

# In & Out of The Zone

by Tom Simpson © December 2002

Pool players frequently mention that magical state – “The Zone” – when they refer to a great performance at the table. “He was deep in The Zone, man.” “He was unconscious.” “It was just him and the balls.” We all talk about it as if we know what it is, but when we try to explain it to someone, we run out of words pretty quickly. We’re not going to nail it down fully here, but we’ll characterize it and try to identify possible triggers to help us get there.

One of the problems in describing The Zone is the idea that it’s purely a “mental thing.” I say not quite. It’s a *mindbody* state. One of the primary characteristics of being in The Zone is that it is a time when mind & body are integrated and are performing together without conflict, i.e., in harmony. “Getting it together.” This is **an ideal state for playing pool**. We want our brains and our bodies both to contribute their best performances. Meanwhile, we also want to keep emotion, doubt, and distraction *out* of our game.

Some players feel Focused Concentration is the key, the trigger that launches them into The Zone. Well, how do you “do” Focused Concentration? If you’re “doing” it, and you realize it, you’ve broken your concentration – you’re not there any more. I’d say concentration is both a symptom *and* a cause. It’s like smiling and feeling good. If you feel good, you smile. If you smile, you feel good. In that sense, if you can somehow focus and concentrate fully, you may fall into The Zone. By the same token, if you’re in The Zone, you’ll find you *are* fully focused and concentrated.

People say pool is a mental game. So what about thinking? Well, yes, we have thoughts in The Zone, but they are not the “monkey chatter” thoughts that typically run through our heads all day long. They are not about worry, failure, what’s going on outside of the table space, and so on. They are not self-conscious or introspective, but rather they are much closer to pure “**joyous function**,” by which I mean it’s just you and the balls, and they are pretty much already in the pockets, but you’re not patting yourself on the back about it. Your success is due both to doing the right things well and to not interfering with that.

Our culture is very goal-oriented, but zoning is a process thing. Teaching martial arts students to take smooth, safe falls, we talk about how a coin rolls along at its perfect speed, each part of the edge making full contact with the ground. No rush, no getting ahead of itself. Playing pool in the zone, there is no hurry. Even though you might know the rack is gone, **the joyous function, the reason we do this, is to fully live each moment of every shot**. The one-ball is as beautiful as the nine-ball. Feeling the cloth slide against your fingertips as you set up is as excruciatingly fine as the roll of a ball.

You can’t readily will yourself into The Zone. I try to remember my triggers. Just like having a pre-shot routine, you can have a pre-zone routine that might help you get there. You still have to remember to do it, and get out of the way so it can happen. It’s more of a “giving up” than a “making it happen.” Musicians talk about “sinking into the instrument.” This is the experience we’re seeking. When we merge with our instrument – the cue – we’re in The Zone. Contradictory concepts like “soft focus” and “relaxed concentration” make sense in The Zone, whereas in our everyday state, these ideas seem paradoxical. Try softening your eyes and allowing the balls or the pockets to become bigger. Concentrate without clenching anything up. Find *anything* about your body or your mental state that seems for you to be a symptom of being in The Zone. Your personal Pre-Zone Routine should feature that symptom. Maybe it’s one of the things mentioned above. Maybe it’s a quality of your breathing. Maybe it’s a certain rhythm of movement. Maybe it’s how your eyes feel. Find something and use it to get you to The Zone.

Unfortunately for most of us, we can’t make it last. It’s a few seconds to a few minutes at a time. Maybe we can stay in the “region” for a longer time, though, and get back in on some shots or innings. If everything clicks, it might go a little longer, but awareness of time is another one of those things that knocks you out of The Zone. Jack Nicklaus is in The Zone as he approaches, sets up, and executes his shot, but he’s probably only in the region as he walks to the next shot. Become aware that you’re in The Zone and it’s over. Congratulate yourself on what you just did, and you’re out. You can’t maintain it. As you develop the skills and experience to *a)* play well enough to get into The Zone and *b)* **trust it and let it be**, you’ll tend to get more Zone-time. The present moment is all there is. Dwell upon a past shot or worry about a future shot and you’re out. As Obiwan Mosconi would say (if there were such a person), **“Present shot, only shot.”**