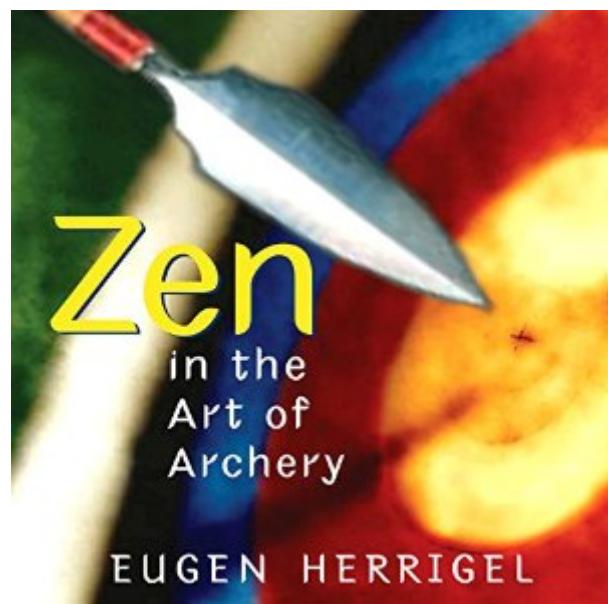


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Zen In The Art Of Archery



Synopsis

This intriguing, influential work of literature - an outstanding way to experience Zen - is now available in audio. It is almost impossible to understand Zen by studying it as you would other intellectual pursuits. The best way to understand Zen is, simply, to Zen. This is what author Eugen Herrigel allows us to do by sharing his own fascinating journey toward a comprehension of this illuminating philosophy. In Japan, an art such as archery is not practiced solely for utilitarian purposes such as learning to hit targets. Archery is also meant to train the mind and bring it into contact with the ultimate reality. If one really wishes to be master of an art, technical knowledge of it is not enough. One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an "artless art" growing out of the unconsciousness. In this way, as the author simply, clearly demonstrates, archery becomes a path to greater understanding and enlightenment.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To those who already practice Zen Buddhism, this book will seem awkward. To those nonpractitioners who would like to understand how to practice Zen Buddhism, this book will be a delightful enlightenment -- especially valuable to those who live outside of Asia. Eugen Herrigel takes on the almost impossible task of describing in writing something that has to be experienced to be understood, and is remarkably effective. The author spent six years in Japan just after World War II, and decided that he wanted to understand Zen Buddhism. He was correctly advised that Zen needed to be experienced as the path to achieving that understanding. Several possible areas were suggested, from sword fighting to flower arrangement to archery. Because he had experience with

rifle target shooting, the author chose archery. He was fortunate to be taken on by a Zen master who normally refused to teach Westerners, because they are so difficult to teach. As a typical high-achieving Westerner, Mr. Herrigel wanted to make rapid progress and to achieve conscious competence in archery. His instructor wanted him to achieve unconscious competence based on experience and build from there into spiritual awareness. This conflict in perceptions created quite a tension for both of them. This tension was ironic, because the purpose of Zen practice is to achieve the ability to be strong like the flexible water. Tension is the enemy of that state of being. Mr. Herrigel also learned from attending flower arranging classes from his wife, who was studying Zen in this way. He also benefited from finding some wonderful commentaries on sword fighting as a path to Zen that are included in this book. These are more eloquent than Mr. Herrigel, and he chose wisely in saving them for the end. I suspect that this wonderful book will mean the most to people who have regularly practiced either meditation or Eastern-style breathing. Having followed both kinds of practices for the past six years, I found it was easier to relate to the Zen concepts in that way than through trying to imagine myself performing the archery described here. By the way, this archery is not at all like what you did in camp as a youngster. It is both much more stylized and difficult. Think of it as being more like a Japanese tea ceremony than like Western-style archery. You will love the many descriptions of how Zen masters helped their students learn through experience rather than lecturing or demonstrating to them endlessly. Mr. Herrigel makes a good point concerning how Japanese teaching in these ancient arts has remained the same, while newer subjects are taught much differently. Some of the most beautiful parts of the book are the explanations that employ natural metaphors. The concept of the Samurai is explained through the fragile cherry blossom, for example, in a way you will not soon forget. The metaphors used in the archery are also very compelling and vivid. They spoke very eloquently to me, especially about how the shot is "released." I got a lot personally from this book in reconsidering how I could and should step back more often to "go with the flow" of the moment rather than trying to orchestrate everything very rationally. The book made me much more aware that I operate in both styles, probably too often in the totally preplanned rational one. I am also reminded of books about golf that I have read that cite similar principles for becoming more competent. I also remembered how all of my best golf shots have come when I was totally egoless. That lesson was very profound for me. I wonder what will happen in other areas if I follow that lesson, as well. If you have never tried meditation, I encourage you to experience this if you find this book interesting. That will probably be your best way to begin to explore what is described here. Naturally, if you can find someone to teach you one of the Japanese arts, that will further expand your soul. A good Western-style book to help you rethink your

approach to life that parallels this one in many ways is The Art of Imperfection. The title is a misnomer. What we often think of as perfection is really the height of imperfection, as the author discovered when he began substituting his own methods for those of his Zen master. Aim straight for yourself!

If one desires to pursue the path of enlightenment under Zen, one must select as a vehicle one of the Zen arts - archery, swordsmanship, brush-and-ink, the tea ceremony or flower arranging. Eugen (pronounced Ol-gen) chronicles his struggle to overcome his "much too willful will" and master the bow. This interesting story is very moving, educational and inspiring, while never becoming heavy as it easily could have under less skillful authorship. The ultimate challenge Eugen faces ends up being the smooth release of the bowstring and arrow without conscious intent, "like the ripe fruit falls from the tree", "like a baby's hand releases one object to grasp another", "like the bamboo leaf slowly bends under the weight of the snow, then releases the clump of snow without thought". Eugen, during a summer sabbatical, develops a "technique" that he believes will solve this problem and nearly gets himself thrown out of the program for "offending the Spirit of Zen". There is also an interesting account of an after-hours meeting where his teacher gives an amazing demonstration of quiet mastery in order to raise Eugen's morale and level of understanding. There is much that this little book has to offer and its message will live in your heart for a long time.

Before I begin, I would like to mention that I have been a student of Zen Buddhism for some years and have also been a kyudo practitioner for some time. Thus, I think I can speak a little from both sides. I shall first state that this book is truly an inspirational account of Mr. Herrigel's own personal, spiritual journey and should be recognized as a good read. It is also a good starting point for a Western beginner of Zen Buddhism as it gives him/her a glimpse from a Westerner's perspective. Having said that, Zen in the Art of Archery has some fundamental problems and errors that misrepresents both Zen Buddhism and kyudo. It might surprise some readers to learn that it has been severely criticized by modern teachers and practitioners of kyudo. To start with, as stated in the book, Herrigel has only one intention of learning kyudo-to become a Zen mystic. Thus his heart is not in kyudo at all. Just as one should do zazen for the sake of zazen one should also do kyudo for the sake of kyudo. Herrigel came to study kyudo with his cup half-full. Next, one must also know that Awa, Herrigel's teacher himself has never been a Zen practitioner and has never done a formal Zen training at all, which is all-important for someone who wishes to understand Zen. Awa, while a fantastic archer, has also been regarded as highly unorthodox in his teaching and views and one

should thus not equate his teachings to be the norm of kyudo and Zen. Another glaring problem is that Mr. Herrigel himself does not understand Japanese and relies on an interpreter, Mr. Komachiya. Mr. Komachiya has himself wrote that he has taken liberty in explaining some of Awa's words to Herrigel. One of the most important part of the book, the Target in the Dark, highlights this problem. The careful reader will realize that in the entire episode, Herrigel is trying to understand Awa without an interpreter at all. One can easily speculate the misinterpretations that might have taken place. Another famous incident is where Awa supposedly says, "It Shoots". Scholars of both Japanese and German have speculated that what Awa meant was that "It just happened." Meaning that he was lucky. For those looking for a more detailed criticism, one should read Yamada Shoji's excellent essay, The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery. My contention in this review is not to debase Zen's relationship with Kyudo. Indeed Kyudo is heavily influenced by Zen and one can absorb traces of Zen in the practice of Kyudo. But one should also try to read this book with an open eye and should not treat this book as a reliable, definitive account of both Zen and Kyudo.

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