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Of mala, baseballs and a messy metaphor

by JAMES MATTHEWS

Baseball and meditation are closely aligned, I think.

This may be the cheesiest thing I'll write for this space. But bear with me. I'm on deadline.

There are 108 beads on the mala used by Buddhists. It's that looped string of beads you see them using when they're meditating or chanting mantras, using the beads to count them off and to keep track, like balls and strikes over innings. Or you see the Buddhists simply carrying them and worrying the beads between their thumb and finger. A calming action, I imagine, like fidgeting with something to still one's mind.

It's all meditating, I suppose.

An official baseball has 108 double stitches. It begins as a cork pit with rubber around it. That's the jewel in the lotus. And that's wrapped in wool string or yarn. I've read there's something like 400 or 500 yards of it wrapped and pulled tight around its core and rubber centre. The leather that encloses the whole thing is held by 88 inches of thread.

I only mention all that because it shows the nature of baseball that's meticulous, like what I think meditation could be.

A pitcher on the hill, toeing the rubber shuts out the world beyond the field, focused on the task at hand, which is to hurl that ball in a specific way. There's the bit about striking the batter out, either looking or swinging. But I think the actual task is in throwing a chosen way. A certain pitch to fit the situation at hand.

I can throw neither a fastball nor a changeup. I was hit or miss throwing for accuracy most of the time when I used to lace cleats as part of a beer league baseball team. I'd like to blame that cock-eyedness on the beer, but I'm a realist. As with many things for me, the beer was an excuse.

The strike zone is only as wide as home plate. It starts at the batter's knees and extends to midway between the batter's shoulders and the top of the pants. I didn't know that. I always thought it was the shoulders. So basic baseball ignorance and the beer were both factors in how I fared on the diamond.

Okay. That's a realization. I accept that. This is a good exercise for me, like therapy or meditation.

Granted, the accuracy has to be a skill attained over many seasons of practice, but there are deeper aspects to standing all alone on that pile of dirt 10 inches high and staring down the 60 feet or so to the batter and the catcher.

It's in the choices and situational responses.

To throw at a certain speed as part of a pitch is ridiculous. Being able to consistently toss a higher-velocity fastball, whichever-seam, or a slower-velocity off-speed changeup or slider is unique to varying degrees across people. Just as how well or easily people weather many of life's differences over good days or bad. Some of us are scarred more than others.

We leave the house and choose our pitches through the day, see where they land and what comes from them. The real work most often is in how we deal with the outcomes of our pitches, our actions.

I've heard it said that the jewel is compassion and the lotus is wisdom. I think that means learning from all the things wrapped and stitched around your life and your respective world. Some fastballs find success straight down the middle, but other times you're best

off to just barely paint one of the strike zone's corners. And after so many of those, a change of pace is best, even when you can't see the signs to know which pitch is being called.

Growth comes from the grind during each outing on the mound and what we take from those experiences.