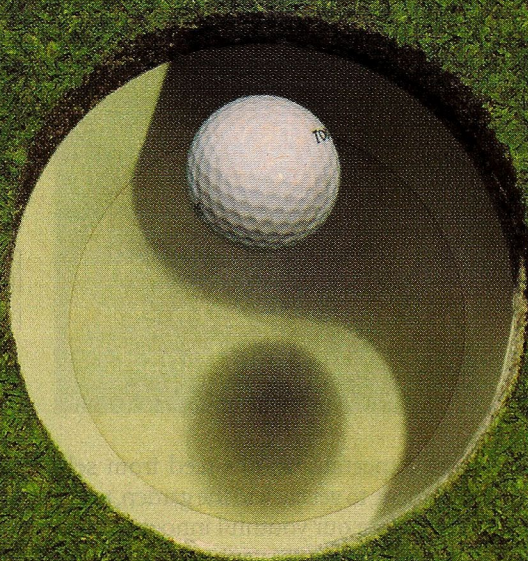


Zen what?



Forget birdies. With a Zen philosopher, a world-class course designer and Phil Mickelson's sister as his guides, our man went in search of something far more meaningful: enlightenment. Hey, Yanni! Wanna play \$1 junk?

By Josh Sene Photography by Darren Braun

I'm a feel player, not a touchy-feely player, so when the big guy beating balls beside me on the range asked for a reading of my joy-o-meter, my first thought was, "Hey, pal. I got your joy-o-meter right here." But the new me—the ocean-of-calm me—couldn't muster the necessary disdain or the crotch grab.

The sun was blinking brightly over the Ojai Valley Inn and Spa in Southern California, and a spirit of acceptance lingered in the air. It was a day for feeling grateful, a day to embrace your fellow golfer, a day to greet your snap-hooks with a shrug

and a smile. Venus was in retrograde. Or maybe it was rising. The practice grounds were swarming with adults in search of their inner children.

At the far end of the range, I spied the beaming visage of Deepak Chopra, author, Zen philosopher and cottage industry, a high-handicapper whose foremost swing thought is to draw a line between his heart and the ball. A gallery of disciples encircled Chopra, watching him hit weak fades with the awe of a crowd admiring John Daly's drives.

Beyond him, near the putting green, stood Joseph Parent, ►

the mental-game coach who'd taught Vijay Singh to accept his mis-hits and three-putts with the impassive gaze of a self-immolating monk. He'd just conducted a clinic in which students practiced chipping with a butter knife.

Parent. Chopra. The potbellied guy practicing beside me. We were all gearing up for a four-man scramble where score would be irrelevant. Never mind birdies, pars and bogeys. At the first annual Golf in the Kingdom Academy, a three-day event, well-heeled golfers, led by a panel of celebrity instructors, set aside their swing thoughts in exchange for a chance to enrich their souls.

The clinic took its name from the novel by Michael Murphy, golf's poster child for mysticism, whose tale of an encounter with Shivas Irons, an enigmatic, sweet-swinging Scottish sage, enjoys a cult standing among golf fanatics outstripped only by *Caddyshack*. Though Murphy wasn't with us at the moment, he was slated to show up the next night for a mind-expanding session of midnight golf.

Meanwhile, in broad daylight, we had work to do.

"Oooh, that was an eight," said my rotund range buddy, watching the flight of his banana ball. Not an 8-iron. An eight on his joy-ometer, an entirely subjective internal register that measured, on a scale of one to 10, the pleasure he extracted from every shot. "This time, I'm going to ramp it up to 10."

Jesus, could this guy be serious? A thousand fruitless lessons, a mother lode of giant-headed drivers, mounting frustrations and self-rebuke. Maybe it was time to try something new. Something like a stint at this plush resort, where 150 duffers had plunked down \$1,500 (lodging not included) to engage in golf as a spiritual pursuit.

"Are you free?" asked Fred Shoemaker. "What would it be like not to give in to fear?"

It was Thursday morning, the start of the festivities, and Shoemaker was making a Pied Piper march down the 15th fairway, trailed by scores of seekers in collared shirts. The author of *Extraordinary Golf* and the founder of a golf school by the same name, Shoemaker has carved out a career by

discarding swing thoughts, swing tips and swing analysis in favor of awareness: awareness of your swing, your emotions and the thoughts pulsing reflexively through your brain.

Standing in the fairway, armed only with a 7-iron and thwacking balls in a freewheeling demonstration, Shoemaker encouraged us to unlearn what we'd learned in our obsession with mechanics, to play the game detached

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from expectations, divorced from self-judgment, to get back to the garden, to the time before our youthful innocence was lost. He urged us to swing with a childlike liberty, though he knew that inhibition was the adult way.

"I ask you to consider," he said, "that to change your game, you might just

have to change your life."

I'd like to change my life. I'd start by playing a lot more golf. I'd bust my drives 300, post lower numbers and never, ever lose a skin. But Shoemaker was saying that those goals were superficial and that playing for score or to trounce our rivals distracted us from something deeper.

"What if you pointed your eye toward joy or learning?" Shoemaker said. "Playing just to play well? I believe that human beings are a grander species than that."

Later that day, Shoemaker spoke again, this time as part of a celebrity panel that included Chopra, Parent, Tina Mickelson (yes, his sister) and Robert Trent Jones Jr., the famed golf architect. They sat on a dais, like the elders from *Shazam!*, though their presentations, laden with Buddhist-flavored aphorisms, seemed more closely patterned on an episode of *Kung Fu*.

"Golf," said Deepak Chopra, with the confidence of a man who's published 42 books and amassed a handicap index only slightly lower, "allows us to embrace the wisdom of uncertainty." That was fortune-cookiespeak for, "You never know if you're going to spank it or shank it."

"Golf," Joseph Parent said, "is 90 percent mental, and 10 percent mental." He added that "the zone" is our natural state. "It only goes away when you try to grasp it." A ballroom of smiling faces nodded in agreement. There were salesmen and stockbrokers, real estate agents and retired executives—men and women accustomed to the buzz and whir of commerce, pleased to be taking a mindful pause. The mood was so bang-the-drum communal that it hardly seemed surprising when Robert Trent Jones Jr. stood to give a poetry reading of verses he'd penned as a paean to St. Andrews. The audience applauded.

But this being a group of golfers with business backgrounds—in short, competitive people—you knew there'd be a cutthroat in the crowd. "Tell us, Tina," asked an audience member. "Have you ever beaten your brother?"

Phil's sister, an instructor and fine player in her own right, gave the faint smile of someone weary of the topic. "Of course I have," she said. ►



The latest in imaginary instruction gear: the joy-ometer.

We reconvened a few hours later for a clinic on the range. At Shoemaker's suggestion, we worked on our joy-ometers. At Parent's suggestion, we practiced chipping with a plastic butter knife, swiping at the ball with a smooth, firm-wristed motion—the same motion we'd want when we picked up a wedge.

"Makes my stomach grumble," said my big-bellied buddy from the range. "I've always been good with a butter knife."

I was hungry, too. Hungry for swing tips. Was my right elbow flying? Was I pronating too early? Supinating too late? But I was in the wrong place.

"I don't think swing thoughts work," Shoemaker said. "I think you work."

That evening, I mingled with my fellow students at a cocktail party, catching snippets of conversation. People spoke of visualization and pre-shot routines, of learning to flex their "commitment muscles." They spoke of acceptance, of swinging freely without worrying about results.

Important lessons, all, but not all limited to golf. This became clear when I chatted with a woman who was writing a book designed to help people find their passion. As part of her research, she'd traveled to Thailand and attended a monkey college graduation.

"Monkey college?" I said.

In Thailand, she said, monkeys go to school, where they're taught to harvest coconuts.

"You see them at the graduation, and they look so content," she said. "You realize, this is what they were meant to do."

The next morning, at long last, we got a chance to play, though not for money or bragging rights.

"The one who succeeds in letting go," Shoemaker announced before the scramble, "will be declared the grand pooh-bah of this event"

As we gathered on the tee, my partners and I reminded ourselves to be mindful, to stay in the moment, to play with youthful gusto, to shake off bad shots like buffalo tail-swatting flies. We rehearsed a drill Shoemaker had suggested: "Imagine that you're 15 years old, and look for real freedom. Let go of your precious self-image."

We ham-and-egged it well, until the 11th hole, a short par 4, where I drove the green, drained the putt and felt my joy-ometer rocket off the charts as Shoemaker drove by in a golf cart.

"An eagle!" he exclaimed. "You've got to do the eagle dance."

And there we stood, following his lead, shuffling our feet in celebration, arms folded, elbows jutting out like wings.

It was all good fun, easy to enjoy when you're making eagles. But two holes later, I was back to my old self, skulking shots and sulking. My blood pressure rose. My joy-ometer sank. It's depressing when you discover your inner child is a whiny brat.

Evening came, and with it another chance at enlightenment. As the clock

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struck 12, I found myself in a crowd on the pitch-black, par-3 16th tee. Somewhere in the darkness, a bagpiper played, and out of the night a spectral figure approached. He was carrying a bucket of glowing golf balls, his face illuminated like a jack-o'-lantern. He was also more than halfway through a glass of scotch.

"Gather around," said Michael Murphy, a wispy, gray-haired man who grinned as though he kept a special secret. "And those who are most inebriated, stay closest to me."

We were about to embark on a par-3 competition, firing night-glo balls toward a green ringed, like an airport runway, by tiny lights. One by one, we took our hacks, some shots arcing sweetly toward the target, others soaring wildly and fading in the blackness like shooting stars. Murphy never said

exactly what the point was. Maybe the point was that there wasn't one.

A bearded man ambled toward the tee. Even in the darkness, I recognized him from the TV ads: George Zimmer, the discount-suit magnate, founder and CEO of the Men's Warehouse. He didn't have a great swing. (I guarantee it.) But he seemed in good spirits.

"Michael, Michael," he said, a cigarette in his fingers, his voice husky with smoke. "I have a marketing opportunity for you."

"Yeah?" Murphy said.

"You should get a deal with Chivas Regal. Get it? Chivas Regal, Shivas Irons."

Murphy gave a noncommittal smile. Maybe he was pondering this new chance at fortune. Or maybe he was remembering what Shivas often said: "Trying too hard is the surest way to ruin your game."

At daybreak, I was back to doing just that. We were playing another scramble and my game was off (again). I drew on my arsenal of Grasshopper tactics: mindfulness and meditative breathing. I tried not to try, but that proved too trying. I was failing in my quest to play for pleasure, tempted to take satisfaction by snapping my driver across my knee.

I ran through my list of emergency swing thoughts. Slow takeaway. Attack from the inside. Useless. Worthless. I was plunging down the rabbit hole, lost in a maze of mechanics, limping through that tangled wilderness teeming with golfers who can't see the forest for the trees.

My playing partner, meantime, was a marvel, an 87-year-old retired chiropractor who played with the sprightliness of Sergio, mid-scissor kick. He smacked shots down the middle. He putted like Brad Faxon. And when he didn't, he smiled and laughed.

He'd driven five hours on his own, from Northern California, to absorb the teachings of mental gurus. But here was a man already enlightened. I asked him his secret.

"In golf or life?" he said.

But before I could respond he gave me an answer that applied to both.

"Do them happily," he said. "And for a long, long time." ■