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## Context to the nugget

In this nugget, Vishy talks about how he harnesses the potential of his mind in being a chess player at the very top over a prolonged period. He talks about how the human mind is like a wild horse that needs to be harnessed carefully. He shares some of his insights on how he tries to get the best of his conscious and his sub-conscious mind in preparing for big games. He also discusses some of his rituals in ensuring that he brings the best of himself to bear in various match situations.

## Transcription

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**Deepak Jayaraman (DJ):** How much of the meticulous planning gets coupled with sort of the pattern and the big picture thinking which might be beyond the left-brain capability?

Viswanathan Anand (VA): Let me follow this rough terminology, my left brain is trying to have some sort of control on the chess board and my right brain let's say what deal with when you lose control, I will describe it in those terms, I don't consciously break it down that way but mostly chess players prefer to win an easy game than a hard game would prefer to win without effort than effort or rather preferred to the effort was at home or at the training camp rather than at the board where the uncertainty involved so everything which will fall under control you will think off with the left, by that I mean things which are already well known to everyone, I mean there is this whole massive knowledge already exist about the chess, you want to be able to work on that and then recall at the moment when you need it, there are so many examples of people losing a game because they know the evaluation correctly they may even know the idea, but they don't know what exactly and if you don't know it exactly you might sleep up in the execution, so that broadly speak on control so when you play against someone you would like to develop the game along the lines of what you prepare this morning and so that is the systematic work, that's the work you work on when you are getting to a training camp you tried to get the work out of the way you think as much as things meticulously and so on, but you should always be ready because you are basically playing against someone who is trying to get you out there at the open he is trying to get you out of your comfort zone and he is trying to make life difficult for you, and he has the same knowledge that you have so it's very easy for your opponent to think this is what Anand would have prepared, how do I get him out and so he is looking unusual ways to surprise you and so if he does that you should be ready for surprises, now that means when you learn a subject even any part of chess that you plan to do use for the next round or the next week or whatever, it's not just enough to remember the or get a grip on the existing knowledge because everyone has that and that doesn't differentiate you chances are you will be dropped very soon into something that you hadn't looked for, how do you deal with those problems, so the thing is when you work you can't only work on prunes that lend themselves to solutions, you have to think more broadly and think how do I train my skills in such a way that I develop a feeling for this class or positions so that whatever turns up I will be able to find the best

moves so you have to do a bit of both. For a right brain what will you do? You play a lot of 5 minutes games, blitz games you do problem solving problem solving is they are trying to find out very unusual patterns and the more unusual patterns you find you are training to your brain to think in an unusual way, so again when you look at the position how many candidates move you think of? If you normally think of three but after some problem solving training you are able to think of 5 that's very healthy, because you pick up more unusual moves, so you would have to balance your work, in such a way that not you are only getting to the proper work done, which is essential by the way, the existing base of knowledge you have to learn playing, you have to learn to play it well, but you also have to train the skills that you need to just cope with unexpected circumstances, and last but not the least the psychological aspect, there is no use having all the creative in the world if when the moment comes that you have to going to the unknown, you enter it with the reputation, because then you have lost half the battle before at this thing, it's not utterly hopeless because still if the position turns into your favour you have to cover and whatever but you must be psychologically ready for the battle that means the moment you have the chance to break free from the known areas and you go out there and you fight, you have to be ready and enthusiastically if you like about facing these unknown challenges

**DJ: And how do you build that psychological capability?**

VA: I think you would fight to play as often as possible if your opponent is an uncomfortable opponent for you, then against that opponent you are tend to gravitate towards safety, and what to break that pattern you will have to figure out the way to do it. Think of breathing the whole method of how you approach a risk but it's a mixture of things sometimes people will go to a board completely ready to take a risk, at the last minute they will suddenly start seeing everything that's wrong with what they have planned to do, and then they will do the same thing and come back, and then the realize that all the thing they were taught wrong were wrong, but themselves wrong, so in fact they could have gone ahead and what is going on here? The thing is psychologically you don't want to enter in the area that risky so at the moment you want to you, your brain almost tricks you, it gives you arguments for going back to the safe and predictable course which at that moment seem logical to you, you justify on the terms that you are saying I am going to play logically, I am doing the logical thing here and then you realize you got to covered, so you can learn the example, you can play a lot of blitz games, you can play training games there are many ways to do this you can study players who have that desired qualities in that area but it's often a psychological problem, nothing in chess is easy to break down, so again what are the things I feel that the chess are start amazed that are very far from controlling to your brain, your brain is a wild horse and you need to work with it, sometimes it will betray you, its operating to its own clock, its own schedule, you can't impose control on that and so creativity is partly learning how to understand that you will lose controls, I have often alluded to losing out controls losing control can happen at many levels, psychological, you can feel uncomfortable when playing something and so on, in chess it's not enough to focus on the skills you can learn, and also the skills that you might become intelligent, I will give you one quick example, I would often get to move 40 and Move 40 is a significant because it is the end of the first hand control, which means you get a fresh amount of time on your clock and normally your time period is over, but a lot of people the time between a move 32 and 40 are so tense and they are so caught up in it they are not able to stop, they will make their 41<sup>st</sup> move any way and especially once upon a time I was very prompt to this error, and I was also prompt to an error when I had half an hour up and had 3 seconds I would try to play fast that he wouldn't have any time for think, it doesn't take a lot of intelligence to stop insolvency that if you played fast to not give him any time to think you are not giving yourself any time think, I thought so these were two areas where I had problems, and one of the things I did was, I would simply make a metal note, I would think of some painful lose I had suffered as a result to this habits, so then when I went to the board, when I wasn't

move 35 and my opponent down to three seconds, he is shaking and the temptations was overwhelming and I have half an hour and I don't have any pressure, I would just tell myself to get up go to the refreshment area have a little bit of water or some coffee and then I would come back and I found that this broke the tension, I became too emotionally bound to the game and this broke that and then I was able to bring some sanitarian process and especially doing this after move 40 when neither if there is any tension anymore, but just getting up going away and leaving it for 10 mins then you come back and you find that it resets your brain almost, so that's one technique but there are techniques like this that you learn part of your bag of tools and your tool kit.

DJ: How you organize the data in your head? How do you organize your processor in the sense is there something that you have learnt over the years in terms of not overloading the data, that you don't have the space for processing power is there a trade-off there or is that a false trade of?

VA: I don't think, I am never thought of my brain in terms of hard disk capacity so there is the limited amount of space that I am going to work with but it's like this I have come to the conclusion that you can't manage your brain in a certain way but what you can do is to create the conditions that are ideal where you found in the past it tends to flourish and you will create those conditions so you follow the kind of habits that worked well, like for an instance this habit of breaking on move 40 worked well for me, I dropped the emotional baggage of the first 40 moves, now a lot of people may not understand what is emotional baggage in chess, so in a chess game you can go through a lot of twist and turns, I might have been winning then suddenly I blundered and then I was lost then now my opponent blundered and now I am back in the game and think, so here are a lot of the cumulated things first kicking yourself and or not winning your first position you are thinking I shouldn't having to play this now, but then you realize that you are lost as well, the only position you will ever have in the board is the one in front of you now, that's the only thing you can do anything about, so you have to have this habit of breaking it now overnight sleep is nice but in this case you have to find somewhere to break it, and I believe that it's important to keep the brain excited about chess, passionate about chess, so if you keep on looking at one position you look out for things that are interest you or you look at difficult things that didn't come to you, if chess keeps fascinating you then the chances are, when the time comes to process it will process when the time comes to remember it will remember, if the people in the audience won't know that in a very basic sense, try to see your recall in subjects that interest you and try to see the recall in subjects that don't interest you.

DJ: How do you think about judgement when you have multiple options to choose from how do you pick the one that sort of makes sense for you at that point in time?

VA: The first thing you learn in chess is you make the best move because that is the best, but then as you get up the ranks you will learn that the best move might not always be what you required, what you required is the most uncomfortable move for your opponent or you may find that slightly better position in which you are very happy and comfortable and you feel everything inside out, it better for you in than a much better position that you don't feel completely comfortable in so your own to tune it a bit to your needs but mostly I think your judgement is just a collection of all your experiences so far, in some way that in a process that you don't control, so you have all these experience you have things but it's very hard to tell what you will recall and what you want at worth? There are times when I astonished at my recall, and that time I just I forget something I saw that morning, whatever I need to remember I tried to make as interesting as possible so that I will remember it or I will look at it several times in such a way or one funny thing, when I was training I would often ask my trainers to quiz me things that I tend to forget, and they would know roughly what I tend to forget and they would do that and when I couldn't recall what I am supposed to do sitting in front of a room with all of them looking at me as I am struggling to the call was so

embarrassing that when I went to the board I remembered it, it's like that, you create the conditions for your brain to work well and that in sense is the judgement.

DJ: Are there rituals you practice to ensure that your sense of judgement in your processing power are sort of its kept at its fullest potential? Or what are the rituals that you follow? Are there any mind or brain rituals that are worth discussing?

VA: I found that a ritual, a good night sleep is very helpful, especially a sleep who is not disturbed, because we are not talking about the rest as much as the ability to put the more nervous energy in the emotion from the previous day away, so that when you wake up you are looking at a fresh day that works well so, and then I work backwards from that and after very tensed game I try to go for a long walk or I might even go to the gym, I am not going there for the exercise I am going there to tied up my self so that I will have a shower and just fall asleep and I will not waste energy thinking about the game, there are even players who prefer to do all their work at night, so they will work till the five or six in the morning, and then go to sleep and then wake up at 2 o'clock and go straight to the game, without any further work, and what they are fighting is if you wake up at 9 o'clock and your game is at 2 o'clock, I can do this but if I do this he might do that and if I do that he might do this and therefore what should I do? This could go wrong, that could go wrong, and you are using a lot of nervous energy thinking about this stuff, so what they are trying to accomplish by waking up at 2 o'clock as they have no time to worry about the game they have done all their work at the last night and then they have gone to sleep, in my case that doesn't work because I can't stay awake till six in the morning but I will try to get a good night sleep then wake up, I like to work for some time, I found that superstition normally comes with that, if you had breakfast in the morning at 9 and won that game, you want to go at 9 next day and this kind of stuff, even though there shouldn't be no real connection but you have to decide that which is harmless and which is superstition which is driving you inside.

DJ: How do you think about sort of the conscious approach to preparation versus the subliminal processing that's going on? What's the take on that?

VA: I think If you keep in fascinate by chess you will see that all the interesting and unusual thing that happen, you will recall it now there is no way it will say that at the right moment you will come up with the right idea, but by looking at a lot of material you are increasing the chance that it will probably be the right decision I mean if there is critical mass of ideas, you will probably find the right decisions so you do that I try and now to control that very much I believe that it's important to learn almost like a child, if you are fascinated by subject it will go in effortlessly the subjects that bore you but then you have to do the reverse, you may not avoid the subjects that bore you so the thing is how do you find a way to make that interesting it can be against this guy I hate, I always lose this kind of position so I am going to work on this position though I don't like it, because one day he will not beat me I will get satisfaction of that, you can always work it backwards like that, and do that but, I think when you grow in chess you will learn in chess by being willing to learn new stuff and I can't refine it more than that.

DJ: How have you made chess interesting for yourself? What's the secret of staying interested in a topic for this long or is it something that comes naturally to you?

VA: One thing is to take breaks from it, I had mention many times that the you hit a point where you sick of the game you just being playing too much or studying too much and then you go one month without even switching on the computer or touching a chess board, and then you come back at the end of the month and suddenly you will find a lot of the stuff that used to bore you is become interesting so that's one thing the second thing is too work a new stuff, I mean working on all things

sometimes even if you have everything worked out, your brain forgets what you keep on working beyond the certain point so it's good to drop something's for a while do other things and then come back and then you are ok but if you are only doing one thing all the time then it gets so routine that your brain stops been creative about it, it almost expects you to just get by muscle memory and that's not a good thing to have, and that's how you keep it interesting.

**DJ: How do you infuse creativity what are you persuade outside of the chess that sort of bring creativity to your chess?**

VA: I listen to the music, I will watch out the sports, I like astronomy, so I have that subjects that I follow I read anything that I loves to disconnect from the game, watch things on Netflix, house of cards was nice for a while.

**DJ: What goes on let's say for a minute if you took the longest that you have ever made or the longest time you have ever taken to make a move is the bulk of time evaluating different possibilities or is it playing out scenarios and coming back, just break that for us how there's the time gets spend?**

VA: I think the longest things I have had is over an hour in London once and basically what it happened was that the, I have got into the bit of the trouble then I realize that I am still very much in the game but it's like full of mind feels, here I make mistake there it's over, and that particular thing, you would not need an hour when you are spending an hour it means you are unable to think very clearly so first lets describe what think clearly is, thinking clearly is looking and saying these are the four alternative I have then you say ok 'A' this move and then you follow 'A' down to its logical conclusion you see what you like you comeback you do B, you come back and then you do C, then based on the information you have you make your move you've pick your one and then your make your move, and if I have done that I wouldn't have needed one hour but what happens is you go down A you come back, then you go down B you come back and suddenly you think wait I miss something in A and go back down A and comeback and so a lot of this work is wasted because it going on the stuff you have already gone but you think you found something new here and there that is what happens more often because sometimes the brain needs go down A, come back and think about something else but in the background it somehow working there and it will find something now if we could think an hour in every move it would be a different game but sometimes these critical moments you have to think like that, I think you can't try for perfection like I said the way your brain will present the answer is something you will just have to getting used to but you try to manage as much as possible on the efficient days you will do better job in someday you will just go overall material again and again, ideally the thinking is very clear you see the essential and you reject everything else but sometimes you get modelled.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: There is so much gold in just this nugget that this could on its own be a separate podcast conversation. Who does not want to harness their mental faculties and bring to bear in whatever they do.

Of the various things I learned in this segment, here are a couple that stand out for me.

First is the point Vishy makes about taking a break at Move 40 and coming back with a fresh mind with a view of clearing up the baggage of the past. It's an interesting practice and that reminds me of the book - Triggers by Marshall Goldsmith. The crux of the book is about the fact that we have all

kinds of triggers around us and often the triggers lead to impulse behaviour that often could be suboptimal. He really urges us to be mindful of triggers that we experience or are likely to come across and suggests a mechanism of taking a breather or injecting some mindfulness that enables us to respond to the trigger in a thoughtful and nuanced way. We all are working on some developmental themes. The key question often is what are the triggers we need to watch out for and how do we build the pause to break the pattern of impulse behaviour

Second is the point about the power of the sub-conscious mind. Vishy talks about it in multiple contexts. He talks about the fact that when he was a child, he would often take a break from Chess and study. But when he would come back to the board, it would appear clearer. He talks about that in the context of how he sleeps over a problem or how when he is evaluating options A, B, C and D, his brain often flip-flops between the various option trees. I am reminded of the work by Adam Grant in his book *Originals* where he talks about marinating in a certain idea or a problem for a period of time. While there is something to be said about the downsides of being too slow, I think there is something equally significant to be said about the perils of being too hasty or fast. It is worth thinking about the sweet-spot in terms of marinating in a problem for us to harness the full potential of the conscious and the sub-conscious mind.

## End of nugget transcription

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### About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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