it’s the best. That’s why lots of tennis players hit the ball so hard. They don’t really believe in themselves.”

“Wow, I never thought about that,” I said. “But it all makes sense. People pound the ball because they don’t believe in themselves and their abilities. They compensate by hitting every ball like a rocket.”

“That’s the sad part.” Conrad said. “We take orders from the ego without even knowing it. We might not even know we have an ego. We just think the ego is us, and that traps us in our conditioning. For the most part, this conditioning tells us we are inadequate, so we puff ourselves up by hitting the ball hard, or doing a hundred other things to prove ourselves. And if we don’t wake up, we spend our whole life marching to our ego, and never get the satisfaction we want.”

“So how do we get out of this ego trap?” I asked. “How can we escape from the dictates of our ego? And how can we translate that into better results on the tennis court?”

“Let’s leave all that for another lesson,” Conrad said.