

The Brahma Band

Opening note and first three daily reflections

Opening Note

Before We Begin

I was standing in the middle of a soccer field with a whistle around my neck and four very young players waiting for me to restart the game.

I put the ball down.

"You stand here."

I moved another player a few feet.

"You come over here."

I pointed to the child taking the kick.

"Okay. Look around. Who are you going to kick it to? Your team or the other team?"

My team.

"Good. Ready?"

Whistle. Play.

A few moments later, the ball went out again. I picked it up. We did it all over.

There was nothing particularly wrong with what I was doing. The children were young. Somebody had to keep the game moving. Somebody had to teach them what a restart was. Somebody had to help make sense of eight children, two goals, one ball, and twenty-four minutes of cheerful chaos.

But somewhere along the way I started wondering:

Who is actually playing this game?

Because I could see everything. I could see the open teammate. I could see who needed to get back. I could see the empty space.

And because I could see it, I could tell them. Again. And again. And again.

It worked. The soccer became more organized.

But I began to wonder whether organized soccer and learning soccer were always the same thing.

What would happen if I stopped supplying the answer quite so quickly?

What if, instead of telling a child where to go, I asked:

"What do you see?"

What if I let the wrong pass happen?

What if I gave them three seconds before rescuing the moment?

What if, when the ball was stolen or a child fell down or someone scored against us, I stopped trying to fix what had already happened and asked something simpler:

"What's your next play?"

That little question changed something for me. Not immediately in the children. In me.

I began thinking less about how to control the game and more about how to create the conditions in which children could learn to play it.

And once I started asking that question, other doors opened.

One led to an ancient Buddhist teaching about two arrows. The first arrow is the painful thing that happens. The second is the pain we sometimes create around it.

A missed shot is the first arrow. I am terrible at soccer can become the second.

Another teaching told of a musician and a stringed instrument.

If the string is pulled too tight, it cannot play properly. If it hangs too loose, it cannot play properly. The music appears somewhere in between.

That one stopped me. I am a musician.

I know what an overtightened string feels like beneath the fingers. I know the lifeless sound of one hanging too loose. And I know that wonderful moment when the pitch settles and the string begins to ring.

Suddenly I had another way to see coaching.

A child can be overtightened. Too many instructions. Too much expectation. Too much correction. Too much fear of making a mistake.

A child can also be left too loose. No challenge. No standard. No structure. No invitation to stretch beyond what is already comfortable.

The answer is not to tighten every player. It is not to loosen every player. It is to listen.

Because you would never tune a guitar by turning every tuning peg the same amount.

One string needs tightening. Another needs release.

And sometimes you reach the E string, pluck it, hear that it is already exactly where it needs to be, and have the good sense to leave it alone.

That began to feel less like a metaphor and more like a philosophy.

A team is not a machine to assemble. It is not even one instrument to tune. It is a band.

Every player arrives with a different temperament, different confidence, different abilities, different fears, different rhythms.

One child needs more challenge. Another needs reassurance. Another needs firmer boundaries. Another may already be singing beautifully and simply needs enough room to be heard.

And then there is the coach. We have to tune ourselves too.

Our anxiety can tighten the entire field. Our desire to help can cause us to play every note for the child. Our competitiveness can push the tempo until nobody can hear anybody else. Our fear of failure can make us fill every silence with instruction.

Music gave me language for things I was beginning to notice in coaching:

Tension. Tuning. Rhythm. Harmony. Dissonance. Dynamics. Listening. Improvisation. Rest.

And underneath those ideas I began hearing echoes from places far beyond music and sport.

Buddhist teachings about attention, suffering, balance, and beginning again.

Hindu traditions surrounding Brahmā, the creator who looks in many directions.

Timothy Gallwey asking what happens when instruction becomes interference.

John Wooden asking what success really means.

Phil Jackson exploring awareness, ego, and collective purpose.

John O'Sullivan asking adults to return the game to the children playing it.

Strategists asking us to understand conditions before acting.

Teachers asking how much help allows learning and how much help replaces it.

Parents asking perhaps the oldest question of all:

When do I hold on, and when do I let go?

Different traditions. Different centuries. Different vocabulary.

But many of them circle the same questions.

How much should we control? When should we intervene? How do people actually learn? How do individuals become part of something larger without disappearing inside it? What do we do when things go wrong? And how do we begin again?

That is what this book is about.

It is not a religious book. It is not a soccer manual. It is not thirty days of drills.

It is thirty short reflections for the person wearing the whistle.

Music provides the language. Other traditions provide harmony, counterpoint, and occasionally a surprising change of key.

Over thirty days, we will tune ourselves, learn to hear individual players, build the band, rehearse, compete, miss notes, recover, and begin again.

Some ideas may change the way you design a practice. Some may change only one sentence you say to a child. A few may change the way you understand coaching entirely.

The goal is not to become the coach with the most answers.

It is to become the coach who listens well enough to know when an answer is needed.

Because eventually the player has to make the decision. Eventually the musicians have to hear one another. Eventually the conductor has to stop counting every beat.

Eventually you have to let them play.

Welcome to The Brahma Band.

Day 1

Before the First Note

Before we talk about drills, formations, substitutions, practice plans, or what kind of soccer you want your team to play, take a moment and go somewhere else.

Go backward.

Something brought you here.

Maybe you played soccer when you were young. Maybe it was basketball, baseball, swimming, running, skiing, music, theater, or something completely different.

Maybe you never considered yourself an athlete at all.

But if you can, think back to a time when you loved being part of something.

A team. A game. A group. A coach.

Try not to remember the record. Forget the standings for a moment. Forget how many goals you scored, how many tournaments you won, whether your team finished first or sixth.

Instead, remember the feeling.

Was there a coach whose name still comes easily?

What did that person bring with them? How did practice feel when they arrived? What happened to the space around them? Why, after all these years, do you still remember?

For me, one of those people was Coach Bob Conley.

I can still picture the big straw hat. I can hear Bob Marley playing. I remember the Sun Tzu quotations. I remember that he would run laps with us.

And I remember something called the Dragon Circle, where we stood together and tried to keep the ball alive between us.

It was a soccer exercise, technically. But that isn't why I remember it. I remember the feeling around it.

We were together. We were trying to keep something going.

And Coach Conley was not standing outside the experience barking instructions at us. He seemed genuinely delighted to be there.

He loved the game. And somehow his love of the game became part of the environment.

That is what remains with me. Not a particular score. Not a formation. Not a trophy. A culture.

He created a small world around the field where the game mattered, where people mattered, where effort mattered, and where it felt good to belong.

That is an extraordinary thing for a coach to create.

And it raises the first question of this book:

What are you creating?

A season begins before the first whistle.

Before you teach a child how to pass, you have already begun teaching them what this place is.

They are learning whether mistakes are dangerous. They are learning whether the coach notices them. They are learning whether the best player matters more than everyone else. They are learning whether winning changes your mood.

They are learning whether effort gets noticed. They are learning whether teammates help each other. They are learning whether practice is a place they want to return to.

None of that requires a whiteboard.

Culture starts forming almost immediately. And whether you intend to create one or not, you will.

The only question is whether you create it deliberately.

This is where the name Brahma first began to matter to me.

In Hindu tradition, Brahmā is associated with creation.

I do not mean that a coach is some godlike architect controlling everything that happens. Quite the opposite.

The coach does not create every play. The coach does not create every decision. The coach cannot create every outcome.

But the coach does create conditions.

You choose what gets praised. You choose what gets corrected. You choose how mistakes are treated. You choose whether children are afraid to experiment. You choose whether the environment feels tense or playful.

You choose whether competition means defeating another person or testing yourself beside them. You choose whether the child who struggles feels like an inconvenience or like part of the team.

You are composing the opening measures before the players ever make their first sound.

That is why this reflection comes before tactics.

Before asking what kind of soccer team you want to build, ask what kind of place you want to build.

Maybe you want courage. Maybe curiosity. Joy. Discipline. Kindness. Resilience. Respect. Belonging. Generosity. Effort.

These are not soccer values. They are human values that happen to have a soccer field on which to practice.

And this is one of the strange gifts of coaching children.

The game constantly creates little opportunities to rehearse them.

A teammate makes a mistake. What happens next?

Someone loses the ball. What happens next?

You are winning easily. How do you behave?

You are losing badly. How do you behave?

Another child is scared. Do you notice?

Someone else succeeds. Can you celebrate them?

The game gives us these moments over and over again.

Our job is not to manufacture perfect children from them.

Our job is to create the kind of environment in which those moments can become meaningful.

So before the season begins, resist the urge to start with your first drill.

Start with three words.

Choose three qualities you want a child to feel when they are around your team.

Not what you want them to accomplish. What you want the experience to be.

Maybe: Brave. Joyful. Connected.

Maybe: Curious. Kind. Competitive.

Maybe yours are entirely different.

Write them down.

Then ask yourself a harder question:

What would I have to do for those words to become true?

If you choose brave, mistakes cannot be punished harshly.

If you choose connected, you cannot spend the whole season celebrating only your strongest players.

If you choose joyful, joy cannot disappear the moment you start losing.

If you choose respectful, your own behavior toward referees, opponents, parents, and players matters more than anything you say about respect.

Culture is not what we announce. Culture is what we repeatedly do.

Years from now, your players may forget almost everything you taught them about soccer.

They may forget your drills. They may forget the score of every game. They may even forget most of the things you said.

But they may remember the music you played. The strange little ritual you did before games. The way you knelt beside them when they were upset. The phrase you always used after a mistake. The way practice felt when you arrived.

The feeling that they belonged there.

Before the first note, decide what kind of room you want the music to fill.

Then create that room.

On the Field

Before your first practice, choose three non-soccer values you want your team experience to embody.

Write them somewhere you will actually see them.

Then, as you design practices and respond to players, ask:

Does this choice create more of that?

For the Coach

Think of one coach, teacher, director, parent, or mentor you still remember.

Do not ask first what they taught you. Ask:

How did you feel around them?

Then consider what they consistently did that created that feeling.

Carry This

The coach creates the conditions. The players create the play.

Reflection

When these players remember this season years from now, what do I hope they remember feeling?

Day 2

The Lute String

There is an old Buddhist teaching about a monk named Sona.

Sona was earnest.

He wanted badly to progress in his practice, and because he wanted it so badly, he pushed himself harder and harder.

Eventually the effort became strain. The more he forced himself, the more discouraged he became.

The Buddha asked Sona about something he already understood well: music.

Before becoming a monk, Sona had experience with a stringed instrument.

The Buddha asked him:

If the strings are pulled too tight, will the instrument play well?

No.

If the strings are left too loose, will it play well?

No.

And if the strings are tuned to the proper tension?

Then the instrument can make music.

The lesson was about spiritual practice. But it is also a remarkably good lesson about coaching.

We often talk about coaches as though there are two kinds.

The strict coach. And the easy coach.

The demanding coach. And the fun coach.

The coach who pushes. And the coach who lets kids be kids.

But a musician knows immediately that this is the wrong question.

The question is not whether the string should be tight or loose.

The question is:

What tension allows this string to sing?

That is different.

A string pulled too tight becomes strained. So can a player.

Too many instructions. Too much correction. Too much urgency. Too much fear surrounding mistakes. Too much expectation that every practice, every possession, every game must demonstrate progress.

A young player can begin to feel that the safest thing to do is avoid being wrong.

And when avoiding mistakes becomes more important than discovering the game, something important has gone out of tune.

But a string can also hang too loose.

A child may be protected from every frustration. Expectations may become so vague that there is nothing to reach toward. A coach may avoid correction because correction feels uncomfortable. Practice may remain pleasant but never become challenging.

The player is never asked to stretch. Never asked to persist. Never asked to discover that something difficult can become possible.

That string cannot sing either.

The work of the coach is not simply to push. It is not simply to protect.

It is to listen closely enough to know when each is needed.

That is calibration.

And calibration becomes much more difficult when there is more than one child.

If you have ever tuned a guitar, you know that you do not tune it by turning every peg the same amount.

One string may be sharp. Another flat. Another close enough that it needs only the slightest adjustment.

And then you pluck the E string. It rings. It is exactly where it should be. You leave it alone.

That may be one of the most important things a coach can learn:

Not every player needs the same adjustment.

One child may need you to ask more of them. Another may need you to step back. One needs a clearer boundary. Another needs permission to take a risk.

One needs to hear: "You can do more."

Another needs: "You don't have to get it right yet."

Another may need nothing from you at all in that moment.

They may already be playing freely, thinking clearly, and enjoying themselves.

Your intervention would not improve the music. It would interrupt it.

This is where fairness becomes more complicated than treating every child identically.

Equal care does not require equal tension.

The coach who gives every player the same correction, the same emotional pressure, and the same amount of freedom may feel consistent.

But consistency and wisdom are not always the same thing.

Different children arrive carrying different things.

Different confidence. Different fear. Different maturity. Different relationships with competition. Different tolerance for frustration. Different reasons for playing.

To coach them well, we have to hear those differences.

That does not mean lowering standards for some players and raising them for others arbitrarily.

It means understanding that the path toward a standard may not sound the same for every child.

The goal is still growth. The instrument simply requires tuning.

And tuning is not something we do once.

A guitar that was perfectly in tune yesterday may not be perfectly in tune today.

Temperature changes. Strings stretch. Wood moves. The room changes.

People do too.

The child who needed encouragement last week may need a challenge this week. The player you have been pushing may suddenly need space. The confident player may encounter something that shakes them. The distracted player may unexpectedly lock in.

Good coaching requires listening again. And again. And again.

That is one reason coaching can never be reduced entirely to rules.

“Always push.” “Always praise.” “Never yell.” “Always let them figure it out.” “Never intervene.”

Each of those may sound principled. But music is more responsive than that.

Sometimes the coach needs to step in. Sometimes the coach needs to step away. Sometimes the practice needs more structure. Sometimes the team needs room to breathe. Sometimes a player needs another repetition. Sometimes they need to stop.

The philosophy is not: Never tighten the string.

It is: Listen before you turn the peg.

For young players, especially, the signs are often right in front of us.

A child who keeps looking toward the coach before making a decision may be overtightened by instruction.

A child who wanders away from every challenge may need a little more structure.

A child becoming frustrated may be standing right at the edge where learning can happen. Or they may already be beyond it.

The coach has to listen. Not perfectly.

No coach gets this exactly right.

We will overtighten sometimes. We will leave things too loose. We will mistake resistance for laziness or discomfort for growth.

The point is not flawless calibration. The point is to make calibration part of the work.

Because the question changes everything.

Instead of asking: “How do I get this player to do what I want?”

we can begin asking: “What does this player need from me right now in order to keep learning?”

That is a very different kind of coaching. And it is a much more musical one.

On the Field

Choose two players. One you tend to push. One you tend to rescue.

At your next practice, notice those instincts before acting on them.

With the player you push, try giving a little more space. With the player you rescue, allow a little more productive struggle.

Do not make a dramatic change. Turn the peg slightly. Then listen.

For the Coach

Think about the players on your team one at a time.

Which strings feel tight? Which feel loose? Which are changing?

And which one might already be perfectly in tune, waiting for you to stop adjusting it?

Carry This

Not too tight. Not too loose. Find the tension where growth can sing.

And beneath it:

Equal care does not require identical tension.

Reflection

Where am I overtightening?

Where am I leaving a player too loose?

Who am I coaching according to what they actually need, and who am I coaching according to my own habits?

When I see a child struggle, how quickly do I turn the peg?

And perhaps most importantly:

Can I hear when a player is already singing?

Tune the Tuner

Synopsis

What happens to the team when I am out of tune?

The entry turns the musical metaphor inward. Day 2 asks how much tension each player needs. Day 3 asks whether the coach is calibrated enough to hear that accurately in the first place.

A coach brings an emotional instrument onto the field every day.

Anxiety, fatigue, ego, ambition, frustration, insecurity, and competitiveness all change how we coach.

An anxious coach often compensates by over-directing. A frustrated coach may tighten every string. A distracted coach may go too loose. A coach who needs to feel useful can start solving problems the players need to solve.

A coach's body communicates before their words do: face, posture, pace, volume, tone, how quickly they intervene.

This is where Gallwey becomes useful. The idea is that our own internal noise can become interference for the athlete.

So the entry should distinguish between having standards and broadcasting tension.

The goal is not to become some permanently serene Zen coach. It is simply to notice:

What am I carrying onto the field today?

The Tuning Fork

A tuning fork is designed to provide a very stable reference pitch, although literally speaking it can shift somewhat with temperature, damage, or physical changes. So we shouldn't say it can never go out of tune.

A tuning fork has one tremendous advantage over a human coach:

It doesn't have a bad day.

It didn't argue with its spouse before practice. It isn't worried about money. It doesn't care whether the team is 1-4. It isn't embarrassed because another coach seems more competent. It isn't secretly hoping its own child scores. It doesn't need applause.

Strike it and, within its physical tolerances, it gives you the reference pitch it was designed to give.

A human being? We wander sharp and flat constantly.

We would love to imagine ourselves as the tuning fork. But we're another instrument in the room.

Before tuning the band, check your own pitch.

On the Field

The practical exercise could be a thirty-second pre-practice check:

What am I feeling?

What am I expecting?

What am I trying to prove?

Am I rushed?

Am I disappointed about something unrelated to the team?

Am I unusually invested in winning today?

Carry This

Before tuning the team, tune yourself.

Reflection

When I become anxious, what kind of coach do I become?

When I feel out of control, do I try to control the players?

What does my team hear from me before I say a word?