

What is Zen? Shooting Meets Real Life

John Dreyer

www.bullseyepistol.com

The word *Zen* is the English derivative of the Japanese *dhyana* which means "to think." In China, *dhyana* was rendered as *shii-shu* or "thinking practice," possibly more applicable to the Zen arts.

The Japanese have been masterful in taking apparently mundane daily activities and elevating them to art forms that create paths to spiritual awakening. In Zen, what makes an activity an art or "Way" is when its practice is not done merely for the immediate result but also with a view to purifying, calming and focusing the psycho-physical apparatus. Indeed, the sport of precision pistol shooting provides a perfectly suitable discipline to practice it in such a fashion. Understanding a little more about Zen will not only benefit your shooting tremendously, but it will allow you to extract more value from this sport.

"When you are hungry, eat. When you are tired, sleep. This is Zen." - Hiakajo Roshi

If one would try to describe what Zen really is, it is important to understand that Zen, in its essence, is not a doctrine. There's nothing that you are supposed to believe in. It's not a philosophy in our sense, that is to say a set of ideas. It is not some intellectual net in which one tries to catch the fish of reality. Actually, the fish of reality is more like water--it always slips through the net. And in water, as you know from swimming in a body of it, there's nothing to hang on to. Well, all of the universe is like water; it is fluid, it is transient, it is changing. And when you're thrown into the water after being accustomed to living on the dry land, you're not used to the idea of swimming. You try to stand on the water, you try to catch hold of it, and as a result you would drown. The only way to survive in the water, particularly the waters of modern philosophical confusion, is to learn how to swim. And to swim, you relax, you let go, you give yourself to the water, and you have to know how to breathe in the right way. And then suddenly you find that the water now holds you up; indeed, in a certain respect, you have become the water.

"The perfect man employs his mind as a mirror. It grasps nothing, it refuses nothing. It receives but does not keep." - Chung-Tzu

There is a Zen poem that says of wild geese flying over a lake, "The wild geese do not intend to cast their reflection, and the water has no mind to retain their image." The thoughts here are to live without "hang-ups", that is to say, to be able to drift like a cloud and flow like water, seeing that all life is a magnificent illusion, a plane of energy, and that there is absolutely nothing to be afraid of. That is, fundamentally. You will always be afraid on the surface. You will be afraid of putting your hand in the fire. You will be afraid of getting sick, etc. But you will not be afraid of FEAR. Fear will pass over your mind like a black cloud will be reflected in the mirror.

"If you see a weed, pick it." - Suhara Kohn Osho

"Eliminate the space between" is an old Japanese saying that describes an important element of Zen. While anyone should always achieve to do the "right thing," in Zen, this is

not the ultimate goal. Rather, to do those right things INSTANTLY, without any conscious deliberation is a much higher goal. Jackson Morisawa stated, "When the operation of the mind and the body coincide with one point in time and when the space between thought and conduct is eliminated in such a way that they are in perfect unison, we may regard such a moment as the present." Just as seen in the familiar image in Japanese art of the moon reflecting on water, so united should be our thoughts and actions. If we live our lives in this fashion, we will be one with our surroundings. In this light, the Suhara Osho saying, "if you see a weed, pick it" is a masterful image. If you see a weed, you will pick it without calculation. The weed becomes an integral part of you, you do not have to give picking weeds any thought, you just do it. And in that manner, we should live our lives.

"Thousands of repetitions and out of one's true self perfection emerges" - Zen saying

An element of Zen teaching is to use various "arts" as a vehicle to attain enlightenment - that is, to better understand yourself and ultimately "Universal truth." While the Zen arts are many and quite diverse, they all share that same common goal - to confront our true nature. Because of that, the Zen arts have been called "fractional expressions of Zen in limited fields." Mere technical mastery of any of these arts is not TRUE mastery. Mastering a Zen art is not based on cognitive or intellectual understanding - it is based on an intuitive awareness of the underlying principles of the Universe as they apply to that particular art. The philosophy of learning a Zen art is to learn its underlying principles through the repetitive practice of techniques. In that respect, it becomes appropriate for more modern activities to be practiced in the method of the Zen art, provided they are studied and mastered with this philosophy in mind. In our case, it will be to study precision pistol shooting in that light, a discipline that bears much resemblance to the ancient Zen art of Kyudo (archery).

"A man who has attained mastery of an art reveals it in his every action." - Gogen Yamaguchi

In Zen, there is "no inside and no outside." There should be no distinction between life on and off the firing range. One should approach all activities and situations in the same sincerity, intensity and awareness that they have while shooting. In other words, while shooting, you are learning to attain an empty mind - acting without calculation - with the underlying objective to be able to maintain it in your everyday life. When a pistol shooter is able to sustain this "empty mind" in daily life, he is able to see the underlying principles of everyday life and become aware of the life in all things. It is in this manner that the simple practices, such as Kyudo or pistol shooting become elevated to a Zen art.

"The challenge of Zen is to be happy when you are sad." - Tanouye Tenshin Roshi

By learning to maintain equipoise, or continuity of emotion, whether you fire a good shot or bad shot, you learn to maintain equipoise in daily life. As a result, you will face hardships and disappointments with the same calm that you must maintain after firing a poor shot or have a dreaded gun malfunction. You will accept responsibility for your mistakes and simply try again. This behavior is called achieving an "ordinary mind," one that is calm, well-balanced and disciplined at all times even when confronted with unexpected or unpleasant circumstances. Alas, this is the true Zen lesson of shooting. He who strives to live his life in

that way understands that the "target" is not a piece of paper downrange; the true target is within.

"The secret of a successful learner is to become like a child again." - Hideharu Onuma Sensei

Learning ANYTHING new is difficult. This is especially true for adults who must endure embarrassing situations and fumble with awkward techniques as they struggle to acquire new information and skills. It is far easier to find reasons why not to pursue the study of complex thoughts or techniques than to suffer through the learning process. Much like anticipating the chilling shock of the water in a particularly cold swimming pool, it sometimes takes someone to figuratively "push you in" to get the learning process rolling. Quite possibly, the few articles on this site exploring "Zen in Shooting" will be that push. The first task is to set aside any preconceived notions you might have about Zen and have a willingness to abandon much of your present shooting mentality. I encourage you to get a fresh start - restore "a beginner's mind" to your shooting.

©2001 by John A. Dreyer. All rights reserved.