

Achieving 'The Zone' in Pistol Shooting

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Many top bullseye competitors speak about something strange that goes on mentally as they compete. They use terms like "Zen" and "the zone." To the rest of us, what are they talking about?

I will start by saying that I am not yet qualified to explain what "Zen" really is. The American Heritage Dictionary defines Zen or Zen Buddhism as, "a Chinese and Japanese school of Buddhism that asserts that enlightenment can be attained through meditation in which dualistic thinking is overcome". (This dictionary didn't define dualistic.)

I believe they mean total singular focus on the task or thought at hand with no distractions bearing on the conscious or subconscious mind.

I have experienced something spiritual (not in a religious sense) like this a few times in my shooting career. Unfortunately, I have not been able to hold this focused feeling except for very short periods. I have not yet learned how to bring this relaxed mental state on when needed most.

The best personal example came once in .45 practice at 50 yards. I started by shooting an off-hand target in the mid nineties more or less by following the "mechanical" fundamentals and procedures. This is a little better than average for me. Somehow, this bolstered my confidence for the next 10-shot string. This string resulted in a 100-7X! The target is framed on my den wall.

Normally, after shooting 5 or 6 slow fire tens in a row, doubts and fears come into my mind. I seem to fear failure, and even success! Mental pressure increases until I shoot a 9 or worse. Then I can relax a bit and usually finish with the rest as mostly tens.

When I shot the clean 7X target, the feeling and awareness was totally different! After about the third shot within the 10-ring, I was sure the rest of the string would be good. Absolutely no doubts entered my mind during the string. I felt that I was holding so well that no shot could miss the 10-ring! I was in a "zone" that I cannot describe in words except it seemed that the red dot was moving very slowly and staying in the black. The dot moved without effort to the middle and the pistol fired, without conscious effort. The slide seemed to move in slow motion. There was never any hesitation or mental reservation.

It is probably more important to try and recall what I was not thinking about. I can assure you that I was not thinking about the fundamentals. I was not conscious of position, stance, grip, nor trigger control. I didn't even consciously hear the pistol fire; nor did I feel the recoil. I was not thinking about past successes and failures. I was not worried about the future. I was in my own little world for about ten minutes! My mind was relaxed and apparently both sides of the brain were contributing to the process of firing well aimed shots.

Contrary to my normal habit of coaching myself through the correct process of firing a well

aimed slow fire shot, I seemed to be just observing the process while feeling the right amount of confidence. It is important to be confident, but detrimental to be overly so.

I think each experienced shooter has a "comfort zone" that he or she normally performs within. If performing below this level frustration sets in, further inhibiting abilities. Occasionally, we will perform above what we are accustomed to. This can create anxiety in the form of "fear of success". Either way we are likely to get in a judging mode and clutter our minds with thoughts that keep us out of that illusive relaxed "zone".

I asked present .45 caliber National Champion and 2670 shooter, Al Dorman to give me his thoughts on the Zen concept. Here are his words:

"First Zen is not a philosophy, it is a place that causes action. A chapter that when explored temporarily and permanently changes perception, both at the same time at different degrees. I cannot give directions as I don't remember getting there or even picking up the book to read the chapter. Maybe it was too long ago and time has eroded the path or maybe it has always been there in varying degrees and there was never a path."

He explains further. "When I shoot with competitors who can beat me, it is the same as when I compete with no High Masters. I have a job to do and I go about getting it done. Wind or other elements do not change my perception; just my sight adjustment is changed. Maybe Zen is a type of focus as perceived by others and giving it a name within one's self causes it to evaporate with the morning mist. Fragile place if so."

Note that Mr. Dorman doesn't worry or even think about what the competition is doing. His attitude and effort are at the same levels.

I'm sure most of you experienced shooters have noticed how easy it was when you shot your best string. Once we are on the "stage" competing, extra effort does not pay off. Trying harder keeps the mind out of its relaxed state and best working mode.

I am, however, convinced that extra effort during training does pay off by ingraining good fundamental habits that must be followed with little or no conscious effort once the competition starts.

I certainly do not want to downplay the importance of the well established fundamentals. They must be applied by all shooters at any level. The goal is to apply them without having to double check for them once you are in competition. If you have a coach, that is his or her role.

I can recommend two excellent books on the subject: Peak Performance by Charles A. Garfield and The Inner Game of Tennis by Timothy Gallwey

May your comfort zone and scores continue to rise.