

Can Buddha Help Your Short Game?

Some Say the Religion's Tenets Can Help Players Master Golf's Finer Points; Keeping Bugs Alive

By Hannah Karp

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When Tiger Woods finally emerged from his trip through the wilderness of marital infidelity, he vowed to make some life changes. One of them was to reconnect with Buddhism, the religion of his youth.

It's fair to say Buddhism could make him a better person. But here's a scary notion for the rest of the PGA Tour: there's a reasonable chance it could make him a better golfer, too.

A growing number of golfers and golf coaches all over the world are warming up to the idea that the ancient religion, which teaches followers to let go of their egos, attachments and desires in order to attain enlightenment, could be the faith most suited to making somebody a holy terror on the links.

Thanks to the growing ranks of players from Asia, new Asian tour events and a handful of coaches who have been introducing elements of Eastern philosophy to Western Players, golfers from a range of religious backgrounds are tinkering with everything from daily meditation and Buddhist breathing

techniques to pilgrimages to Buddhist monasteries in Thailand.

The basic idea: to alleviate suffering on the golf course by cultivating inner peace, self-awareness and a sense of responsibility for one's actions. "It puts you in a peaceful plane," Vijay Singh told reporters while visiting a Buddhist abbot in a Thai temple several years ago. "It's pretty rough out there on the PGA Tour."

Adherents include Thailand's Thongchai Jaidee, who ranks 44th in the world and finished tied for ninth place in the weekend's Ballantines's Championship in South Korea, and Y.E. Yang, who became the first Asian to win a major last year when he beat Tiger Woods in the PGA Championship and who was near the top of the leader board for much of this month's Masters. Mr. Singh, who has earned more money than any golfer on the current Tour except Mr. Woods, has befriended Buddhist leaders and appreciates the philosophy, although he says he considers his personal religious beliefs private.

There are nine Asian players on the PGA Tour this year, and 59 on the

LPGA circuit, up from a total of five Asians on the two tours 15 years ago. The LPGA Tour's 45 South Koreans include devout Buddhist and World Golf Hall-of-Famer Se Ri Pak, who joined the women's tour in 1998. Among Westerners, 12-time LPGA tour winner Cristie Kerr and Tim Petovic both recently hired Joseph Parent, the author of the book "Zen Golf," to help them incorporate Buddhist techniques into their games, while English golfer Justin Rose rose to sixth in the world in 2007 after spending two years meditating nightly with Buddhist swing coach Nick Bradley.

Though Buddhism has been growing steadily in America in the past 30 years, the religion is still a bit far out for American golf, a relatively conservative, county-club sport where the commentators find it shocking when players neglect to wear socks. (Fred Couples is still drawing flak for doing that that in this month's Masters.) Apart from weekly Bible-study sessions long hosted by players including two-time U.S. Open winner Lee Janzen, most top tour players have avoided talking much about religion, not wanting to appear "off-center," says

Greg Norman's longtime manager Bart Collins.

Still, because Buddhism doesn't attempt to broach the subject of God (Buddha was a human being born in Nepal more than 2,000 years ago, and his teachings suggest neither the presence, nor the absence, of a higher deity) the philosophy has been able to hake hold even among some of the tours' Christians, who can incorporate the religion's practical teachings without having to renounce their own beliefs. K.J. Choi, a Christian who grew up in South Korea and now resides in Texas, says Buddhism "may help some players because they may feel inner peace," though Mr. Choi says he's at peace with his belief that God is by his side for every shot.

So what exactly does Buddhism do for golfers? Adherents say it helps them see their mind as an ally instead of an enemy, and helps them see how they may be getting in their own way on the course. (Buddhist golf coaches say a player's ego can be particularly detrimental to a long game.) Ms. Kerr says she finds it helpful to be reminded by her Zen instructor that she's controlling the ball rather than the

other way around. Discipline is also an important tenet. As Mr. Woods told Reuters in a 2008 interview: "It is all about what you do, and you get out of it what you put into it."

Mr. Woods's representatives didn't respond to requests for comment.

Three years ago, Chapshai Nirat of Thailand was struggling to control his temper on the course. Then in the summer of 2007, he spent three weeks living with monks in a Buddhist monastery with "nothing to think about" but "keeping the temple tidy." Shortly after, the now 27-year-old won the Vietnam Masters, and last year he set a record low score of 32-under-par at the SAIL Open in India. He returned to that monastery for a three-day stay with other pro golfers in December.

Mr. Yang, who was raised Buddhist, says his religious practice has been crucial to his success in golf. The Korean even does his best to stop other players from killing bugs on the course, believing that helps increase his "good Karma."

Buddhist monks aren't exactly fixtures on the world's putting greens, but many leaders in the Buddhist community see parallels between golf and the religions. Marvin Harad, a reverend at the Orange County Buddhist Church in Southern California, frequently waxes poetic about his passion for golf in newsletters to his church members. And in Northern California, there's even a prominent Tibetan monk who frequents the fairways in his yellow robes, though he rarely keeps score. As the high priest Kunga Rinpoche put it to Golf Digest in 2002: "I would like to be reincarnated as a better golfer some day. "