

Beginning Zen in Shooting

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Excerpts from an interview with Kanjuro Shibata XX, Sensei. While initially written for Japanese Archery (Kyudo) it has been translated and heavily edited to explore our modern precision pistol sport.

The Developing New Shooter

For the beginner, the fundamentals provide the basis of shooting. New shooters should carefully reflect on each and every shot as if it was their only shot. In all sports there are competitors, winners and losers. However, this is not the primary focus in shooting. If understood through a Zen perspective, shooting is based on the idea "one shot" (issha). The focus and reflection on each shot is the most important thing. In the beginning, learning technique is the first priority of the new shooter. However, most beginners forget about this and think of the target and their score too much. It is not important where your shots go. That is only a reflection of the accuracy of your technique and the purity of your mind. Working on the fundamentals refines your technique. Scores are secondary - improved scores will come in time.

As the new shooter continues to work on proper technique, he begins to encounter the Zen "Seven Defilements" of mind. The way to set aside these defilements is through the Zen Art or "Way" aspect of shooting. This Zen "Way" is endless. Practice never ends, and begins again with each shot. You don't shoot the target. Keeping to the fundamentals, the shot will go to the bullseye, just as if the shot had its own mind. It is not "you" shooting at the target. The right mind and the right heart, not just the right form, shoots the target. This right mind will be gained by the fundamentals, reflecting on both accuracy of the technique as well as on the Seven Defilements.

The Seven Defilements:

1. Happiness (Yorokobu)
2. Anger (Okoru)
3. Greed-Uneasiness (Urei)
4. Expectation (Omou)
5. Sadness (Kanashimu)
6. Terror (Osoreru)
7. Surprise (Odoroku)

The ultimate goal of shooting is to cleanse or polish your mind, precisely the same as sitting meditation, or "zazen." By perfecting technique, you are not polishing your style of shooting, but rather the mind. The dignity of shooting is the important point. Without the right mind, no matter how long you shoot, this dignity won't be gained.

More Than Just a Sport

Today, shooting is being practiced by thousands of people all over the world for the development of mental discipline as well as for spiritual development. The simple elegance

of the mechanics, the beauty of the equipment and the atmosphere of solitary dignity predominant at the range, have a great attraction for those who wish to walk upon the path of self-knowledge.

If you look at it from the outside, shooting seems to be just a game. Raising the pistol and shooting at the target resembles a test of skill, but shooting is much more than just a sport. To discover the true nature of shooting one has to look inside, to cut through and go beyond any kind of preoccupation, whether it be worry, hope, doubt or fear. Although the actual forms of competitive shooting have changed over and over again and equipment has become more sophisticated over the last two centuries, the essence of true shooting practice always remains the same. It is the epitome of traditional Zen "standing" meditation.

A Spiritual Path

Although shooting is certainly not a religious practice, we may still apply the philosophies of Zen Buddhism and Shinto to understand its true value. In this light, the heart of shooting is truly linked to Buddhist philosophy, with the interpretation of Tao merged into it. The teachings of Zen Buddhism tell us that our true selves are hidden within deep layers of habitual thought patterns, self-delusion and ego. We live in a dream-world of our own making.

The aim of Zen practice is to wear away these layers of illusion and ego so as to be free from the dualistic outlook that keeps us from understanding our true nature and living harmoniously with ourselves, others and the universe at large. In sitting meditation, one strives to unify body and mind, the medium of the breath, and maintaining a strict sitting posture. Shooting as "Zen in action" incorporates the same concepts of mind and body working in unison.

To the sincere practitioner, shooting is a way of life, and there should be no separation between shooting training and everyday activities. Each shot is shot as if it were the only one, just as each moment of one's life is the ultimate. The shooting practitioner does not look at the target for the result of his or her practice, but inward, for the target is not a target - it is a mirror. And if the heart is right, each shot clears away some more of the obstacles clouding the vision of one's true nature.

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