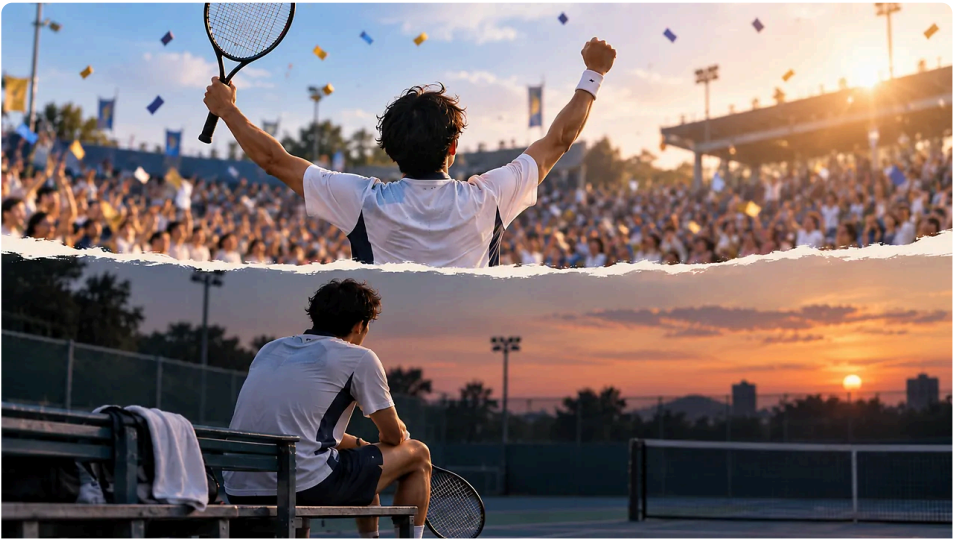


Authored by: Acharya Prashant | Updated: Oct 24, 2026, 20:00 IST

Conversations with medal-winning athletes, and a struggle for which no trophy is awarded



Acharya Prashant explains how athletes can overcome performance anxiety, ego and social expectations by focusing on the process rather than medals, and separating self-worth from victory or defeat.

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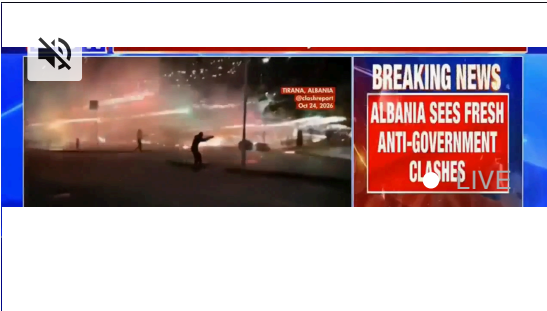
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When their boat was ahead, Salman seemed an excellent teammate. When it fell behind, the same Salman suddenly appeared full of faults. Rower

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Satnam Singh admitted this in front of Salman, who acknowledged feeling much the same. Both laughed. They had won an Asian Games bronze together but never confessed these thoughts during competition.

I asked them: Had Salman's character changed with the boat's speed? Only the result had changed. Yet with it, our judgment of another person changes. So does our judgment of ourselves. When the boat leads, we feel capable; when it falls behind, we doubt ourselves. What changed?

At a recent dialogue session in a Delhi-NCR auditorium, I met athletes from rowing, judo, mixed martial arts, soft tennis, kurash and powerlifting, including Asian Games medallists. They feared decisive matches, teammates' success, and family expectations. Their questions extended far beyond sport.

Can a Medal Determine Your Worth?

MMA athlete Arya Choudhary said that if a training partner performed even one more burpee than she did, she could not sleep at night. I asked: How did that extra burpee diminish your skills? Your strength and training remained unchanged. Then why the distress?

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Training harder may be appropriate. But if another's performance measures my worth, I am defending an identity, not merely playing a sport. I told Arya that her greatest opponent was now in the mirror. And I asked her to put that formidable energy into worthwhile activity, whether training, learning, reading, music or something else. But switching activities cannot help if the same ego seeks self-importance through each.

Ego is not merely arrogance. "I am a champion", "I am a failure", "I am better than others", "I am worthless": all are identities borrowed from circumstances. Whoever swells with victory must dread defeat. We do the same with examination marks, job titles and other people's approval. Make anything the arbiter of your existence, and you become afraid of it.

We collect achievements to complete an "I" that feels incomplete. Bronze demands silver, silver demands gold, and gold another tournament. Material shortages can be remedied. But if incompleteness belongs to the claimant himself, how can changing the objects resolve it?

Reva Bhadoria asked why she should not want gold, given the efforts of her parents, coaches and

teammates, and the expectations of her country. I said I had played tennis with my coach that morning, wanted to win and had won a set. There is no dishonesty in trying your utmost to win. The dishonesty begins when defeating an opponent becomes a means of proving who you are. The game requires attention to the opponent, not yourself.

Reva also regretted starting her training at fourteen, years later than Arya. Could she change those years? No. Then why waste today's possibilities arguing with yesterday? First ask whether the struggle deserves to be won. A child may collect medals merely to secure admission abroad through a sports quota. An adult may acquire status while remaining inwardly enslaved. Great success in the wrong struggle can be a defeat in life. The right struggle must also expose something false in the one fighting it.

Soft tennis player Jay Meena had trained for sixteen years, yet reaching an Asian Games quarterfinal felt like having his hands shackled. The country's prestige seemed to rest on his shoulders. Earlier defeats followed him into every new opportunity. After one defeat, teammates slept in their match kits, some without dinner. Had

sixteen years of training vanished in a day, I asked, or had one result been appointed judge over those years?

In his final chance at a medal, Jay needed four consecutive points. He attended to the point being played, won all four and secured bronze. In the locker room he removed his shoes, relaxed and received his father's congratulations. The medal was assured; now he could play freely. Against a Japanese opponent in the next match, his rhythm returned. He said even the court appeared larger.

Same body, racket and training. One self-imposed condition was satisfied; fear subsided. But this was no final freedom. Today's condition is bronze; tomorrow's will be gold. The ego can even turn that wonderful sense of immersion into a fresh demand: I must feel like that in every match.

Jay also faced physical limitations. Typhoid had cost him nearly ten kilograms, and food had been difficult during the tournament. Exhaustion is not psychological weakness. Injury, hunger and rest require attention. "My knee is injured" is a fact; "therefore my life is worthless" is the ego's story built upon it. Severe physical or psychological

trauma may require appropriate care, not a sermon about detachment.

I told Jay there is no instant cure for lifelong bondage on quarterfinal morning. If daily life is one continuous calculation of profit and loss, why would the decisive match be different? Practise while practising, rest while resting, play while playing. Give the present task your full attention.

The Bhagavad Gita asks Arjuna to remain equanimous amid pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat. It does not ask him to flee the battlefield. Strategy studies the opponent; attachment worries what people will say if you lose. Effort improves the probability of winning, but cannot guarantee any particular result.

Salman said he could not sleep before major races. If victory matters, I asked, what serves it tonight: rest or an entire night imagining possible outcomes? Anxiety sometimes sabotages the very work it claims to honour.

Nishkama karma is not carelessness: attend to the work, without making its outcome your master. Care for right action, not merely its result. But beware: "I will become detached so that I can win gold" merely turns detachment into another tactic

for getting gold. Vedanta is not a performance-enhancement programme. It asks what the "I" hopes to obtain from victory.

Love of the Game, or a Bargain?

I asked Salman what relationship he had with a sport to which he had given years. Would you call it love if you approached someone while calculating what profit they would deliver three years later? Why treat a game that way? Win a medal and the years count; lose and they become worthless. We do the same with books, abandoning them the moment the examination ends.

Yet loving a pursuit means more than enjoying it intensely. Even sport can feed vanity. Love is tested by the falseness we will relinquish for it: the addiction to praise, envy of a rival, the belief that one must always be right.

Imagine winning matches for years with an incorrect racket grip. A coach corrects it; initially the performance worsens. Does the player protect old comforts or pay the price of learning? Seeing what is false and having the intent to change are different requirements. We seldom know the full price beforehand. Often, only after relinquishing something do we see what a burden it was.

After his father's death, Salman supported his family by driving a cab in Delhi and Gurugram. His Army selection came while driving. His height led coaches to select him for rowing, a sport he had never tried. He repeatedly avoided practice until coaches brought him back. Years later he contemplated quitting again. A senior officer gave him thirty days to think. He returned and chose to commit to rowing.

The point is not merely the eventual medal. A task others saw for him had to become his own choice. Difficulty alone neither sanctifies nor discredits a path. The ego can work extraordinarily hard for an utterly misguided aim. Ask what the hardship serves.

Powerlifter Uttam Rawat balanced training with work and family and won Commonwealth gold and silver. Having achieved his goals, he hoped life would finally settle. I told him: Do not settle. One achievement need not end meaningful work. Learn something new; create opportunities for others. Resting because the body needs rest is one thing. Asking life itself to stop making demands is another.

Arya wanted peace through acquiring more. Uttam wanted it through holding on to what he had. Both

had made peace dependent on external arrangements.

Salman asked why taunts troubled him long after they were spoken. I joked, "When a donkey opens its mouth, do you expect it to recite scripture?" I recalled people cutting across active tennis courts in Greater Noida, then arguing when asked to stop. Once, even a tennis coach did so. What kind of respect for sport is this? Medals require facilities, training and a culture that honours the athlete's work, not merely public demands for victory.

Object to bad conduct, seek better conditions, but do not burn inwardly all day. Another person's foolishness tells us something about that person. Why should it govern my mental condition? His conduct need not become my fate.

Whose Ambition Is the Child Carrying?

Parents declare that they want a child to win out of love, then make six months of training hostage to one day's result. When does the child get to play and learn? Becoming a parent does not automatically confer wisdom. One can be no better a parent than one is a human being.

We teach children that marks, colleges, salaries and prestige are everything, then complain that

they grow up valuing only money and status. Who taught them that lesson?

I recalled how some promising squash players trained primarily to obtain admission to foreign universities through sports quotas, and abandoned the game once admitted. By contrast, Arya's parents spent years taking their children to practice on a scooter. Supporting a child's pursuit and making the child an instrument of your ambitions are entirely different things.

Jay was expelled from school at nine for bullying other children. His father feared his future was ruined. Yet at his next school Jay encountered tennis courts, beginning the journey that brought him to international sport. This does not excuse bullying. It asks why we turn one child's mistake into a verdict on the whole person.

Martial artist Suchika Tariyal described abuse she suffered as a child. The wrongdoing belonged entirely to the perpetrator. She later trained, competed internationally and began teaching girls. One student was beaten at home simply for wanting martial arts lessons. What protection denies a girl the ability to protect herself? Keeping

her weak makes her dependent on the very people who may then demand control over her life.

People mocked Suchika's strong body as unfeminine. We have renamed weakness delicacy and delicacy beauty. I asked why so much of women's time and money is directed toward appearing attractive to others rather than becoming capable themselves. What is this body, this life for? To win, or to be sold? The criticism is of dependence on others' approval, not of a woman's choice to dress or adorn herself.

Suchika returned from the Asian Games with a medal, only to be asked when she would bring the family the "good news" of a baby. Why was the medal not good news enough? And why should a woman need a medal to control her life? Biological realities do not automatically justify society's timetable for marriage and motherhood.

Kurash medallist Pinky Balhara came with an aunt who pressed her to marry. Pinky laughingly admitted using sport to postpone the conversation. But why must a capable woman hide behind excuses instead of making a considered choice? Her aunt joked that a boy born in the family was already "gold", while Pinky had brought bronze. What achievement lies in being born male? Why

compare his birth with years of athletic work? Why speak of a daughter as someone to be "given away", as if she were an object?

Yet I also challenged the aunt's claim that she followed no one's pressure and simply did what she wished. Obeying every impulse is not freedom either. Where did the impulse come from? From understanding, fear, resentment, inherited conditioning? Defiance alone does not make a decision right. Without examining the chooser, we merely trade one identity for another. Girls are told not to become too strong; boys are told not to cry. Even natural responses become servants of social identities.

Look Beyond the Action to the Actor

I told Satnam that sport can be education. On a court or a river one can notice envy, fear and expectation alongside physical technique. But playing does not automatically yield self-knowledge. Skill does not guarantee inner freedom.

The Ashtavakra Gita says: "You are not the body, nor does the body belong to you; you are neither the enjoyer nor the doer." This is not a licence for the ego to announce that it does nothing. Scripture

is meant to question our claims, not award us a new spiritual identity. The body practises and the brain learns. Then the ego insists that all of it must prove its importance. Vedanta turns the inquiry from the action to the claimant.

Two athletes may train just as hard. One is protecting an identity of inadequacy; the other is attending honestly to necessary work. The outward action looks alike, but what drives it differs. Old identifications return; the inquiry must continue.

Jay's coach Sudesh Sangthe recalled selling newspapers at a bus stand, sometimes those carrying his own photograph as a national medallist. Now he coaches children free of charge. Satnam recalled ending an airport argument simply by carrying a stranger's bag. He needed no medal to do it. Arya studies Kathak; Reva, a trained singer, was nervous about forgetting the words of a Sanskrit devotional song during our session. A human life is not exhausted by one skill or its ranking.

Suchika asked what lesson an athlete should carry for life. I said: Look at yourself. Do not become so dependent on applause that you cannot function

without it; the same dependence will make insults powerful.

Baba Bulleh Shah asks, "Who am I?" The question is not an invitation to invent a grander, permanent identity. "I lost a match" is a fact. "Therefore my life is worthless" is a story. "I won" is a fact. "Therefore I am superior" is another story.

The boat will advance and fall behind. Opponents will sometimes play better; bodies will sometimes fail. Practise, learn, rest and return to the contest. But the boat's speed cannot enlarge or diminish Salman's humanity. Nor can the colour of a medal. On the field, face the opponent with all your skill. Within, examine the "I" that demands each victory as proof of its worth. No collection of medals can complete a claimant whose very nature is to seek completion.

Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-examination and its application to contemporary life.

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