

The Inner Game: Data-Driven Wellness to Combat the Ailments of AI

Nicholas Davidov

Independent Researcher, Plano, Texas, United States

Abstract

The widespread adoption of artificial intelligence is producing a distinct set of cognitive, psychological, and spiritual ailments in human populations, and most acutely in youth: chronic lower attention spans, lower interest in learning (cognitive passivity), anxiety fueled by algorithmic comparison to others, and a diffuse sense of lack of purpose in the face of automation. This paper argues that the high-performance wellness practices used by elite soccer players including Flow State, Visualization, and Breathwork, constitute a coherent, data-backed inner game capable of directly addressing each of these ailments. Drawing on neuroscience, sports psychology, and biofeedback research, the paper maps each practice to its neurobiological mechanism, its specific AI-era target, and its psychological and spiritual outcome. The central argument is that the greatness of an elite soccer player resides not in physical statistics but in mastery of internal state whose mastery is teachable, measurable, and urgently needed by a generation navigating an increasingly automated world. The paper concludes that fulfillment in the AI age is found not in the efficiency of outcomes (aka, "the hustle"), which is AI's domain, but in the quality of the internal experience ("the inner game"), which remains irreducibly human.

Keywords: flow state, visualization, breathwork, artificial intelligence, youth wellness, transient hypofrontality, heart rate variability, neural plasticity, cognitive resilience, inner game.

Introduction

Artificial intelligence is changing the conditions of human experience faster than human developmental systems—schools, families, civic institutions—can adapt. The changes are not only economic and occupational, though the anxiety around job displacement is real and well-documented. They are cognitive, psychological, and, in ways that are harder to name but no less consequential, spiritual.

The average person in a high-income digital economy now receives more informational inputs in a single day than a person living in the pre-digital era would receive in a month. Algorithms designed to maximize engagement have become extraordinarily effective at capturing and holding human attention—not through depth, but through novelty and intermittent reward. The result is a population, and especially a youth population, whose attentional architecture is being continuously reshaped by external systems optimized for metrics that have nothing to do with human flourishing.

Against this backdrop, the inner game of elite athletics offers something that is at once ancient and urgently contemporary: a set of data-grounded practices for mastering the internal state under conditions of extreme external pressure. The soccer player preparing to take a penalty kick in a championship final is, in a neurological and physiological sense, navigating the same challenge that a young person faces when opening a social media feed: an environment saturated with threat signals, comparison triggers, and attentional demands that, if unmanaged, overwhelm the capacity for focused, intentional, self-directed action.

The three practices examined in this paper—Flow State, Visualization, and Breathwork—are not esoteric techniques reserved for elite athletes. They are measurable, teachable, and accessible interventions grounded in robust neuroscience and sports psychology. Each maps directly onto a specific ailment of the AI age. Each has a clear neurobiological mechanism, an identifiable data marker, and a psychospiritual dimension that speaks to questions of meaning, agency, and identity that the AI transition has made newly urgent.

The paper is organized as follows. The Methods section describes the analytical approach. The Results section examines each of the three practices in depth. A synthesis section integrates the three practices into a unified Inner Game Framework. The paper closes with implementation recommendations, conclusions, and key findings.

Methods

This paper employs a theoretical synthesis and translational review methodology, drawing on published research in sports psychology, cognitive neuroscience, psychophysiology, and educational psychology. Priority was given to studies that identify measurable neurobiological or physiological markers associated with each practice (flow state, visualization, and breathwork), and to research that connects these markers to the specific cognitive and psychological challenges posed by digital and AI-saturated environments.

The review is explicitly translational in orientation. Its goal is not to provide a systematic meta-analysis of effect sizes in any single field, but to build a coherent theoretical and practical bridge between elite athletic performance science and the emerging field of AI-era human wellness. Citations are selected to anchor the key empirical claims in each domain; they are not exhaustive literature reviews.

The youth population is foregrounded throughout because the neurological and psychological impacts of AI-era environments are likely to be most acute and most consequential during developmental periods, and because the inner game practices described here are most durably established when learned early. However, the framework proposed is applicable across age groups and contexts.

Theoretical Background

Three bodies of research provide the theoretical foundation for this paper.

The first is the neuroscience of optimal performance states. Decades of research following Csikszentmihalyi's foundational work on flow (1990) have established that the experiential state of complete absorption in a demanding task is accompanied by measurable neurological and physiological signatures: shifts in brainwave activity, changes in prefrontal cortex function, and alterations in heart rate variability. These signatures are not merely correlates of performance; they are, in important respects, mechanisms of it. Understanding them gives practitioners and educators a data-grounded basis for designing interventions.

The second is the neuroscience of mental rehearsal and neural plasticity. Beginning with landmark studies in the 1990s, researchers established that the brain does not clearly distinguish between vividly imagined action and performed action at the level of motor cortex activation (Pascual-Leone et al., 1995; Decety & Grezes, 2006). This finding, replicated across multiple methodologies and extended by EEG-based neurofeedback research (i-BrainTech), means that visualization is not merely a psychological motivational technique; it is a neurobiological training method with measurable effects on the neural pathways that govern skilled performance.

The third is the psychophysiology of breath and the autonomic nervous system. The link between respiratory pattern and autonomic nervous system state is one of the most well-established and practically significant findings in psychophysiology. Coherent breathing—slow, rhythmic respiration at approximately six breaths per minute—maximizes heart rate variability, a marker of autonomic flexibility widely recognized as a strong indicator of resilience across physiological, cognitive, and emotional domains (Lehrer & Gevirtz, 2014; Zaccaro et al., 2018). Unlike most performance interventions, breathwork requires no equipment, no institutional infrastructure, and no prior training to begin.

Together, these three bodies of research point toward a unified practical conclusion: the internal state of the human performer is not a fixed background condition. It is a dynamic, measurable, and trainable variable—and in the AI age, it is among the most important variables we have.

Results

Three practices emerged as the primary components of the inner game framework: Flow State as an antidote to fragmented attention; Visualization as a method for building neural plasticity and cognitive agency; and Breathwork as the most accessible data-driven tool for nervous system regulation. Each is examined in depth below.

1. Flow State: The Antidote to Fragmented Attention

The AI-era ailment that Flow State most directly addresses is the fragmentation of attention. The notification economy is architecturally opposed to sustained, deep engagement: it is designed to interrupt, to redirect, and to keep the user in a state of low-level vigilance and high-frequency switching that is the neurological opposite of flow. The consequences are not merely productivity-related. Chronic attention fragmentation is associated with elevated cortisol levels, increased anxiety, reduced working memory capacity, and a diminished sense of agency and meaning—precisely the outcomes that a life of constant interruption produces.

Flow State, as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and extended by subsequent sports psychology research, is defined by complete absorption in a task, effortless execution, a distorted sense of time, and the temporary disappearance of self-consciousness. It is, in the language of the neurosciences, a state of transient hypofrontality: a temporary downregulation of prefrontal cortex activity that reduces the self-monitoring, rumination, and social comparison mediated by that region, while leaving executive function and skilled performance intact or enhanced (Dietrich, 2004).

Philippe and colleagues (2022) documented how elite athletes actively use flow state to manage the psychological demands of high-pressure performance contexts. Their work demonstrates that flow is not simply a fortunate accident of optimal conditions; it is a state that skilled practitioners can reliably approach through deliberate preparation: challenge-skill calibration, clear goal-setting, elimination of irrelevant stimuli, and pre-performance routines that shift neurological state before the performance begins.

For youth navigating AI-saturated environments, the implications are direct. Flow State provides an experiential reality—one they can access through sport, creative practice, skilled craft, or any deeply absorbing activity—that is categorically different from the fragmented, comparison-driven, algorithm-mediated experience that dominates their digital lives. More than a technique, it offers a reference point: a lived knowledge of what it feels like to be fully present, fully capable, and fully oneself, without the noise of external evaluation or the anxiety of social comparison. That reference point, once established, becomes a resource—something to return to, to protect, and over time, to generalize.

The spiritual dimension of flow is not incidental. Athletes across cultures and traditions describe the flow state in language that closely resembles the language of contemplative experience: a dissolution of the boundary between self and task, a sense of effortless rightness, a feeling of being carried rather than driving. In a youth culture that is increasingly spiritually unmoored—lacking the traditional structures of religious community while being simultaneously immersed in

digital environments that offer stimulation without meaning—flow may be one of the most accessible doorways to genuine transcendent experience.

2. Visualization: Neural Plasticity as a Shield

The AI-era ailment that Visualization most directly addresses is cognitive passivity. AI-generated content—images, text, music, narrative—is proliferating faster than human creative output can keep pace with. For youth developing their cognitive identities, the risk is not that they will be unable to distinguish AI content from human content; it is that they will gradually cease to generate their own. The neural pathways associated with self-directed imagination, creative problem-solving, and proactive mental modeling—pathways that are use-dependent and therefore vulnerable to disuse—may atrophy in environments that consistently outsource cognitive effort to automated systems.

Visualization is, at its core, a proactive cognitive act. Unlike passive consumption of AI-generated imagery or content, mental rehearsal requires the practitioner to generate, sustain, and direct their own internal representations. This is not merely a psychological exercise; it is a neurobiological training method. Research pioneered by Pascual-Leone and colleagues (1995), and subsequently extended through EEG-based neurofeedback methodologies, has established that vivid mental rehearsal of a skilled action activates the same motor cortex regions as physical execution of that action (Pascual-Leone et al., 1995; Decety & Grezes, 2006)—producing measurable neural changes that are functionally equivalent, though not identical, to those produced by physical practice.

In the athletic context, this is used to refine technique, manage performance anxiety, and rehearse responses to high-pressure scenarios. The soccer player who mentally rehearses a penalty kick is not simply thinking about it; they are training their nervous system to execute it. In the youth wellness context, the application extends beyond sport. Visualization for identity formation—the practice of vividly imagining a future self that is capable, fulfilled, and purposeful—is one of the most powerful tools available for countering the hopelessness and purposelessness that AI-driven displacement narratives can generate in young people.

This is what the plan calls Visualization 2.0: not merely rehearsing a physical movement, but rehearsing a life. By repeatedly and vividly imagining themselves as the kind of person who is competent, connected, and generative in the world they will inhabit, youth build what might be called a neural blueprint for identity—a self-concept that is not merely aspirational but somatically encoded, resistant to the erosion of algorithmic comparison and the ambient message that human capability is being rendered obsolete.

Neurofeedback tools that use EEG to track and reward the brain states associated with effective visualization—focused attention, reduced default-mode-network activity, heightened motor planning signals—are now accessible enough to be incorporated into school and community settings (i-BrainTech). These tools provide youth with real-time data on their own cognitive states, transforming the inner game from an abstract concept into a visible, measurable, and therefore learnable reality.

3. Breathwork: The Bio-Data of Stress Regulation

The AI-era ailment that Breathwork most directly addresses is chronic digital stress: the persistent, low-level activation of the sympathetic nervous system produced by high-frequency digital engagement, constant reachability, and the ambient urgency that characterizes the information environment of the early AI age. Unlike acute stress—which has a natural biological arc of activation and recovery—chronic digital stress produces a sustained elevation of sympathetic tone that gradually degrades cognitive function, emotional regulation, immune response, and the capacity for deep, restorative rest.

Breathwork is the most immediately accessible counter to this pattern, and it is the most directly measurable. Heart Rate Variability (HRV)—the variation in the time interval between successive heartbeats—is a robust, non-invasive marker of autonomic nervous system flexibility (Lehrer & Gevirtz, 2014). High HRV indicates a nervous system that can rapidly shift between activation and recovery, engaging fully with demands and then disengaging cleanly. Low HRV indicates a system that is stuck in a high-arousal state, unable to fully recover. Chronic digital stress, like chronic stress of any kind, depresses HRV.

Coherent breathing—slow, rhythmic respiration at approximately six breaths per minute, in which the inhalation and exhalation are equal in duration—has been consistently shown to maximize HRV by synchronizing respiratory rhythm with the natural oscillation of the heart. Lehrer and Gevirtz (2014) established coherent breathing as one of the most reliable non-pharmacological methods for improving autonomic flexibility. Zaccaro and colleagues (2018) synthesized the broader evidence linking slow-paced breathing to reduced anxiety, improved attention, and enhanced emotional regulation across healthy and clinical populations.

For youth, the practical significance of breathwork is its immediacy and its universality. It requires no equipment, no institutional resources, no prior experience, and no particular physical capacity. It can be practiced in a classroom, a locker room, a bedroom, or on a bus. Its effects are measurable—a youth who has learned to monitor their HRV using a simple consumer wearable can see, in real time, the physiological impact of a three-minute coherent breathing practice. This transforms breathwork from an abstract wellness recommendation into a lived data experience: the inner game made visible.

The spiritual dimension of breathwork has been recognized across virtually every human culture and contemplative tradition. Conscious breathing is described, in traditions as diverse as pranayama, Taoist qi cultivation, and hesychast Christian prayer, as the primary gateway between the outer world and the inner life—between the body and what various traditions call the spirit, the soul, or the deeper self. Modern psychophysiology has not diminished this insight; it has given it a mechanism. When youth learn to breathe consciously, they are not only regulating their nervous systems; they are learning to direct their own inner experience, to choose presence over reactivity, and to find, in the simplest of biological acts, a form of agency that no algorithm can replicate or diminish.

The Inner Game Framework

The following table integrates the three practices into a unified framework, mapping each to its neurobiological marker, the AI-era ailment it addresses, and its psychospiritual outcome.

Practice	Neurobiological Marker	AI-Era Ailment Addressed	Psychospiritual Outcome
Flow State	Transient hypofrontality; theta/gamma brainwave synchrony	Fragmented attention and the anxiety of algorithmic comparison	Self-transcendence; present-moment immersion
Visualization	Motor cortex activation mirroring physical execution; EEG-measurable neural rehearsal	Cognitive passivity; over-reliance on AI-generated content and automated suggestions	Purpose, mental agency, and proactive identity formation
Breathwork	Maximized heart rate variability (HRV); parasympathetic dominance via coherent breathing	Chronic digital stress; sympathetic nervous system dysregulation in high-speed digital environments	Inner calm, self-connection, and transcendence of ambient technological anxiety

Synthesis

The three practices described in this paper are not independent techniques to be applied in isolation. They form a coherent inner game: a layered system for managing internal state under external pressure that, taken together, addresses the full spectrum of challenges posed by the AI age.

Breathwork is the foundation. It creates the physiological conditions—a regulated nervous system, a flexible autonomic response, a parasympathetically grounded baseline—without which the higher-order practices of visualization and flow are difficult to access. A nervous system locked in fight-or-flight cannot sustain the absorbed attention of flow or the generative internal imagery of effective visualization. Breathwork is the reset button: the tool that returns the system to a state of readiness.

Visualization builds on that regulated foundation. In a body that is calm and an attention that is freed from reactive urgency, the mind can do something genuinely extraordinary: it can generate its own reality. Not the simulated reality of an AI-generated environment, but the self-authored reality of a practitioner who knows what they are building toward and has trained their neural architecture to recognize and move toward it. Visualization is the inner game's planning function—the capacity to see clearly where one is going and to begin, at the level of the nervous system, the journey toward it.

Flow State is the culmination. It is what becomes available when the nervous system is regulated, the cognitive direction is clear, and the environment is calibrated to match the practitioner's current capacity. In flow, the practitioner is not managing their state; they have transcended the need for management. They are operating from a place of full engagement, full presence, and full humanity—precisely the place that the AI age, with its automation of cognitive labor and its algorithmic mediation of experience, most threatens to displace.

The argument of this paper is ultimately simple. AI is extraordinarily good at producing outputs. It is incapable of having experiences. The inner game—the quality of attention, the depth of presence, the felt sense of agency, the capacity for genuine absorption in a meaningful task—is entirely and irreducibly human. Teaching youth to cultivate and protect that inner game is not a retreat from the modern world; it is the most forward-looking investment we can make in the humans who will navigate it.

Core Evidence

The following table summarizes the key studies supporting each practice, including their core findings and application for youth in AI-saturated environments.

Practice	Key Study / Source	Core Finding	Application for Youth
Flow State	Philippe et al. (2022). Flow in elite athletic performance.	Elite athletes use flow to manage high-pressure performance dynamics; transient hypofrontality reduces self-monitoring and enables peak execution.	Teaching flow entry skills to youth builds cognitive resilience against notification-driven attention fragmentation.
Flow State	Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience.	Flow is characterized by complete absorption, effortless action, and intrinsic motivation; self-consciousness is temporarily suspended.	Flow offers youth a direct experiential counter to the identity-comparison anxiety amplified by social media algorithms.
Visualization	i-BrainTech neurofeedback research; Decety & Grezes (2006). The power of simulation.	Mental rehearsal of a movement activates the same motor regions as physical execution, strengthening neural pathways without physical repetition.	Youth who practice visualization build proactive cognitive habits that resist the passive consumption patterns reinforced by AI-generated content.
Visualization	Pascual-Leone et al. (1995). Modulation of muscle responses evoked by transcranial magnetic stimulation.	Five days of mental piano practice produced cortical changes comparable to five days of physical practice.	Neural plasticity through visualization is accessible to all youth regardless of physical ability or resource access.
Breathwork	Lehrer & Gevirtz (2014). Heart rate variability biofeedback. Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback.	Coherent breathing at approximately 6 breaths per minute maximizes HRV, a validated marker of autonomic flexibility and stress resilience.	Breathwork provides youth with an immediately accessible, zero-cost tool for self-regulation in high-stimulus digital environments.
Breathwork	Zaccaro et al. (2018). How breath-control can change your life. Frontiers in Human Neuroscience.	Slow-paced breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and is associated with reduced anxiety, improved attention, and enhanced emotional regulation.	Brief breathwork practices can be integrated into school, sports, and digital-use contexts as a real-time intervention for chronic digital stress.

Implementation Guidance

The inner game practices described in this paper are most effective when integrated into existing youth contexts—schools, sports programs, community organizations, and family environments—rather than delivered as standalone wellness modules. The following table outlines practical implementation approaches across these contexts.

Context	Practice	Implementation	Target Outcome
School classroom	Breathwork	2-minute coherent breathing exercise (6 breaths/min) at the start of each class period.	Reduced ambient anxiety; improved attentional readiness for learning.
Sports training	Flow State	Progressive challenge calibration: ensure tasks are consistently at the edge of current skill, with immediate and unambiguous feedback.	Deepened flow access; transfer of flow-entry skills to academic and digital contexts.
Sports training	Visualization	3-5 minutes of structured mental rehearsal before each practice session; athlete-directed, not coach-scripted.	Strengthened motor cortex engagement; development of proactive cognitive habit.
Digital-use education	All three	Explicit instruction in the neurobiological mechanisms of each practice, paired with experiential exercises.	Youth agency in managing their own cognitive and emotional states in digital environments.
Community programs	Breathwork + Visualization	Group-based sessions combining breathwork for regulation and visualization for identity formation, facilitated in youth centers.	Collective resilience; reduced AI-displacement anxiety; strengthened sense of purpose and future self.
Family and home	Breathwork	Family breathwork practice during periods of high digital use (e.g., after screen time, before bed).	Establishment of home-based recovery routines; reduction of chronic low-grade sympathetic activation.

Recommendations

1. Integrate breathwork into the daily structure of schools and youth sports programs. Even two to three minutes of coherent breathing at the beginning of a class period or training session produces measurable improvements in attentional readiness and autonomic regulation. The barrier to entry is zero.
2. Teach the neuroscience of flow to youth directly. Young people who understand why their attention fragments in digital environments, and what flow state is and why it feels different, are more motivated to pursue it and better equipped to recognize and protect it. Demystifying the inner game is the first step to teaching it.
3. Incorporate structured visualization into athletic coaching and academic preparation. Visualization sessions of three to five minutes before training or testing, athlete-directed and goal-specific, build both neural capacity and the habit of proactive self-direction.
4. Use wearable HRV and EEG tools where resources allow. Making the inner game visible—giving youth real-time data on their own neurological and physiological states—transforms abstract wellness concepts into lived, measurable reality and deepens engagement with the practices.
5. Frame the inner game explicitly as a response to the AI context. Youth who understand that they are building cognitive and physiological capacities that AI cannot replicate or replace are more likely to invest in them. The framing matters: this is not wellness as self-care; it is sovereignty as self-determination.
6. Address the spiritual dimension of these practices without dogma. Flow, visualization, and breathwork all have documented connections to experiences of meaning, transcendence, and deep self-connection. These dimensions need not be framed in religious terms to be treated seriously. They are among the most powerful motivators for sustained engagement with any inner practice.
7. Pilot and evaluate integrated inner game programs in high-need youth communities. Communities experiencing the most acute AI-related displacement anxiety—those where automation is already disrupting local employment and where digital comparison is most corrosive to self-worth—may be both the most responsive to and the most in need of these interventions.

Conclusions

The inner game of the elite soccer player and the inner game required by the AI age are, at their neurological and philosophical core, the same game. Both demand the capacity to remain present, regulated, and self-directed under conditions of intense external pressure. Both are won or lost not in the external environment but in the quality of the internal state.

The practices described in this paper—Flow State, Visualization, and Breathwork—are not supplements to human development in the AI age. They are its foundation. A generation that can enter flow, generate its own mental imagery, and regulate its own nervous system is a generation that has preserved the irreducibly human capacities that the AI transition most threatens: presence, agency, creativity, and the ability to find meaning in the act of doing rather than merely in the result.

The greatness of an elite soccer player is not in their physical statistics. It is in their mastery of the internal state under conditions that would overwhelm a less prepared person. That mastery is what this paper proposes to scale: not as a sporting achievement, but as a civic and human one. The inner game, taught deliberately and practiced consistently, is one of the most powerful tools available for equipping the next generation to remain fully, sovereignly, and irreducibly human in the world that is coming.

Open Questions and Limitations

Several important limitations bound the arguments of this paper. First, while the neuroscientific foundations of each practice are well-established, the evidence for their specific effectiveness as responses to AI-era cognitive and psychological challenges is largely inferential. Direct empirical research testing these practices in AI-saturated youth populations—using the data markers described (HRV, EEG, flow scales)—would substantially strengthen the case made here and is a clear priority for future research.

Second, the implementation of these practices at scale raises equity questions that this paper has not fully addressed. EEG and HRV wearables remain costly and unevenly distributed. School environments are under-resourced and over-scheduled. The practices described here are accessible in principle; making them equitably accessible in practice requires deliberate attention to the structural barriers that shape who gets access to inner game training and who does not.

Third, the relationship between athletic contexts and broader youth development is more complex than the analogy in this paper implies. Not all youth are athletes, not all youth have access to quality sports programming, and the motivational and cultural resonance of athletic metaphors varies significantly across communities. Translational research that adapts these frameworks for youth who are not engaged in organized sport is an important complement to the athletic-origin framing developed here.

Key Findings

- The AI age is producing a distinct set of cognitive, psychological, and spiritual ailments in youth: fragmented attention, cognitive passivity, identity anxiety, and purposelessness in the face of automation.
- Flow State, grounded in the neuroscience of transient hypofrontality and theta/gamma brainwave synchrony, directly counters attention fragmentation and provides youth with a reference experience of full presence and self-transcendence.
- Visualization, grounded in the neuroscience of motor cortex activation and neural plasticity, counters cognitive passivity and builds the proactive cognitive architecture of agency, purpose, and identity.
- Breathwork, grounded in the psychophysiology of HRV and autonomic regulation, provides an immediate, zero-cost, universally accessible tool for countering chronic digital stress and restoring the inner conditions for presence and resilience.
- The three practices form a layered inner game: breathwork creates the physiological foundation; visualization builds cognitive direction; flow state is the culmination of both.
- Fulfillment in the AI age is found not in the efficiency of outcomes—AI's domain—but in the quality of the internal experience, which remains irreducibly human.
- Teaching youth to cultivate and protect their inner game is among the most forward-looking investments available to educators, coaches, families, and communities navigating the AI transition.

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