

A CONVERSATION WITH
MICHAEL MURPHY



J Was the sense of golf you brought to *Golf in the Kingdom* with you when you first began to play?

M Not really. I started golf at fourteen, which I think was a late start, and at first was just trying to learn how to play. I must say, though, that I was a fast learner. After two years I had a four handicap, and played in the final of the California Junior Championship's President's flight against Ken Venturi. That was the flight below the championship proper. Ken beat me by a lot.

The sense of the game you ask about, which I suppose is the mystical, didn't come to me until I was at Stanford. Although, the seeds of it were sown earlier, when I was sixteen and seventeen years old and had watched Ben Hogan practice at Pebble Beach during the Crosby tournament. I was very aware of how the other pros came to watch him practice, and was always amazed at that. But what made it so moving was the silence. Hogan, of course, never said anything while he was hitting his shots, one after the other right on target; the caddie hardly ever had to move, except back as Hogan changed to longer clubs. But the pros who were watching were also dead still. The silence, you could cut it with a knife. One late afternoon was particularly impressive. He had already played his round, everyone was watching without saying a word, and by this time the sun had almost set. So there was the light that everyone was stoned on, as well. I was struck by the aura Hogan projected. I guess everyone was.

J There's a religious quality to all that.

M I'd always been religious. I was an altar boy in the Episcopal Church, in Salinas, and every winter I would think about becoming a priest. Then

—M the summer came and I'd fall away. But I was feeling my way to a kind of mystical philosophy, a primitive version at the time I was watching Hogan practice of what finally came through when I was at Stanford. In my second year there I turned toward Eastern thought, or partly eastern; it was the evolutionary mysticism of Sri Aurobindo, which embraced both east and west. A vision of the earth unfolding our divinity. All the stuff that's there, playfully, in *Golf in the Kingdom*. I wanted the book to be fun. And I must say, there was or is a lot of Hogan in Shivas Irons.

J A term early in *GITK* is fiedle, as in "Aye, one fiedle before ye 'ere swing." What does fiedle mean?

M Field, in Scottish, or Scottish dialect. The reference is to the field of existence. That is a double-edged reference to the field of play. And the field of being, which is a mystical image. Aye, or always, one field before you swing. You swing out of this intuitive state.

When I sat down to write the book I was coming out of a long exposure, some twenty years, to the mystical literature; particularly Aurobindo, which is an incarnation of mysticism that says it is all the divine disclosure at work. This evolving universe is through the ages manifesting more and more of its latent divinity. That's my essential metaphysics, and the metaphysics of Shivas Irons. You swing the club from that, that's your swing thought. I think it was being spoofed in *Caddy Shack*, the movie. The line, 'be the ball,' which Chevy Chase uses. The book was out for about five years prior to that movie being made and Bill Murray, a devotee of the book, picked up on it. "Be the ball' as it was used in the movie was making fun of the spiritual pretentiousness of the Chevy Chase character.

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J Which brings up a question central to this conversation. Have you seen an impact on golf from *Golf in the Kingdom*, and if so what has been the nature of it?

M First of all, I had no idea whatsoever what impact the book might have. If any. And of course, I would have never guessed how widespread it has become. Like I told Steve Cohen, when he started the Shivas Irons Society; I would back him up on it, but I gave it only six months. Now here, in 2005, it's thirteen years old. Steve enjoys reminding me of that.

One fascinating thing about it is that a lot of people who have read the book and were somehow moved by it were not golfers. But of course many golfers have read it. I still see the book in pro shops. Sometimes, fellows in the shop recognize me and let me on free! Once I met the president of Titleist, Wally Uhlein, who loves the book and he gave me a stack of golf balls. And Mark King, who runs the TaylorMade Company, has a big test facility down in Carlsbad [California] that he calls The Kingdom. They'll tell you it is named after Mark, but I know that he and Tom Sysmoski, his close associate in the company, both are very fond of the book. I've found, too, that the book was very often given by people of the 60s generation to their parents as a way to help them better understand where their kids were coming from. Over the years I've had hundreds and hundreds of conversations with people for whom it opened something up.

Just a few months ago [in March, 2005] I was interviewed on the book by Bill Bradley, on his Sirius Radio program. He and Phil Jackson, whom he played with on the Knicks, have been touched by the book. Jackson gave it to Michael Jordan. He gave it to a lot of his players.

J Has it done well, in sales?

M If you count foreign translations—there have been nine, two in French, three in German—over a million have been sold. It's never gone out of print. The first ten years, from 1972 through 1982, it never sold more than four or five thousand a year. But then something started to happen, and sales began to grow and grow. Ten years after the book came out it was selling around 50,000 copies a year.

Peter Jacobsen won a tournament and at the end said he was influenced by it. His caddie at the time, Fluff Cowan, showed me a tattered copy with almost every sentence underlined. He said that he and Peter had been using it since college. So it was spreading among the pros. D.A. Weibring talked about it. Glen Albaugh, who was the golf coach at College of the Pacific, was influenced by it, and gave it to Scott McCarron and Kirk Triplett, both of whom work with Glen. It also developed a following down in Texas with Willie Nelson and some of his friends. In 1992, before the US Open at Pebble Beach, Tom Watson was asked what he thought of the course and he said "it's worthy of Shivas Irons." So there were many references to it, big and small.

J What about today's touring pros, the younger fellows? Do you see any Shivas in them?

M Well, Tiger Woods certainly. I'm fascinated by him.

J His Buddhist background, through his mother, must have some influence in his temperament on the course.

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- M Yes, it supports my thinking about him.
- J And yet, he displays a very sharp temper at times, something not usually associated with Buddhism, or eastern thought.
- M Unless you're very advanced. In Zen they say this, to the ordinary person a tree is a tree and a mountain is a mountain. To a committed Zen student a tree is no longer a tree, a mountain is no longer a mountain. But then, as you grow in meditation, a mountain is a mountain and a tree is a tree again. The notion is that you develop an emotional elasticity as well as a settled equanimity. You don't have to be made out of marble anymore. Tiger is essentially unflappable. Look at his record. I think he's lost only two tournaments in nine years when he's ahead or tied after 54 holes. I don't think Hogan had such a record.

The point I want to make is this: in the Zen sense, unflappability is a hallmark of enlightenment, but it is a calm with life flowing from it. I would argue that Tiger's Zen practice is golf. He's not a meditator in the conventional sense. He meditates through his golf, which becomes what I call a covert or informal practice. It is not declared to be a practice aimed at enlightenment but at a particular skill. I've known nurses who can be said to be saintly with their quiet, unflappable calm in the midst of great suffering.

So for Tiger golf is a transformative practice. His little flare-ups don't amount to a hill of beans. They are refreshing to me. He's like a kid in that respect, and the minute he loses being a kid like that we all lose something.

But it's amazing how quickly Tiger snaps back from his temper outbursts. He probably picked it up from his mother's temperament, and from whatever Buddhist culture she comes from. But he also has his father's fiery, striding, super-ambitious side. Which gives him incredible



- M confidence. He could say to the world that he is going to try to beat Jack Nicklaus' record in the majors. I mean, Joe DiMaggio didn't say he was going to hit in 56 games in a row. But Tiger tells us what he's going to do, or try to do. That is very unenlightened behavior, on the face of it, to set such goals. The whole doctrine of non-attainment says that you have to go with the flow and not set impossible goals for yourself. But Tiger is a mix. I often think of him as Frodo Baggins, in Tolkien, on his pilgrimage. That's one reason why so many of us identify with him, why he has such a huge following.

This is how I watch Tiger when he loses his temper. His ability to hold that quietude, or regain it quickly is more than a mental attitude. When you have it, it is something deeply settled in your psycho-physical being. I don't think western science has caught up with all this.

- J Does the term True Gravity fit in to this? It's perhaps the most enduring term from the book. People sign off letters with it. Where did it come from, what does it mean?

- M The phrase came to me when I was writing the book; it was an intuitive thing; I was being playful. Gravity is a mutual attraction between physical bodies, but for Shivas Irons "True Gravity" meant attraction between us and our deepest source or, as in the kabbalah, into the abyss of all things. In that there is no up or down, no east or west, no backward or forward. It's the being of being, the ultimate splendor, that informs and can subsume all physical attractions.

Let me put it into an anecdote. A man named Jim Benepe came to Esalen, in 1972. He had read *Golf in the Kingdom*, and was the first to ask me about true gravity. After reading the book he was in an extraordinary

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—M state, and one day shot an even-par round of golf, better than he'd ever shot on this particular course. On the eighteenth hole, a very long, uphill par-five, he hit the green in two for the first time. Then, as he was walking up the hill to the green he had the distinct impression he was walking downhill. Is this what true gravity means? he asked.

I don't recall the answer I gave him, but I would hear many stories about a similar, levitation-like experience. So now, my answer to Jim Benepe would be yes, it was an example of True Gravity because you are free from the tugs of old neuroses and bad attitudes and touched by the supreme joy of existence. That is another way to describe true gravity.

J That reminds me of an answer Jack Nicklaus gave when asked why he stood over a putt so long before making the stroke. He said he wanted to clear his mind of all thought before taking the club back. Is that the same thing as true gravity?

M Many athletes get to this state but have no context for it, no adequate philosophy. They don't have the language for it, and some will discount the gurus who do articulate it, although that is becoming less the case with modern-day players. Hogan would probably never know what I'm talking about. Athletes, for the most part, are not introspective people. Even Tiger, I think. Or so it appears to me. He is a curiously poised guy, but seems basically to be a very physical extrovert. Nevertheless, he, like other athletes, enters these states.

J There is evidence that players, at least when they're active in their sport, do not want to discuss such stuff even if they have the language. That to talk about it gets in the way of their doing.

M That brings up one of the oldest adages in Zen Buddhist practice. It is called the stink of Zen. When you talk too much about it, instead of just living it. I deal with that in my book, *The Psychic Side of Sport*, which became, *In the Zone*. I say, why the silence? A lot of it comes from an intuitive kinesthetic wisdom about not talking the state away.

The other side of that, however, is that by not talking about it you deny yourself access to it. The right attitude, I think, is to talk enough to catalyze these extraordinary states without talking them to death.

J Tom Watson was once asked about golf dreams or extraordinary states he had, if any, and he said he didn't want to talk about such stuff. This was when he was in his competitive prime.

M It's a huge issue. The balance between right conversation about these things and "the stink of Zen." The game has been going through a transformation in this regard. For example, you hear now in golf instruction or the commentators covering a tournament for television about the set-up ritual the players go through. They talk about it as a way to deal with pressure. By having this routine you can waylay the psychological tension you're feeling—and it works. Such ritual has slowly emerged in golf, along with attention to the "inner game." No one talked much about all this before, certainly not in Hogan's time. He no doubt did it intuitively, but didn't articulate it. Now it's being taught. It's part of sports psychology. The pros on tour now have not only swing coaches, but sports psychologists as well. The conversation in golf has changed in that respect. I'm not going to say I was the pioneer of all this through *Golf in the Kingdom*, but I think it had an influence.