

Zen Practice, Action, and Life

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Introduction

Minutes after firing an outstanding 2672 at a sanctioned match one day, James Henderson was approached by a timid sharpshooter-class competitor who asked, "What's the key to shooting those kind of scores?" The questioner was hoping for a magical answer emphasizing some particular aspect of the fundamentals or mental focus that would quickly loft him into personal success. To his disappointment, Jim's response was a masterful, "Lots and lots of practice." To expand on that thought, it is your *results* that will show to what extent you understand the art of shooting -- and the only way to understand the art is to *practice it*. That is accomplished as Yoshimi Junsei Sensei explains, "Searching only in yourself, you must cleanse your mind and correct your body, and, with singleness of purpose, nurture the proper spirit, train yourself in proper technique, and throw yourself into your training with all of the sincerity you can muster."

"Since shooting is honest and is a mirror, if you have any dishonesty or problem, this will surely reveal itself in the results." - Suzuki Hiroyuki Hanshi

The physical act of shooting cannot be distanced from the mind and spirit and there is no separation between the mind and the body or between technique and spirit. They are interdependent, so by properly training in technique you train your mind and spirit. To the average Western mind this may not be as obvious as it sounds; but it is one of the most fundamental things to understand in the practice of pistol shooting. What it means in practice is that every physical action is viewed as a mirror of the state of your mind and spirit.

Seishin Tanren

It is important that you base your shooting practice on an understanding that will help you focus your energies on shooting correctly. You can then visualize and internalize the spirit of the art and express it through action. If you keep the following points in mind, you will be able to practice with the right mind and spirit.

- The ultimate truth of shooting is understood through the union of mind, body, and pistol, or "Sanmi Ittai" (the three essentials as one body).
- Incessant practice, done correctly with a pure mind and spirit, is the only way to understand shooting. Nothing can take the place of this.
- Growth in shooting has a natural progression. Instruction and practice must be in accord with this natural progression.

- Shooting tradition is the living legacy of past masters and the guide for future development. Therefore, dedicated practitioners must always follow tradition and the structure it imposes.
- It is impossible to ever be perfect in shooting; however, we must never stop training. It is the devotion to constant training that gives meaning to shooting as a Way of life.

True shooting can only come from within the depths of your own being, from your guts and your blood. For this process to work, there is one vital trait that you absolutely cannot be without: the capacity for honest self-evaluation. This does not mean evaluating little details of technique. It means to really look into your own soul for the true causes of things. If you are not honest with yourself, you will always make excuses for poor shooting and will never be able to accept whatever shortcomings you may have. Everyone wants to think highly of themselves, but if this prevents you from seeing your shooting as it really is, you will never make any lasting progress. Each shot gives you the opportunity to see your true self. When you do, you must honestly accept whatever deficiencies you may find, reflect clearly on them, resolve to correct them, and then act on that resolve, come what may.

People do things for many reasons. Without realizing it, most people have ulterior or impure motives for their actions and these motivations affect their shooting. Some people want to be liked and admired for their accomplishments; some aspire to position and power; some love competition and the adulation achieved through victory; some fear losing and so shun anything having to do with competition; some hold themselves in high regard and therefore believe that their way is right while others are wrong; others think little of themselves and value everyone's opinion but their own. Peoples' deepest character traits, even those unknown to themselves, affect everything they do, including their shooting. A physically strong person will shoot with confidence and power, but with too much aggression and brute force. A spiritually weak person's shooting will vacillate and lack decisiveness. A person whose mind is erratic will shoot erratically. A sloppy person will shoot sloppily. A tense person's shooting will be tense and an angry person's shooting will be angry. As the person is, so is their shooting.

"It is necessary, through the exercise of technique in your shooting practice, to sufficiently master such mental and spiritual aspects as mental calmness, the development of spiritual power, mental and spiritual concentration, and decisiveness." - Murakami Hanshi

This is the ability of the art of shooting to act as a vehicle for "Seishin Tanren," which translates to the "forging of the spirit." It is held by most masters of any art that it is not possible to ever be completely perfect in one's art or one's life, yet you must never give up the effort, since it is this effort itself which trains you. Therefore, it is not the result of training but rather the act of training itself that is important. Pistol shooting is a Way in that it seeks to use the art of the pistol primarily as a medium for training your mind and spirit. This training will lead to great proficiency in the art of shooting if you are sincere and diligent, but this is not the sole objective. The development of character through training is the real goal. However, shooting is like anything else in life: it will give back to you exactly what you put into it. If you treat it as a sport, it will be a sport. If you treat it as a diversion, it

will be a diversion. If you treat it as a Way, it will be a Way. Therefore, it is up to you yourself to imbue shooting with meaning through your own efforts.

Makiwara Hanshi

It is a common occurrence among the developing shooter to be able to shoot high scores in practice sessions, but then cannot display the same ability when shooting in competition. This is because the mind, being swayed by negative attitudes such as attachment and desire, becomes agitated, making it impossible to put forth all of one's skill and technique. In short, they are defeated by the working of your mind (*shin*) and spirit (*ki*).

This phenomenon, described simply as "Makiwara Hanshi", or "*master of the practice target*" refers to someone who can shoot high scores in practice but falls to pieces the minute he step to the firing line in real competition.

All shooters sometimes lose their composure. At important events, you can be affected by the atmosphere of the event. As the strong internal and external stimulation causes increasing excitement, both your mind and body become abnormally tense; technique which you can normally perform smoothly and without thinking loses its cohesiveness, continuity, and sustainability; your body and mind become rigid; and you are seized by uncertainty and become unable to control your own mind. In short, you lose your self-control. No matter how strong and skillful you are, you cannot fully exercise your ability if this strength and skill is not accompanied by the proper working of the mind and spirit.

The target and the mind have a relationship similar to that of a catalyst and that which it catalyzes. When a catalyst is introduced into a seemingly stable chemical solution, for instance, a violent reaction will occur if there is anything in the solution that is receptive to the catalyst. In the same way, the target, taken by itself, is meaningless, and your mind, not affected by thoughts of the target, can remain calm. When the target and your mind are joined through the act of shooting, however, the target suddenly assumes overpowering importance. You see the 10-ring as an object that must be penetrated with every shot. It is the goal, the objective, the physical representation of all your hopes and fears. Hitting it means success, and missing it failure. Everyone reacts to it in a different way, based upon what it represents to them.

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for you to face the target and, through shooting, to learn to deal with the emotions it engenders. You cannot lie to yourself about how you feel about the target, for the shooting does not lie. It will be obvious for everyone to see. An honest shooter, therefore, does not shy away from this confrontation, for this confrontation, more than anything else, holds the key to understanding the essence of shooting as a Way.

Murakami Hanshi says that the "target on its wooden frame is just a physical object, a medium for your own mind. This physical target is unmoving. However, the target of the mind is always restless and tumultuous and is never still." When, through constant practice, you have rid yourself of the "*Seven Barriers*" brought into sharp focus by the target, your mind will become still and pure and the shooting will be natural and flowing, like a stream of pure water gushing from an unpolluted spring. As Ise Tadatake says, "training the mind is the most vital thing. If the mind is agitated the spirit is agitated; if the spirit is agitated the

heartbeat is agitated; and if the heartbeat is agitated the whole body is agitated, so the target will not be struck". Therefore, in order to train your mind, your selfish attachment to the target, which is the source of your mental agitation, must be faced squarely and overcome.

For this process to work, there is one vital trait that you absolutely cannot be without: the capacity for honest self-evaluation. This does not mean evaluating little details of technique. It means to really look into your own soul for the true causes of things. If you are not honest with yourself, you will always make excuses for poor shooting and will never be able to accept whatever shortcomings you may have. Everyone wants to think highly of themselves, but if this prevents you from seeing your shooting as it really is, you will never make any lasting progress. Each shot gives you the opportunity to see your true self. When you do, you must honestly accept whatever deficiencies you may find, reflect clearly on them, resolve to correct them, and then act on that resolve, come what may.

Heion

If you can truly shoot with all your heart, soul, and might, you will transcend your attachments and delusions and achieve "Makoto," the "stainless mind". At that instant this stainless mind will, like a smooth and perfect mirror, intuitively perceive the undistorted essence of the shooting. All doubt and fear vanish and are replaced with an unshakable confidence and certainty. This spirit of truly knowing, deep down in the marrow of your bones, that everything is all right, that there is no need to hurry, to be agitated, to be afraid, or to hesitate, is called "Heijoshin", or "everyday mind," the mind that can face everything with calmness and equanimity. It is also called "Fudoshin," or "immovable mind;" that the mind that is so clear and unclouded that nothing can move it. When the mind is freed in this way, tremendous power, energy, and vitality are unleashed. The Zen priest Takuan has taught, "Keeping the mind tranquil as it moves in the myriad directions in the midst of uproar and commotion is true tranquillity. Tranquillity in tranquillity is not true tranquillity; it is tranquillity in action that is the true tranquillity". This "uproar and commotion" definitely occurs in shooting - but not from the outside, but from the inside, from the target of your mind, "restless and tumultuous and never still." When you shoot, you are always assailed by doubts and fears that sap your strength and vitality. "Am I on pace for the new slow fire record? Will I clean this rapid fire target? Am I going to choke and throw a shot? Will I break 870 to win the .45 aggregate? What will my competitors think of my score? Am I better or worse than so-and-so?" Fudoshin cuts through all of these phantoms of the mind, reducing them to nothing, making it as though they never existed. All that is left is the brimming power of the immovable mind and the incandescence of pure shooting, the "shower of sparks born of the collision of iron and stone". The result is true "Heion" or "tranquility."

"Not to be attached to external forms, not to be unsettled within, not to think this and that, not to be cluttered with extraneous things, not to think about gain and loss and whether we are happy or sad. This can be called Zen." - Shodo Harada Roshi

Here is an magnified image that will help demonstrate how thoughts of fear can be can cloud your focus... Imagine that after a period of imprisonment, you have been selected to be executed. The guards have now come for you and are marching you from your cell to a guillotine in the courtyard for the execution. Would you be able to remain calm and composed during the walk? Would you be able to notice all of the details along the way?

Count the number of steps up to the guillotine? Breathe normally? Would you be able to willingly stick your head into the guillotine?

Or possibly this more familiar image... Imagine taking your vehicle on a road trip to arrive at a distant destination by a specific time. On the road, the average driver's thoughts would be fixated upon the destination itself, possibly even planning what will happen after they arrive. Because of their preoccupation with their destination, they fail to truly experience all of the many events of the trip itself. Furthermore, if there are any difficulties or delays during the drive, they will begin to think about the ramifications of being late to their destination. They will spend the remainder of their trip consumed in thought of the various potential ramifications of their possible late arrival. Dwelling on these delusional thoughts will likely make your driving less efficient and safe. But it will *definitely* make the long journey unpleasant! Now compare this road trip to the firing of a pistol match. You will quickly see how destructive it is to dwell on our destination (*aggregate score*) as we encounter difficulties (*poor shots*) along the way. It will do nothing but cause us undo misery and increase the possibility of further lessened performance.

Mui Shinnin

While delusive thoughts of potential poor performance may haunt us and erode our performance, the elation from our *successes* during a match may easily distract us from executing the fundamentals. For example, knowing that you just fired an outstanding NMC may cause your mind to drift, resulting in a disastrous timed and rapid fire.

"Be satisfied with your accomplishments only at death." - Yamada Jirokichi Hanshi

There is an old saying, "don't get caught up reading your own press." In the short-term, it is a warning to not admire that last good shot or string and stay on focus to execute that at the moment. You must postpone your celebrations until after the grand aggregate is posted. Likewise, in the long-term, it is just as easy to become distracted as victories and classification promotions come our way. Yamada Jirokichi's, "be satisfied with your accomplishments only at death" is an admonition to never stop training and seeking to improve yourself. But we must remember that the truth of this statement is not limited to shooting; it truly applies to everything in life.

"Make yourself master of your situation; wherever you stand is truth." - Rinzai Gigen

From the Rinzai doctrine of Zen comes the masterful image of the person as "Mui Shinnin" or the "True person of no status." Rinzai Gigen asserts that it is one's "original nature" to be sought through Zen instead of no-thinking. Rinzai has told that "there must be a true person before there can be true knowledge." The *true person* is one of Rinzai's common descriptions for the sage who acts spontaneously, responsively, and without a plot. Thus, the Rinzai image of the *true person of no status* is one who functions in his *original nature* and does not sense the demands to meet expectations or social standing. In this perspective, the competitive shooter's satisfaction must come from his focus on breathing and perfectly executing the fundamentals. He manifests his total self in the activity at hand, executing the current perfect shot, and has no concern for the accolades that may come.

"The individual we think of as body, vision, and consciousness, of what constitutes existence and function, is what Rinzai calls the true person of no status." - D. T. Suzuki

Every Day is a Good Day

If shooting is to be of any use to our lives we must be able to bring what is discovered to our daily life. Shooting does not remove us from life and the world but gives us the insight necessary to help better it. As a practitioner, one has the freedom to take the teachings to whatever purpose one desires. Practicing shooting as a Zen art lays its foundations on this very world we call everyday life. Zen principles help us notice how to view this world, and the life we are living. This is like a mother teaching her child how to gain its first steps on their own. The potential for walking is already there and the mother just encourages that potential to arise. Once the student of Zen has gained the first steps, it is like a water spring that suddenly rises from the ground, for what that stream encounters and where it meanders, is the Dharma life of the Awakened one.

The ability to apply the teachings of Zen to daily life is very important. Zen uses our ordinary life as a vehicle to enlightenment. One must always keep mindful of what one does. One must understand the importance of ordinary activities, that they are all methods of Zen.

Although knowledge is generally viewed as a key virtue, it is not so in Zen. Action is more important, and knowledge that cannot be used to enhance life is of little value. It is interesting that many people read all about the benefits of Zen and try to intellectualize the experience with out ever really having it. Although this can be beneficial in following the path it can never substitute for the actual experience.

Again, Zen practice can not only be limited to our time while shooting, it extends to the times we are just doing our normal activities. It is only in *this* way we will find that every day is a good day. The reality is that everyday is just a day there are no good days or bad days. It is up to our attitudes to decide. Life is always in a state of change and there is nothing wrong with this because it is teaching us something each day. If we can only detach ourselves from the past and enjoy what we have right now, how much better will we feel? We must learn to flow from one moment to the next. If we can do this, every day will be a good day.

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