

Issha Zetsumei: One Shot and Expire

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Introduction

"Issha Zetsumei" is a Japanese phrase whose image provides a masterful foundation for the art of pistol shooting. When translated to English it means literally "one shot and expire." The saying conjures the image of the last act of a dying man - a shooter summarizing his entire life with a single shot. In other words, the goal is to establish in your mind that you have no other purpose or concern in life than to properly execute the current shot.

"When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself." - Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

In Zen, it is recognized that there are no second chances in life. One must throw himself fully into any activity he is participating, regardless of how mundane it might be. Each activity should be done as if it were their only activity on Earth. In shooting, this means to concentrate on each shot as if it were the only shot you will ever shoot. Jackson Morisawa Sensei explains this concept as "each [shot] is final and decisive as each moment is the ultimate."

It is both the challenge and valuable purpose of the art of shooting to help us attain the freedom of our being, both physically and mentally. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi has said, "When you do something, if you fix your mind on the activity with some confidence, the quality of your state of mind is the activity itself. When you are concentrated on the quality of your being, you are prepared for the activity."

Mushin

When we practice the art of shooting, our minds must become calm and quite simple. But this does not happen by accident. Because by nature our minds are complicated and very busy, all of our activity in life is usually shadowed by traces of other thoughts. These traces and notions make it hard to concentrate fully on what we are doing. In fact, most people have a double- or triple- notion in one activity. The saying, "to catch two birds with one stone" states what is happening in their minds. Because they are trying to catch too many birds, it becomes difficult to concentrate on one activity, and as a result, they may not catch any birds at all! In other words, if you leave a trace of thinking on your activity, you will become attached to the trace and not the activity.

"To take [your stance] is to have the right state of mind. There is no need to obtain some special state of mind."- Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

Our first priority in preparing to fire a single shot or string of shots is to bring all of our awareness to the present. The routine processes of taking our stance and focusing on our breathing should act as a trigger to automatically bring our thoughts fully to the moment at hand. To understand this mindset, try to picture the image of a digital clock - this instrument has no sense of past or future; all it has is the moment. Surely you've watched

one to see how it changes - take this as a challenge to "catch the ceaseless flow of quality in the passing moment." How much quality can you compress into any moment by simply being there and nowhere else? This is the magic and life-lesson of our art.

The state of mind that we are trying to attain in Zen and the arts is called "mushin" in Japanese, roughly translated to mean "empty mind." While in English there is no exact equivalent to the word, Professor Daisetz Suzuki describes it as a state of "conscious unconsciousness." Because of the inseparability of mind and body, you cannot view mushin as purely a mental phenomenon. You cannot simply reason yourself into mushin, you must utilize proper breathing and stance to create it. When you have assumed your proper shooting stance and are preparing to raise the pistol, recall Thich Nhat Hanh's saying, "Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile." Awareness of our breathing is the biggest key in uniting our mind and body, the first step in creating mushin. Focusing on our breathing will enable us to lose any thoughts that might be clouding our minds and will allow us to "become" the present moment. As a result, you will lose all sense of yourself and other and will be able to completely concentrate.

Heijoshin

Attaining mushin while shooting is certainly a challenging task. Any number of delusive thoughts can distract us and cloud our minds. It can be thoughts of trying aspects of our daily lives such as work, finances or relationships that can intrude our concentration. But the thoughts that are most difficult to keep from following are those relating to our shooting performance itself. Each shot must be made without any regard for past performance or to one's performance in the future - concern about how the aggregate score is going to be affected cannot be a consideration. However, the truth is that most of the internal dialogue that people have in their minds center upon thinking about and planning what they will do. These thoughts are delusive - this planning for the future simply keeps them from concentrating fully on the present and impairs their performance. "Have you ever gone on a well-deserved vacation and in the middle of all of the fun and relaxation found yourself thinking about when the trip will end?" asks Sensei Dan DeProspero. Everyone has done so - and this is precisely the delusional type of thinking we must avoid in shooting.

"The Way is ... not picking things up along the road." - Tung-shan Shou-ch'u

It can be said that the real value of the art of shooting is not what we gain from it but what we lose. Lao Tzu has said, "If we learn, we accumulate day by day. If we study [a Zen art], we reduce day by day." In the practice of a Zen art, unnatural fixations ranging from muscular tension and immature attitude to vicious circles of interpersonal interactions are to be lost. It is this manner that our true self emerges. Calmness of spirit in all circumstances, acting spontaneously without restraint, acting without concern for public recognition, seeing things as they truly are, and realizing that every day is a fine day are positive qualities that are already within us. Our practice of shooting will allow us to unlock those qualities by shedding the delusive thoughts we have collected that weigh us down that mask our true self.

One objective in our practice of shooting is to achieve "heijoshin," which translates from Japanese to "ordinary mind." The Zen definition of an "ordinary mind" is one that is calm,

well-balanced and disciplined at all times. The secret in life to attaining this mindset is to treat ordinary moments as special and as a result special moments will seem ordinary. In shooting, this means not grieving over bad shots, but also not to rejoice over good shots either! In either case, analyze the execution of the just fired shot and leave it - do not carry its memory any further. Preparations for the next shot, the only shot that matters, must begin immediately. This is particularly difficult because of the cumulative nature of an aggregate - good shots or bad - there is a natural tendency to foolishly reflect on how the aggregate score is going to be affected even BEFORE we fire a shot.

Zanshin

"Zanshin" is an important term in any activity we practice as a Zen art. It translates literally to "remaining heart" and partly refers to an element of the fundamentals known as "follow-through." However, follow-through is somewhat of a trivialization of Zanshin. On a deeper level, Zanshin means that the state of mind and body used in executing an action is not dissipated by it, but is carried over into the next activity. On a physical level, breathing and stance remain correct; the body remains in balance, arm and shoulder muscles remain flexed, and we are ready to fire another shot. On a mental level, one's awareness and concentration remain after the trigger break and "calling of the shot." It is at this point where we must come to terms with the quality of the shot just fired, but we cannot dwell on it. If so, our concentration will lapse. Zanshin, therefore, is the critical phase during which is determined whether the shot just fired will haunt the shooter or whether he will be able to maintain mushin.

Understand that the ego is the source of any grief or anger we might feel after a poor shot, not the moment of the shot itself. The problem of grief arises when we subordinate the moment to our self-centered thoughts: not just this moment, but what WE want. Most emotions do not arise out of the immediate moment, such as witnessing a child getting struck by a car, but are generated by our self-centered demands that life be the way WE want it to be. While it is not bad to have such emotions, they have no importance in themselves. When such emotions emerge, our feelings should be identified and looked at with interest, but nothing more. Our attention should remain in the present moment. If we become upset, we have lost our attention to the present moment. Conversely, if we can pay complete attention to the present moment, we will never become upset.

Fudoshin

The ego is a form which has been developed over countless generations of life. It is a technique used by everyone for living in a civilized manner. The practice of pistol shooting allows us to transcend the ego by mastering it. While we progress in our art, we will gain increasing insight into our own psychological makeup. This can be a painful process, for we must acknowledge flaws in our character that make us shoot poorly at times. Greed, competitiveness, vanity, self-criticism, shyness, fear, need for approval - are but a few of the personality traits that can lead to delusive thoughts that cloud our awareness. We must recognize these flaws before we can transcend them. Recognize that shooting is an ongoing struggle with the ego, a battle with oneself. In this battle, one must face physical and psychological pain in order to experience the fruits of victory. From our practice, one learns to endure pain and austerity, delay gratification, concentrate fully on the task of the

moment, each moment, and refine form to the nth degree. The ultimate objective of our continued practice of shooting is losing the ego and realizing the freedom of the true Self.

"Don't be afraid of failure. See it as a learning experience that provides an opportunity for new growth." - Hideharu Onuma Sensei

Quite possibly, a person's most powerful weapon for survival and success is the ability to believe in oneself. It is true that one of the most difficult points in the practice of any Zen art is coming to terms with the fact that we alone are responsible for everything that happens. As a result, this reality creates a natural stress arising from doubts of our ability to perform well. However, it can be said that these self-doubts are nothing more than delusional thoughts. Just as you do not drive to work every day fearing that you are going to be fired, you cannot allow thoughts of the fear of failure cloud your mind while shooting. It is imperative that any stress we experience be identified in order that we can set our delusional thoughts aside. Once identified, stress can be seen as a positive thing. Armed with self-confidence, stress can be rechanneled into positive energy for the intense mental concentration that is necessary to succeed.

"Fudoshin" is a Zen term that translates to "immovable mind," a mind that is so clear and unclouded that nothing can move it. Since it sees everything as it really is, the immovable mind harbors no hesitation, confusion, doubt or dishonesty, and therefore fears nothing. Like an irresistible natural force that sweeps away everything in its path, this mind is invincible. Nothing can stand before it and nothing is beyond its grasp. Takuan Roshi explains, "Keeping the mind tranquil as it moves in the myriad directions in the midst of uproar and commotion is true tranquillity. Tranquility in tranquility is not true tranquility; it is tranquillity in action that is the true tranquility." While some people may view this state of mind in an overly romantic way, divorced from mundane considerations, it has, so far as shooting is concerned, a very practical application. This mind gives birth to flawless shooting and so the results of your shooting will show plainly whether you have achieved it or not. Therefore, you can only grasp it through shooting, and when you grasp it, your shooting will be perfect.

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