

# Leisure and Relaxation in Halacha, Week 4: Sports: Foreign Influence or Jewish Tradition?

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## 1. Rabbi David Stav, Bein Hazmanim, Page 106 (based on Google translation)

קשה למצוא בתנ"ך מקורות מפורשים המעודדים פעילות גופנית או שוללים אותה. עם זאת, יכולותיהם הגופניות של כמה מהדמויות המרכזיות בתנ"ך זוכות לתיאורים נרחבים ומובלטים. כך למשל המקרא מזכיר את כוחו של יעקב אבינו, אשר בא לידי ביטוי בגלילת האבן הכבדה מעל הבאר ובמאבקו עם שרו של עשו. גם שמשון ודוד מוזכרים כאנשים חסונים המסוגלים להיאבק פיזית באריות ובדובים ולהכותם. במקומות אחרים מזכיר המקרא בעלי כישרון בתחום הריצה.

It is difficult to find explicit sources of physical activity in the Bible that esteem physical activity or disregard it. Nevertheless, the physical abilities of some of the central figures in the Bible are widely described. Thus, for example, the Bible mentions the power of Jacob, which was reflected in the rolling of the heavy stone off the well and in his struggle with Esau's angel. Samson and David are also mentioned as strong people who can physically fight lions and bears and beat them. In other places, the Bible mentions people who have a talent for running.

## 2. Tosefta Shabbat 10:10

כגון אילו שמשחקין בכדור ברשות הרבים ויצאה כדור מתחת ידו של אחד מהן חוץ לארבע אמות חייב.

Those who play with a ball in the public domain and the ball leaves the hand of one of them and travels outside of 4 amot, they are liable.



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## 3. Rabbeinu Chananel to Shabbat 147b (Davidson Edition translation)

אבל לא מתעמלין. פי' פושטין ומקפלין זרועותיהם לפניהן ולאחריהן וכן רגליהן ע"ג ירכותיהן ומתחממין ומזיעין והוא כמין מעשה רפואה ואסור.

But not exercise: Meaning, they stretch out and fold their arms in front of them and behind them, and so their legs to their thighs, and they warm up and sweat, and it is like an act of healing, and prohibited.

## 4. Responsa Teshuvot Vehanhagot 1:552

ומה שפירש שזה יחזק הת"ת שיבואו עוד תלמידים, קשה להאמין שזהו הדרך, אבל "אל תדון חבירך עד שתגיע למקומו", ואם זהו הכרח, צריך לשאול הרב שמה שהוא ת"ח ויחליט, ומ"מ אין לקבוע כן אלא כהוראת שעה לשעתה לבד...

This that he explained that it will strengthen the Talmud Torah, as more students will come, it is hard to believe that this is the [proper] way, but "don't judge your friend until you reach his place", and if this is required, they should ask the rabbi there who is a Talmid Chacham and he will decide, however, one should not set this [permanently], rather, only as a temporary measure...

## 5. Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3:25 (Friedlander translation)

[MAN'S] actions are divided as regards their object into four classes; they are either purposeless, unimportant, in vain, or good.... Unimportant are such actions by which a trivial object is sought, an object that is not necessary and is not of great use. This is the case when a person dances without seeking to benefit his digestion by that exercise, or performs certain actions for the purpose of causing laughter. Such actions are certainly mere pastimes. Whether an action belongs to this class or not depends on the intention of those who perform it, and on the degree of their perfection. For many things are necessary or very useful in the opinion of one person and superfluous in the opinion of another. E.g., bodily exercise, in its different kinds, is necessary for the proper preservation of health in the opinion of him who understands the science of medicine; writing is considered as very useful by scholars. When people take exercise by playing with the ball, wrestling, stretching out the hands or keeping back the breathing, or do certain things as preparation for writing, shape the pen and get the paper ready, such actions are mere pastimes in the eyes of the ignorant, but the wise do not consider them as unimportant. Useful are such

actions as serve a proper purpose: being either necessary or useful for the purpose which is to be attained. This division [of man's actions] is, as I believe, not open to any objection. For every action is either intended for a certain purpose or is not intended; and if intended for a certain purpose, that purpose may be important or unimportant, is sometimes attained and sometimes missed...

#### **6. Mishnah Yoma 2:1-2 (Davidson Edition translation)**

בראשונה כל מי שרוצה לתרום את המזבח תורם ובזמן שהן מרובין רצין ועולין בכבש כל הקודם את חבירו בארבע אמות זכה ואם היו שניהן שוין הממונה אומר להן הצביעו... מעשה שהיו שניהם שוין ורצין ועולין בכבש ודחף אחד מהן את חבירו ונפל ונשברה רגלו וכיון שראו בית דין שבאין לידי סכנה התקינו שלא יהו תורמין את המזבח אלא בפייס...

MISHNA: Initially, the practice among the priests was that whoever wishes to remove the ashes from the altar removes them. And when there are many priests who wish to perform that task, the privilege to do so is determined by a race: The priests run and ascend on the ramp leading to the top of the altar. Any priest who precedes another and reaches within four cubits of the top of the altar first is privileged to remove the ashes. And if both of them were equal and neither preceded the other, the appointed priest says to all the priests: Extend your fingers, and a lottery was performed, as will be explained... Initially, that was the procedure; however, an incident occurred where both of them were equal as they were running and ascending on the ramp, and one of them shoved another and he fell and his leg was broken. And once the court saw that people were coming to potential danger, they instituted that priests would remove ashes from the altar only by means of a lottery...

#### **7. Talmud Bavli, Yoma 23a (Davidson Edition translation)**

ת"ר מעשה בשני כהנים שהיו שניהן שוין ורצין ועולין בכבש קדם אחד מהן לתוך ארבע אמות של חבירו נטל סכין ותקע לו בלבו עמד רבי צדוק על מעלות האולם ואמר אחינו בית ישראל שמעו הרי הוא אומר (דברים כא, א) כי ימצא חלל באדמה ויצאו זקניך ושופטיך אנו על מי להביא עגלה ערופה על העיר או על העזרות געו כל העם בבכיה.

The Sages taught in the Tosefta: An incident occurred where there were two priests who were equal as they were running and ascending the ramp. One of them reached the four cubits before his colleague, who then, out of anger, took a knife and stabbed him in the heart. The Tosefta continues: Rabbi Tzadok then stood up on the steps of the Entrance Hall of the Sanctuary and said: Hear this, my brothers of the house of Israel. The verse states: "If one be found slain in the land... and it be not known who had smitten him; then your Elders and your judges shall come forth and they shall measure...and it shall be that the city which is nearest to the slain man...shall take a heifer" (Deuteronomy 21:1–3). And the Elders of that city took that heifer and broke its neck in a ritual of atonement. But what of us, in our situation? Upon whom is the obligation to bring the heifer whose neck is broken? Does the obligation fall on the city, Jerusalem, so that its Sages must bring the calf, or does the obligation fall upon the Temple courtyards, so that the priests must bring it? At that point the entire assembly of people burst into tears.

#### **8. Talmud Yerushalmi Taanit 4:5 (Cohen translation)**

טור שמעון הוה מפיק תלת מאווין דגרבין דמרקיע לקייטא כל ערובות שובא. ולמה חרב יש אומר מפני הזנות וי"א שהיו משחקין בכדור. Tur Shimon used to provide three hundred loaves of bread (for the poor) every eve of Shabbat. Why then was it destroyed? One says, due to licentiousness. Another says, because they used to play ball.

#### **9. Korban Haedah to Taanit 4:5**

שהיו משחקין בכדור. בשבת א"נ שהיו מבלין ימיהם בהם ולא עסקו בתורה:  
That they would play ball – on Shabbat, or that they would waste their days with it and not learn Torah.

#### **10. Midrash Eichah Rabbah 2:4**

טור שמעון הוה מפיק תלת מאה גרבין ולמה חרבו אי תימא מן הזנות, והלא לא היתה אלא ריבה אחת והוציאוא משם, א"ר הונא משום שהיו משחקין בכדור בשבת

Tur Shimon would export 300 loaves of bread, and why was it destroyed? If it was due to the prostitutes, but there was only one [prostitute] and they removed her from the city! Rav Huna says that it was because they played ball on Shabbat.

### **11. Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 308:45**

אסור לשחוק בשבת ויו"ט בכדור: הגה ויש מתירין ונהגו להקל [תוס' פ"ק דביצה]:

It is prohibited to play with a ball on Shabbat and Yom Tov. Rema: And some permit it and the custom is to be lenient (Tosfot Beitzah Chapter 1)

### **12. Mishnah Berurah Orach Chaim 308:158**

ויש מתירין - אפשר שטעמם שכיון שעשוי לכך ומיוחד לזה בתמידות לא שייך בו שם מוקצה וכדלעיל בסכ"ב. ומ"מ לכו"ע אסור לשחוק בר"ה ואפילו בכרמלית בשבת דבקל הוא שיפול לחוץ מד' אמות ואתי לאתויי אבל ביו"ט מותר אפילו בר"ה לשחוק בו לדעה זו. וכ"ז כששחק שלא ע"ג קרקע אבל ע"ג קרקע לכו"ע אסור משום חשש אשויי גומות וכדלקמן בס"ה של"ה לענין שחיקת אגוזים ומ"מ אין למחות בנשים וקטנים דמוטב שיהיו שוגגין ואל יהיו מזידין:

And some permit it – it is possible that since it is made for this purpose and it is set aside for this use all the time, considering it muktzah is not relevant as we saw in seif 22. Nevertheless, according to all opinions it is prohibited to play in a public domain, and even in a karmelit on Shabbat, as it can easily fall outside of 4 amot, and it might be carried back, but on Yom Tov it would be permitted to play with it even in the public domain according to this opinion. This is all said when they are not playing on the ground, but if it is on the ground, everyone agrees that it is prohibited because of a concern for filling in crevices, as we see later on in siman 338 regarding playing with nuts, however, one should not protest against women or children, as it is better that they do these actions accidentally, rather than purposefully.

### **13. Machzor Vitri, Hilchot Pesach 94**

ולשחוק בכדור שקורין פלוטא מתיר רבינו מפני שמחת יום טוב

And to play with a ball which they call pluta, our rabbi [Rashi] permits due to Simchat Yom Tov.

### **14. The Importance of Leisure: Rabbinic and Psychological Perspectives, Rabbi J. J. Schacter, YU Pesach To Go 5779, page 9**

Engaging in physical exercise was widely accepted as legitimate. R. Hayyim Soloveitchik used to box with his students; R. Yosef Yozel Horowitz (later “the Alter of Novaredok”) and R. Aharon Walkin (later the author of She’elot u-Teshuvot Zkan Aharon) used to wrestle one another as young men in Riga; Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky was known to be the best swimmer in the Lomza Yeshiva; and R. Shlomo Goren (later the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel) reported that he did fifty pushups a day.

### **15. Avraham Shemesh, "I have seen the custom of the King of Egypt in our time as well." A study in comparative Midrash and commentary, Old Testament Essays**

R. Yosef ibn Caspi (Provence, 1279-1340), philosopher, linguist, and biblical commentator, travelled extensively throughout his lifetime, visiting among others Spain, Majorca, and Egypt. Unlike Ibn Ezra, who as stated never visited Egypt, Ibn Caspi was personally familiar with the Egyptian culture, and as a result he offers an interpretation adapted to his time, based on a custom common among Egyptian kings of the Mamluk period (1250-1517). Ibn Caspi proposes that Moses was asked to meet Pharaoh by the Nile, where he was accustomed to playing ball with his entourage. Ibn Caspi's words are brought in two different versions in his works and I shall compare them. In his work Tirat Kesef (Silver Castle - Interpretation of the Torah's Secrets) he writes:

Notably, the King of Egypt only left his house on Tuesdays and Saturdays, when he would go in the morning to a known spacious area by the Nile to play with a little ball with his horsemen and ministers. And thus it was said: "Confront him on the bank of the Nile", because in my opinion Moses came to him

on a small ship on the Nile and spoke to him, as Pharaoh was standing by the riverside, and when he finished speaking he went his way.

In contrast, the following is the version in Matzref Lekesef (Crucible for Silver - Commentary on the Torah):

I have seen the custom of the King of Egypt in our time as well, where two days a week, on the third day and the seventh day, the King of Egypt goes out with his chariot and horsemen, to a designated place by the Nile, to play there all day with a little ball, and maybe Moses could only speak to Pharaoh on those days, because on other days he [Pharaoh] would be in his room [...] Because since Pharaoh would be at the Nile with his netting and tent on those days, Moses could take a small ship and could confront him from the ship.

Ibn Caspi thinks that the reason such a specific time frame was utilized in order to hold the meeting was because normally Pharaoh did not tend to leave his house, aside from the two days a week on which he went out early in the morning to play ball. Without contending with the question of why Pharaoh remained at home, we can try to understand what game this was and whether its description is perhaps anachronistic.

Judging by his description, Ibn Caspi may be referring to the game of polo, which was the most popular ball game in the Arab world in medieval times as it combined two elements to which the Arabs were partial - horses and competitiveness (see Figure 2). The game was played by kings and noblemen, who had the capacity to keep horses, and it also required riding skills, as did hunting and fighting. The game also required saddles and stirrups, which did not exist in Moses's time. According to medieval custom, the game was played on horseback. Competitors were divided into two groups and they held a long stick with a crooked end. Each of the groups would endeavor to insert a small ball made of leather or sometimes silver into the goal, which consisted of two posts stationed at some distance from each other. The game of polo was very popular among the Mamluk elite, as they believed that it helped maintain the combative skills of both riders and horses. Baibars (who died in 1277), the Mamluk sultan of Egypt and Syria, is a good example of a king who encouraged the game of polo in Egypt and even initiated competitions with representatives of other nations. James Waterson states that when Baibars was in Damascus or Egypt he would play polo twice a week. This historical detail is compatible with Ibn Caspi's statement that the kings of Egypt played ball twice a week, on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Ibn Caspi indeed visited Egypt several decades after the death of Baibars, but he may have heard of this custom and maybe it was also common among subsequent sultans. The historians are conflicted as to the origins of the game. Some claim that it came from Iran, sometime between the 5th century BCE and the 1st century CE. In any case, the Muslims learned it from the Sasanians, and during the Middle Ages it became customary in Egypt as well. Hence, Ibn Caspi's suggestion is clearly historically untenable as he is applying a relatively late custom to the ancient Egyptians.

It is evident that Ibn Caspi is referring to the game of polo as several details in his description are compatible with the actual game:

(i) Ibn Caspi speaks (in the first version) of a game that takes place in a spacious area, namely, this is not only a game of catch, rather a more intensive game that requires a relatively large playing field.

(ii) The game involves a "little ball" (in both versions), as typical of polo. According to the second version, the game is played "all day," that is, for a lengthy span of time.

(iii) According to both versions, Pharaoh would play the game with his "horsemen." The term "horsemen" in this context refers to people who ride horses in contrast to those who ride in chariots, and this detail as well is compatible with the game of polo.

(iv) Ibn Caspi claims that Pharaoh was by the riverside and Moses was to come to the place of meeting in a "small ship." This detail as well is taken from the Egyptian world where different types of boats were used, made of various materials and sizes. According to the second version Pharaoh would be standing next to a tent or netting (protection against insects and pests that normally thrive in the vicinity of water) located "on the banks of the Nile," namely on the edge of the playing field. Moses was to speak with him from the boat and then go on his way. Moses probably could not disembark because polo is a game played on horseback and it is dangerous for people to be on the field while it is being played.

### 16. Rashi to Vayikra 18:3 (Rosenbaum and Silbergman translation)

ובחוקותיהם לא תלכו – מה הניח הכתוב שלא אמר, אלא אילו נימוסות שלהם, דברים החקוקים להם, כגון: טרטיאות ואיצטדיאות. ר' מאיר אומר: אילו דרכי האמורי שמנו חכמים.

Neither Shall Ye Walk in Their Ordinances – What has Scripture left unsaid when it spoke of the deeds of the Egyptians and Canaanites that it felt compelled to add ובחוקותיהם לא תלכו But by these latter words it refers to their social customs — things which have assumed for them the character of a law as, for instance, the frequenting of theaters and race-courses. Rabbi Meir, however, said: These (חקתיהם) refer to the "ways of the Amorites" (superstitious practices) which our Rabbis have enumerated (Shabbat 67a; Sifra, Acharei Mot, Section 8 8; cf. also Tosefta Shabbat 7).

### 17. Talmud Bavli Avodah Zarah 18b (Davidson Edition translation)

דתניא אין הולכין לאיצטדינין מפני מושב לצים ור' נתן מתיר מפני שני דברים אחד מפני שצווה ומציל ואחד מפני שמעיד עדות אשה להשיאה

The Gemara answers: This issue is a dispute between tanna'im, as it is taught in a baraita: One may not go to stadiums, because they are considered “the seat of the scornful.” And Rabbi Natan permits attending stadiums due to two reasons; one is because he can scream and save the life of someone who would otherwise be killed, and the other one is because even if he cannot save the man's life, he can provide testimony that a woman's husband died, which will enable her to marry again.

### 18. Responsa Mahari Bruna 71

נשאלתי אם מותר לצאת ולראות שמחת הערלים כשממרים ומריצים סוסיהם כל הקודם סוסו ירויה זהב וכה"ג, אם יש לדמותו לצידת חיות ועופות שאוסר בפ"ק דע"ז (יה ב): והתירתי דלא דמי כלל כי אין זה לשמחה אך ללמוד אומנות ולקנות סוסים לרוץ בהם להנצל מאוייבים וכן ראיתי מבעלי מעשים: אך בהא מספקנא אם מותר לילך ולראות כשמשמחים יחד לרכוב זה כנגד זה במוטות וכדים שקורין לטעד"ן:

I was asked if it is permitted to go out and see the rejoicing of the non-Jews when they race horses against each other and whoever's horse is first wins money, if this can be compared to trapping animals and birds which is prohibited (Avodah Zarah Chapter 1). I permit it, as it is not similar at all, since it is not for rejoicing, but to learn a trade and purchase horses to run from enemies, and so I have seen from people who have done this. However, I am unsure whether it is permitted to go and watch when they rejoice [by watching] people ride opposite each other with sticks and jugs [shields?] which are called “leteden”.

### 19. Responsa Igrot Moshe Yoreh Deah 4:11

א. אם אסור מצד בחוקותיהם לא תלכו, ללכת לתיאטרון ואיצטדיון ספורט בימינו באלו שנקראו תיאטרון שעושים שם ענייני שחוק, וכן איצטדיון, שהם המקומות שמשחקין ספארט, לא שייכי בהו עניין ובחוקותיהם לא תלכו (ויקרא קדושים י"ח י"ג), שהוא דווקא כשהוא חוק להעכו"ם לעשות איזה דבר בעלמא, אף כשאין זה מחוקי הע"ז שלהם, אבל עכ"פ הם ענייני חוקים שהנהיגו ביניהם - לא רק דברים של פריצות אלא אף דברים בעלמא - שלא ידוע טעם, כדאיתא ברמ"א יו"ד סימן קע"ח סעיף א'... אבל כשאכא טעם למה שעושין, כהא דאיצטדינין ורקום שאיתא בע"ז דף י"ח ע"ב שהוא לליצנות, ליכא בזה משום ע"ז, אף שהוא דבר אסור מצד איסור ליצנות, וכל ההולך שם עובר באיסור מושב לצים ובביטול תורה - לא רק על זמן זה - אלא שגורם לו להיות בטל לגמרי מתורה כמפורש שם. וכ"ש בתיאטרון הנמצא כעת במדינתנו, וכן האיצטדיון של משחקי ספארט, ואף במדינות אחרות, דעושין זה סתם אינשי מהנכרים שבעיר שלא שייכי כלל לענייני ע"ז. וכדומני שהכומרים דאמונת הנוצרים, שהיא עתה אמונת רוב אוה"ע, נמי לא ניהא להו ענייני תיאטרון ואיצטדיון. וגם לא ניהא בזה לאנשי אמונת המוחמדים שהוא אמונת מדינות טערקיי וכל מדינות ערב. שא"כ רוב המדינות שבהן נמצאים תיאטראות ואיצטדיאות לא שייכי כלל לאמונתם, שוודאי לא שייכי להלאו דובחוקותיהם לא תלכו, אלא הם מאיסור ליצנות וביטול תורה. וגם עוד איסור גדול יש דמגרי יצה"ר של עריות בנפשיה דרובן הם דברי ניבול פה והסתה לעריות.

If it is prohibited to go to a theatre or sports stadium in our days due to “Bechukoteihem Lo Telechu”:

Places known as theatres where they perform types of comedy, or stadiums, places where they play sports, the concept of “Uvechukoteihem Lo Telechu” is not relevant to them, as it applies specifically where there is a rule for non-Jews to do something in particular, even when it is not from the rules of their idol worship, but so long as it is a rule that they practice – not only licentious things, even regular ones – that has no reason, as is brought

in Rema (YD 178:1)... But when there is a reason for what they do, like the stadiums and camps of besiegers that are brought in Avodah Zarah 18b, which are for the purposes of entertainment, there is no concern of Avodah Zarah, even though it is prohibited due to scorn, and anyone who goes there transgresses the prohibition of “Moshav Leitzim” and “Bittul Torah” – not just for that time – since it causes him to be entirely removed from the Torah as is explained there. Certainly for a theatre found now in our country, and so too the theatres of sports games, and even in other countries, where regular non-Jews take part in it, that it is not at all relevant or related to idol worship. As far as I am aware, the priests of the Christian faith, which is now the belief of most of the nations of the world, also find these practices of the theatres and stadiums to be inappropriate. It is also inappropriate to the people of the Islamic faith, which is the belief of the countries of Turkey and all of the Arab lands. If so, most of the countries in which theatres and stadiums are found have nothing to do with their faiths, and are certainly not relevant to the prohibition of “Uvechukoteihem Lo Telechu”, rather, they are prohibited due to the prohibition of mockery and Bittul Torah. There is also an additional great prohibition that it releases the inclination towards licentiousness upon [people], as most of them contain inappropriate language and incitement to licentiousness.

## **20. Rabbi Dr. Asher Meir, OU.org, The Jewish Ethicist, Spectator Sports**

We could say something similar about spectator sports. As we mentioned, the Talmud identifies the Roman coliseum with the Biblical “seat of the scoffers” (Psalms 1:1). This characterization is hardly surprising given the extremely cruel and violent nature of the “entertainment” found there: gladiators, bullfights, and the like. Yet we have to admit that many modern sporting events also have their share of violence, and the eminent authority Rabbi Moshe Feinstein wrote that contemporary spectator sports can also be considered “the seat of the scoffers.” He writes that attendance at these events can cause a person to forget his religious obligations. Is this meant to be a blanket condemnation of watching sports events? I cannot speak for Rabbi Feinstein, but I can point out that the Tiferes Yerushalaim Yeshiva which he headed had its own sports teams and competitions, and I doubt that the stands were empty. Evidently he acknowledged that watching sports can have some value, though obviously it is not commensurable with the value of Torah study, which occupied the overwhelming majority of students’ time and effort. I think that the critical distinction here is the purpose of the activity. The main purpose of the sports teams at the yeshiva was certainly not for entertainment but rather for the students to develop their bodies and to provide an outlet for their energies. (In another responsum Rav Moshe writes that providing a swimming pool for students in the summer constitutes an act of kindness, since they need a place to cool off in the heat and sometimes this can also bring them to exert themselves more in their Torah study.) Cheering on the competitors is mainly a way of encouraging them in their training and exertion, and not a diversion for the spectators. Watching sporting events can also be of value for people who play that particular sport, since this teaches them about the game and inspires them to greater achievements. Another possible ethical horizon in sporting activities is to draw inspiration from the example of the athletes. I have heard many sermons in which rabbis, both community rabbis and leading Torah educators, use sports as a model for rigorous devotion to self-improvement within an ethical (sportsmanlike) framework. I’m not sure that this attitude can be cultivated in every individual, but it is in the reach of some and for a young person who is already devoted to sports encouraging this aspect can be a way of harnessing his interest for a positive purpose. I recall once that Rav Aaron Lichtenstein urged us to spend more hours in the Beit Midrash (study hall) by referring to the example of legendary forward Larry Bird, “who is always the first one to arrive at practice and the last one to leave – and not because he needs it!” Sporting events in our society have become an obsession and reach a centrality far beyond their true importance. They also are categorized by an excessive amount of violence and gratuitous rivalry. The best use of our leisure hours is for Torah study and acts of kindness. Even so, a measured interest in sporting events to appreciate and encourage the teamwork, sportsmanship, and efforts at self-improvement of the athletes can be one tool to help us inspire us to develop our own bodies and spirits.