Van Der Sterren, P., 2024. *Mindful Chess: The Spiritual Journey of a Professional Chess Player.* New In Chess: Alkmaar.

Younger readers may not be familiar with the name Paul Van Der Sterren and, indeed, to those of us who were aware of him in the 1980s and ‘90s we might remember a player of not quite the highest calibre. However, his life and career hold some interest. Unlike today when it seems that unless you are a Grandmaster by the time you leave Primary School then you are nothing, van der Sterren only attained the GM title at the age of 33. Magnus Carlsen, just for contrast, is 35 now and didn't do too badly for himself, and Ding Liren, now 33, has come and gone as World Champion.

Van Der Sterren then was not one of the greats. Yet he played for the Netherlands eight times at Olympiads, was two-time Dutch Champion, and qualified for the Candidates in 1994. In those days the Candidates was a series of matches rather than a tournament as today, and Van Der Sterren lost his match to Gata Kamsky.

Van Der Sterren retired from active chess play in 2001 at the young age of 45. Since then, he has become a respected author of books on chess and his ‘chess autobiography’ I*n Black and White* was well received and is on my ‘to buy’ list. While *In black and White* weighs in at a whopping 768 pages, the subject of this review, *Mindful Chess*, is a slim volume of just 127 18cm by 11cm pages. I read it in one sitting when I first acquired it some time ago and wondered about reviewing it then but life got in the way and when I came, finally, to write about it for EP now, I had to re-read it but this time carefully, one might say mindfully (reading, reading).

The book does two things, I think. First it is autobiography (although perhaps a better description would be auto ethnography. One for the social science geeks!) as he chronicles his spiritual journey engaging with Buddhist philosophy and practice. He describes his experiences of engaging with meditation and of going on retreats. Here, I think it is worthwhile to distinguish between contemporary uses of ‘mindfulness’ and the Buddhist understanding. Today, if you should consult a medical professional about your stress or anxiety it is quite likely that you will be signposted to mindfulness. Here meditation has a therapeutic goal of helping to induce calmness in the meditator with the expectation that, over time, that calmness can be felt in response to the stressful events or anxiety provoking trigger. By contrast, in Buddhism, while these things might also result, the primary aim is to allow insight into one’s true nature to arise to strip away notions of ‘self’ and to recognise the interrelated nature of all things. I can give a linguistic example. Consider the sentence ‘I am happy.’ How can we understand this state (or some schools of Buddhism might call it a manifestation) of happiness without also needing to be aware of its opposite, sadness? The two states of happiness and sadness can only be understood together. The sections of the book where Van Der Serren explores his encounters with Buddhist meditation are fascinating. He brought to it a desire to be the best meditator he could in much the same way as he tried to be the best chess player he could. Eventually, however, he left attending formal meditation in the belief that he had internalised the practice so completely that he could be mindful at any time in everyday life.

The second thing the book does is consider the possible benefits of mindfulness to the chess player. He writes of his understanding of chess as gladiatorial combat with

defeat being equivalent to death. At times he struggled with both the fear of ‘death’ or defeat and also with negative feelings induced by having won and so defeated another and recognising the negative feelings in his opponent for which he was responsible. I recall Nigel Short once saying that defeat hurts more than winning is nice and this seems to be a common experience among elite players.

In mindfulness attention is supposed to be placed on the present moment. Replaying the past is of no value as it has passed and worrying about the future of no value because it has not occurred yet. But for the chess player trying accurately to predict the future - at least on the 64 squares of the board - is a key requirement. Sure, there might be benefit in letting go of a past defeat but always in chess one must have some regard for the future. However, if we understand the now in chess to be playing, playing rather than what happens if I move there, she moves there then we see some benefit, at least to the OTB player in bringing his or her attention fully to the game.

Van Der Sterren gives one excellent example of a game he played in 1978, before he approached meditation, against Korchnoi. He describes how he was utterly absorbed in the game in a way which was beyond normal. Yet, when Korchnoi resigned what Van Der Sterren felt was sadness; a realisation that he would never again play so well that this was ‘it’ as a chess player. Looking back to 1978 from his perspective as a student of Buddhism he can now see that game as representing Buddhist teachings. Impermanence (the game is finished), suffering (at the thought of loss as I will never play that well again).

I could write much more about this book but I have already taken up enough of our editor’s precious space. This book is for you if you are interested in Van Der Sterren as a player or in the ideas of mindfulness and Buddhism and how they might influence or be applied to chess. It is absolutely not a mainstream chess book. There is only one unannotated game and a couple of positions analysed. I formed the impression on first reading it, and again on re-reading, that the book was not so much about how to make you a better chess player but a better person.