

# *Insight & Outlook*

## THE MYSTERIOUS POWERS OF BODY AND MIND

An Interview with Michael Murphy

From the radio series *Insight & Outlook* hosted by Scott London

**W**idely regarded as the father of the human potential movement, Michael Murphy is the co-founder of the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, and author of *Golf In the Kingdom*, *Jacob Atabet*, *The Psychic Side of Sports*, *The Future of the Body*, and other books. In the following interview, conducted in Santa Barbara, California, in 1996, Murphy points out that most of us use only a fraction of our human capacities and that we are capable of developing our abilities to a far greater extent than we think is possible. He also offers some fascinating reflections on the early days of the Esalen Institute when it was at the crossroads of the American counterculture. Murphy believes we are seeing a return today of many of the concerns and interests that shaped our national consciousness in the 1960s.

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**SCOTT LONDON:** In the opening lines of *The Future of the Body* you write, "We live only part of the life we are given." What do you mean by that?

**MICHAEL MURPHY:** We have more and more evidence today, more than ever before in world history, that all of us have enormous unused potentials. The novelist James Agee once said it's "the greatest crime against humanity" that we go through life without using these potentials. I meant it in that very simple, straightforward way.

**LONDON:** What kind of potentials?

**MURPHY:** There are physical potentials. For instance, a book called *Biomarkers* came out recently that rounded up all the evidence that strength-training in people aged 84-96 increases their strength 50 percent in 3 months and their health radically. There was also a big article in *The American Psychologist* in August 1994 entitled "Expert Performance" which reviewed dozens of studies about abilities that were thought to be genetically determined, such as perfect pitch or the ability to remember strings of numbers on a single hearing or various athletic skills. These studies have shown that everybody who is trained can learn perfect pitch, can learn to extend their short-term memory, and can extend their athletic abilities. It was a landmark study, one of those great historic

roundups of the evidence. Those are just physical abilities. There are also emotional capacities, cognitive skills, and spiritual abilities. Every single human attribute gives rise to the extraordinary — among men and women, young and old, in all cultures.

**LONDON:** What do you mean when you say that each human attribute "gives rise to" these extraordinary abilities?

**MURPHY:** In *The Future of the Body*, I chose 12 attributes. They include perception, cognition, volition, our hedonic response (that is, our relation to pain and pleasure), our sense of self, our movement abilities, our abilities to manipulate the environment, our capacity for love, and the very structure of the body itself, and so on. These 12 attributes — all of which exist in the animal kingdom in the higher vertebrates, and all of which exist in every human — all give rise to the extraordinary.

For example, there are extraordinary forms of perception. We can extend all of our senses. Some wine tasters can make ten thousand discriminations. There are perfume testers who can make 30,000 discriminations. People can train their eyesight to far greater acuity than was thought possible. There is enormous evidence that there is extra-sensory perception, as well. You can train remote viewing like they did at the Stanford Research Institute, for example.

That is just perception. You can extend that to other attributes as well, such as our ability to love. We can learn to love by the practice of love. Or our relation to pain and pleasure. Anybody who has been to these pain clinics can learn to control pain. We can also learn to induce states of pleasure.

There are so many ways to categorize our human faculties. You know, there are these many topologies of human nature and we can do it this way or that way. All I was trying to show in *The Future of the Body* was that no matter how you analyze human nature — no matter how you map it, whatever attribute you look at — there is a huge lore of that attribute being cultivatable and becoming extraordinary.

**LONDON:** Your book is called *The Future of the Body*, but in many ways it is also a history of the body, since you examine a great of historical data in the book. For instance, you go back and analyze records from the Roman Catholic Church that suggest that worship and contemplation often produced extraordinary experiences.

**MURPHY:** Yes, Roman Catholicism, more than any other religious tradition, has tried to sift out the evidence for these extraordinary abilities. They put their saints on trial in the canonization proceedings and put witnesses on oath. It is a mortal sin to lie to the Congregation of Rights that do these investigations.

What they have dug up is the fact that there have been about 300 Roman Catholic women and a few men who have had the marks of Jesus Christ on their hands and feet, marks that simulate those of Christ's crucifixion. Typically these things either ache or bleed every Friday or perhaps every Good Friday.

There are other kinds of stigmata, as well. In the Muslim world, there are the two saints who have had the battle wounds of Mohammed appear on their back.

In these cases, the mind identifies with or conceives of a particular bodily image and translates it with enormous specificity into the flesh. This is, again, another example of mind over matter, of the influence of imagery on the body.

The Roman Catholic tradition has sifted this body of data most carefully. But the biggest catalog of these powers exists in Hindu and Buddhist lore, where they are called "siddhis." Charisms and siddhis are great pointers to what I see as our untapped greater potential. I'm convinced there are thousands of these abilities.

**LONDON:** You also talk about sports as an area of human transcendence. In fact, in an article you called sports an "American equivalent of Yoga."

**MURPHY:** Yes, I've also written a couple of books about that. The most recent one, *In the Zone*, is a chronicle of altered states of consciousness and extraordinary feats in sports. The more you look into these high skills in sport, the more you realize that mind enters. A lot of top athletes develop their physical skills, but they can't compete with certain other athletes who have a great mental game. In golf, for example, Ben Hogan had great physical skills, but he also had a great mental game. The same with Jack Nicklaus. But there were other golfers whose swings were just as good — even more beautiful — but they didn't have the mental discipline, the mental strength, that Jack Nicklaus or Ben Hogan had.

This is true in every sport. So these sports become a mind/body discipline. That is what Yoga is — a lifelong mind/body practice to attain religious illumination. In sport, it's aimed at attaining particular skills. What is interesting, however, is that these sports spontaneously give rise to what are nothing less than quasi-mystical illuminations.

**LONDON:** A wonderful example of this is Lee Evans who in 1968 took the world record in the 400-meter dash.

**MURPHY:** That's right. I was privileged to know Lee and I actually ran with him in some senior track meets. He was hypnotized by his coach Bud Winter, who is perhaps the greatest sprint coach in American history (he coached Tommy Smith and John Carlos and other great sprinters). On the night before he ran 43.86 in Mexico city, he rehearsed every single stride of that race, over and over, under hypnosis. He went through every single stride, over and over. So when he went out to run, his mind was **THERE**. And with the mind comes this energetic framework, this aura, if you will.

**LONDON:** With *The Future of the Body*, you come across as a combination of mystic, philosopher, and scientist. What you are bringing together are the worlds of observable fact and quantifiable data, on the one hand, and mystical experiences, on the other, and from that you draw a number of fascinating conclusions. But you've taken a very scholarly approach, on the whole, and you have a real respect for the scientific tradition.

**MURPHY:** Yes. I was very mindful of people like Carl Sagan and other great warriors who protect the bastions of science from obscurantism and what they think of as occultism and mysticism. Science is one of the great driving-forces of the world and a stupendously beautiful achievement of the human race. But there is such a thing as "scientism," or scientific dogma. The whole history of science is overcoming one dogma after another, in every field. Just because a theory works today, it may not hold true later. Isaac Newton's great laws of physics and laws of momentum and acceleration are not undone by Einstein's relativity theory; they are subsumed into a larger set of propositions. The same goes for what I try to do with *The Future of the Body*. These different knowledge domains are compatible.

Mainstream science depends on evidence produced by the senses and their extensions (through microscopes, telescopes, etc.). But if you get into sociology or anthropology, you have to depend a lot on what people tell you. If you go down to New Guinea and interview some of the natives there, you have to be sympathetic and listen to what they say. Or you must observe what they are doing. The phenomena aren't necessarily repeatable, and they are not always exactly replicable. So anthropology and sociology are different from physics.

Now when it comes to psychical research, even though there is a lot of experimental data which can be confirmed by the senses, there is also a lot of anecdotal reports. You have to go around and ask people about their clairvoyant experience or whatever. But it is no different from an anthropologist, it seems to me.

**LONDON:** So psychical research is a bit like anthropology?

**MURPHY:** Yes. Many people have made this point. William James, for instance, with his "radical empiricism."

Mysticism, whether it's in a Zen Buddhist monastery, in a Roman Catholic monastery, in a Kabbalistic circle, or in a Sufi group, starts with a set of instructions or injunctions to practice: "You do this and you will have such and such an experience. You pray with all your heart and mind and soul for these hours a day for these years and you will begin to feel a union with God." Then, you do the procedure: you pray or you meditate. Then, eventually, you get some results. Now those results have to be communally verified. In Zen, for example, you sit in front of the master and he tests your realization. Why? Because people get false illuminations, inflations — they go cuckoo. They do. So your experience is communally verified.

So the analogy with science is exact. In science, if you are a chemist, you are told that if you proceed with these elements, then you get this data, and then other laboratories test your results. You can't depend just on your data alone — that would be alchemy. One result for one alchemist. The difference between alchemy and science is that science is publicly verifiable.

**LONDON:** You're saying that mystical experiences, like new discoveries in science, have to pass the test of peer review?

**MURPHY:** That's right. The wisdom tradition's all say that every single claim is verifiable — by you. You can meditate and you can have this. You can pray and you will have this.

So I say, and I think the greatest philosophers of science would agree, that the analogy is exact. Contemplative or mystical practice is scientific in spirit. If you need a term for this, I call it synoptic empiricism — empiricism in the sense that every theory stands or falls finally on experience, but testable and verifiable.

**LONDON:** When did you discover your interest in the whole human potential idea?

**MURPHY:** I got started in this interest in high-school. I got interested in some Jungian ideas and was influenced a little bit by Spinoza. Then I got to Stanford and went through this 18-year-old atheistic phase after I heard about evolution, which bowled me over. I had been thinking I would be either an Episcopalian priest or a doctor. By the time I got to college it had evolved into becoming a psychiatrist. My family had thought I should be a doctor.

Anyway, I became an atheist for a year and a half, until I walked into a course by Frederic Spiegelberg — this tremendous professor of comparative religions. He was lecturing about "atman" and "brahman." After the first lecture, I walked back to my fraternity and said, "I don't think I'll ever be the same." Then, over the course of nine months, I started to get very interested in the Vedas and the Upanishads. Then, particularly, the philosopher Sri Aurobindo — the Indian philosopher who saw all the universe as a stupendous evolutionary adventure. He talked about "mind and supermind."

I gave up pre-med studies and gave up the fraternity and took up these studies. I went to India for a year and a half. I then, ten years later, started Esalen Institute in Big Sur — that was 33 years ago.

**LONDON:** When you were in India, at what point did you decide you wanted to return, and how did that lead up to founding of the Esalen Institute?

**MURPHY:** I spent a year and a half at the Aurobindo ashram from 56-57, but when I came back I didn't have Esalen in mind. The idea started to dawn, though, after I had been back for a few years. I had continued to practice meditation, not knowing exactly what I was going to do. Before I had gone to India I had tried graduate school; I had thought I would become a philosophy professor, but the philosophy departments then were swept by analytical philosophy which is a far cry from the Indian philosophy and Sri Aurobindo that I knew. So that door closed too — medical school closed and now philosophy closed too. So I didn't know.

My main thrust throughout my entire life was centered in meditation and reading. By the time I got to be thirty I still didn't have a job yet, though I supported myself by working two days a week as a bell-hop or waiting tables or gardening on this old family land in Big Sur with Richard Price — my classmate from Stanford who was equally, "creatively" unemployed. We then started this institute and I finally went to work on an honest job at the age of thirty.

**LONDON:** How did you get in contact with all these luminaries of the day — people like Alan Watts, Joseph Campbell and Fritz Pearls?

**MURPHY:** Well, I just started writing them letters and, to my astonishment, they came [laughs]. They loved it that we were raising the flag of human potentialities. We had in mind to create a center which would be an open forum for many different perspectives on mind, supermind and human potential.

Basically, I invited the people whose books I had read, people like Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard, who was this inspired Irish philosopher and an influence on Huxley.

**LONDON:** One of the better known figures was Abraham Maslow.

**MURPHY:** Yes. I bought a dozen copies of his book *Toward a Psychology of Being*, which came out in 1962, and passed it out to members of the staff. To our astonishment, one foggy night he drove in, lost on Highway 1. He and his wife found the place and it reminded him of the movie *Psycho*. He came to the end of this lonely road thought it looked like the Bates motel. Then, to his amazement, the entire staff was reading his book. I took it as a sign from above that we were doing the right thing. I took it as a confirmation. All these coincidences started to happen.

**LONDON:** What about Arnold Toynbee?

**MURPHY:** I wrote a letter to Arnold Toynbee, and he came! [Laughs] We got the most famous historian of the age and we gave him the stupendous honorarium of \$100. But he was willing to come. Paul Tillich, Charlotte Salver, the list went on and on. There was a huge cast of characters who came to Esalen under the banner of human potentialities. The ideas were in the air then. It was the early sixties and we were a little ahead of the crest that hit much heavier around 1965. Then came the Summer of Love and the explosion of interest in Eastern thought, psychedelics, and so forth. We were very much in the middle of it.

**LONDON:** Esalen had a reputation for encounter groups and public nudity in the 1960s. Things are quite different now, I gather.

**MURPHY:** Yes, we would be in jail if we continued at the pace we were going then [Laughs]. For one thing, the sheer amount of experimentation with LSD and all of that. We never promoted it; we couldn't. We are a 501(c)3 and we put a bulletin up on the board that anybody found dealing drugs or having drug trips was going to be evicted instantly since it was against the law. But, we knew, of course, that these people with that particular look on their face, some of whom couldn't walk very well, were under the influence of something other than beer or wine. It was happening all over Big Sur in those days.

Also, many of our programs were kind of the sledgehammer approach to human growth. We just don't do it anymore. There were encounter groups there where the darkest and the dirtiest things you could dig up from your own psyche or accuse someone else of was being tossed around. People were saying things to one another that thirty years later they haven't forgiven one another for.

[Laughs] There was a heavy-handed aspect to early Esalen — not on the intellectual side, but on the practical side.

But there was also the spirit of breakthrough, and these marvelously creative people were there, like Will Schutz, Fritz Pearls, Charlotte Salver, Moshe Feldenkrais. We gave the field of somatics more of a platform at Esalen than any other place in the United States for rolfing and new approaches to the body. It was a wonderfully creative time. And it was really wild. Now it is much more assimilated, toned down. But the general idea is still the same. We are still exploring the same domains.

**LONDON:** Speaking of Esalen in the 60s, some feel that the 90s in some ways represents a return to the themes of the 60s. There is all this attention now on personal growth, social transformation, and so on. What is your take on that?

**MURPHY:** What I see is that the 60s was definitely — and by the 60s we mean from '64 on into the early 70s, because the events that most people talk about didn't happen until '64 (the free speech movement and so forth) — a watershed in American consciousness. You had streaming in, at an unprecedented rate, an interest in Eastern philosophy, in esoteric Christian, Jewish, and Sufi mysticism, interest in altered states of consciousness (much of it inspired by psychedelic drugs), new interest in hypnosis, in imagery practice, biofeedback, and many other disciplines for personal growth exploded on the scene.

I think that since the 60s we've had the gradual assimilation of these — in YMCAs, in church programs, in university extension programs, and all over the place. That's how I see it. I think it's been going on now for thirty years. Meanwhile, there are more and more and more pieces of the jigsaw puzzle laid out on the table in front of us about this human potential, about this possibility for further human growth. What I see now is a greater and greater desire for integration of all these pieces — not only in theory but in practice.

**LONDON:** It's been 25 years since you wrote *Golf in the Kingdom*. Is it true that you're now working on a sequel to it?

**MURPHY:** Yes, I am. It's by far my most popular book. It was published in '72. In 1994 alone, it sold 100,000 copies. It gets more popular all the time. So it's struck a nerve of some kind.

**LONDON:** I've heard you say that in the years since you wrote the book you've collected hundreds and hundreds of anecdotes about actual mystical experiences people have had on the golf course.

**MURPHY:** Yes, to such an extent that I have started to see golf as a mystery school for Republicans. I mean, I think it's a successor body to the Masonic order or something. It's unbelievable, these experiences. It's constantly astonishing to me that this game, which to many of us has elements of the absurd about it, produces these experiences.

**LONDON:** What do people say?

**MURPHY:** A lady wrote to me saying that playing golf one day she saw the whole golf course as God's negligee. She could see right through matter into this light. Or, a man standing on the tee of a four par hole claiming to see a ball-marker the size of a dime on the green 400 yards away, and his partner scoffing; then they get up there, and there IS a ball marker. What clairvoyance, what meta-normal visual acuity, occasioned that?

A fellow wrote to me after reading the book to tell me that he was so inspired he went out and shot a 72 for the first time in his club's history. The 18th hole was a five par uphill which he had never reached in two, but that day he hit it in two. Walking uphill, he felt like he was walking downhill. That may sound like a metaphor, but to him it was how he experienced it. (This experience of feeling like you are levitating is one of the hallmarks in Zen of the enlightenment experience, by the way.) Alan Watts used to say that you feel like you are walking six inches off the ground — which is a common expression in our language.

**LONDON:** I would like to return to your research. Where do you think we are headed in the future in terms of human consciousness research? Let's take a short-term view, say the next ten or fifteen years or so.

**MURPHY:** I like to say that there are five great areas that are now up for work in this area. First, theory. I hope that *The Future of the Body* is a small contribution to the theoretical work. Ken Wilber's book *Sex, Ecology, and Spirituality* is a big theoretical contribution. And the work of the philosopher/theologian David Griffin reconciling Whitehead with various domains of knowledge. This work of theory is where it is going to move.

Secondly, research — testing these ideas in all sorts of ways. We see this in psychoneuroimmunology now: the influence of mind on brain, on hormones, on the immune system. Research on how these things are related.

Then, thirdly, practice. People are looking for lifelong, comprehensive practices outside the domain of strict gurus and cults and dogma.

Then, to support that practice, I think we have to create new kinds of institutions. George Leonard and I are putting together a new center outside San Francisco for lifelong integral practice. It will look a little bit like a health club, but on the other hand it will look like a learning center, a seminar center. But you join as a member. Then you can design your own program within this school. I think there has to be more of this kind of "social invention."

Finally, the fifth area is, I think we can go further in opening up our imaginations. Here is where the movies come in, for instance. Even movies like *Star Wars*, with "the force," and *Cocoon* with these aliens and these features of the luminous body, and *Jacob's Ladder*, which really was a dramatic portrayal of Buddhist theory, and *Field of Dreams*. My book *Golf in the Kingdom* was purchased by Warner Brothers I have talked to them about the imagery involved and how you would do it. So the imagination and science fiction is an important part of the process. So those are the five areas in which I think we can advance: theory, research, practice, institution-building, and in the realm of the imagination.

**LONDON:** You are an optimist when you talk about human potential. But some people feel that the 20th century in many ways represents not the flowering of human consciousness, but the degradation of it. We've had all kinds of problems in this century: the Holocaust, the world wars, Bosnia and so forth. How do you respond to that?

**MURPHY:** Well, when it comes to that sort of thing, I call myself an existentialist. There are days when I wake up and I say, the human race just ain't going to make it. But on other days I look at it and it looks manageable to me, if I take the big view.

I don't know. I don't pretend to be a futurist. All I say is, we can improve our lives, the lives of those around us, and the whole wide world by exploring our hidden potentials. We're learning more and more about them. And it can apply to social action. I worked for fifteen years on Soviet-American relations, for example, and our institute actually brought Boris Yeltsin over in his first trip to the States. It started in 1980. It all started around the search for common ground philosophically. So in my own life I have experienced the power of these ideas in citizen diplomacy and in social movements. We have also worked a lot on black/white relations at Esalen. We have a long way to go in race relations — an enormous way to go — but it's not impossible.

So, yes. Some of the worst things in human history are happening right now. We're stripping away a lot of the ozone, the Amazon forest, the American west. We have got to get this thing turned around. And we do have Bosnia and all. But, there are also ways and means to get past it, and we just got to keep working.

**LONDON:** Thank you very much.

**MURPHY:** It's been a great pleasure.

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This interview was adapted from the radio series *Insight & Outlook* hosted by Scott London. It is available online at <http://www.scottlondon.com/insight/scripts>

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