

## Zen and the Art of Being a Student

I have recently been reading Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953), in which Herrigel (a German philosopher) describes spending six years in Japan being taught 'the art of archery' by a Zen Master. So that you know what it was that Herrigel was trying to master, check out this very brief clip [here](#). It seems incredible that learning to do something that looks so simple should take six years, but as Herrigel tells the tale, it took a year to learn to draw the bow without any effort at all, and then three years to learn to loose the arrow without jerking his hand away from the bow string or feeling any aftershock from the release of the bow string, and then more than a year to learn how to hit a target.

What Herrigel was having to learn over these six years was how to hit the target with his arrow *without his being involved* in the drawing of the bow, the loosing of the arrow, or the arrow hitting the target. For example, he was told after drawing the bow to wait for the bow string to release itself 'like the snow falling from a bamboo leaf' – the leaf 'bends lower and lower under the weight of the snow. Suddenly the snow slips to the ground without the leaf having stirred. Stay like that at the point of highest tension until the shot falls from you.' But Herrigel found it too painful to just hold the bow in its outstretched state, waiting for he knew not what to happen that would release the bow. So instead he hit on a technique for releasing the bow string in a way that he hoped would be 'natural': 'If, after drawing the bow, I cautiously eased the pressure of the fingers on the thumb, the moment came when the thumb, no longer held fast, was torn out of position as if spontaneously: in this way a lightning loose could be made and the shot would obviously "fall like snow from a bamboo leaf".' Herrigel used this technique in front of his Master: 'The very first shot I let off...was, to my mind, a brilliant success. The loose was smooth, unexpected. The Master looked at me for a while and then said hesitantly, like one who can scarcely believe his eyes: "Once again, please!" My second shot seemed to me even better than the first. The Master stepped up to me without a word, took the bow from my hand, and sat down on a cushion, his back towards me. I knew what that meant, and withdrew.'

Herrigel was 'fired' – and was only able to get the Zen Master to resume his tuition by having an associate intercede on his behalf. His offence was that he was still trying to *control* the process of drawing and releasing the bow, instead of letting go and getting out of the way – waiting 'without purpose' for the bow to release itself. Herrigel learned his lesson and started to stop caring whether he released the bow 'correctly' or not. 'Then one day, after a shot, the Master made a deep bow and broke off the lesson. "Just then 'It' shot!" he cried, as I stared at him bewildered.' When Herrigel realised that he had finally got to the stage (at least for one shot) of allowing 'It' to loose the shot, he let out 'a sudden whoop of delight' and was promptly reprimanded for it: "What I have said...was not praise, only a statement that ought not to touch you. Nor was my bow meant for you, for you are entirely innocent of this shot. You remained this time absolutely self-oblivious and without purpose in the highest tension, so that the shot fell from you like a ripe fruit. Now go on practising as if nothing had happened."

But what is this 'It' that a Zen master of the art of archery has to get out of the way of, allowing 'It' to take over the drawing and release of the bow? Herrigel's Master always refused to answer this question: "Once you have understood that, you will have no further need of me. And if I tried to give you a clue at the cost of your own experience, I should be the worst of teachers and should deserve to be sacked! So let's stop talking about it and go on practising." In his book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) (the title is a

deliberate invocation of Herrigel's book) and its sequel *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals* (1991), Robert M Pirsig tells us that 'It' is 'Quality' – a metaphysical force that, in its dynamic form, is constantly and restlessly seeking to manifest Itself in the world. So a high quality shot from Herrigel's bow is literally that – a shot produced by Quality, rather than Herrigel. And this is where students should get *very* interested in the experiences of people like Herrigel, and the claims of someone like Pirsig, because if students should be interested in anything, it is in doing high quality work.

However, students could be expected at the same time to be resistant to the idea that there exists something outside them that is responsible for their doing high quality work when they do it. That's because we live in a culture that encourages us to think that *tricks and techniques* (like Herrigel's gradually allowing his thumb to lose grip on the bow string) are the secret of success in any enterprise, and a culture that emphasises the overriding importance of our being in *control* of what we do and how our lives go and that a loss of control over these things *is* a loss – something we should try to avoid if we possibly can. Against these cultural forces we could make the following observations:

(1) Everyone would accept that ideas are a crucial component in producing high quality work, but where ideas come from seems wholly mysterious. They just come into our head – but where from? There is certainly no trick or technique that we know of that can guarantee us that we will come up with good ideas. People who are particularly good at coming up with good ideas seem to be tuned into a frequency that other people just aren't. And people who have this talent are usually very happy to admit that they cannot take any credit for it. For example, John Lennon and Paul McCartney admitted that their songs simply seemed to come to them – with the best example of that being the song 'Yesterday', the complete melody of which was simply in Paul McCartney's head when he woke up one day (with the result that McCartney assumed for weeks later that he must have heard the tune being played by someone else at some point in the past and therefore couldn't use it himself).

(2) High quality work seems to have a naturalness and inevitability about it that makes it very hard to think that the person doing the work had much to do with its final form. Another Beatles reference: the run off at the end of their *Sgt Pepper* album says, over and over again, 'Could never be any other way.' To the same effect, when students are asking me for advice as to how to write good essays, I frequently invoke the story of Michelangelo being asked how he produces such wonderful sculptures: his response was, 'Inside this block of marble is an angel, and I am simply releasing it.' Moreover, when someone who is going through a dry patch *tries* by sheer effort of will to force things and produce work of high quality, the result is *always* a failure. Contrast, for example, Oasis' '[Don't Look Back in Anger](#)' (1995) with their '[Lyla](#)', ten years later; or Suede's '[Saturday Night](#)' (1996) with their '[Streetlife](#)', six years later. The first song in each pair sounds like it's existed forever; the second song is obviously the product of a band straining to summon back a muse that has long since fled (in both cases as a result of the consumption of huge quantities of narcotics – don't do drugs, kids).

(3) As Pirsig observes in his *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* book, it seems impossible to define what 'quality' is. We all know the difference between high quality work and low quality work – but if we have to put our finger on why a particular novel or album or film is of better quality than another novel/album/film, we become very inarticulate and normally resort to simply insisting 'It is just is!' So we are not able to define when Quality is present in a particular work – we are simply equipped, if we are functioning properly as

Quality-detecting machines (which is what human beings may, essentially, be), to respond to Quality when it is present in a work. (Here's a story I sometimes like to recall: 'A tourist is going round a Rembrandt exhibition, mouthing off about what paintings he likes and dislikes, when he is gently taken aside by an attendant who tells him, "In this place, it is not *the paintings* that are on trial.") And if we are unable to *define* when Quality is present in a particular work, it seems unlikely (though not impossible) that we are able to *determine* when Quality will be present in a particular work. Either the work is blessed with Its presence or it isn't.

The implications are unnerving in a culture that, as I've said, preaches that you can achieve anything you want if you set your mind to it. Quite the opposite seems to be true when it comes to doing high quality work. I've already suggested in my essay 'Lose Yourself' that focussing on doing what is in your interests may actually get in the way of your doing what is in your interests. Here I am making a similar suggestion – if you want to produce high quality work, don't *aim* to produce high quality work through your own *efforts*: let high quality work be produced through you *by getting out of the way* of its being produced. So your role is simply to remove the roadblocks that *you yourself* erect in the way of high quality work being produced through you, and then let Quality do the rest. Here are some ways of doing that:

(1) *Tools*. Obviously, no one can become a Zen Master of the art of archery without the tools that enable them to practise that art – a good bow, straight arrows, a decent target, peaceful surroundings. Similarly, no one can produce high quality work as a student without the tools that enable that work to be produced – in particular, the kind of knowledge that a high quality answer will draw on. So reading *a lot* is indispensable to putting yourself into a position to produce high quality work.

(2) *Time*. A rushing, let's get it over and done with, mentality is obviously incompatible with producing high quality work and will instead result in a bodge job. Entering the Zen state of allowing high quality work to be produced through usually involves *waiting* for that state to enter you – just as Herrigel had to wait for the moment when the shot would be released through him. So give yourself the time to think and contemplate and compose that is needed for high quality work to be composed.

(3) *Immersion*. High quality work is produced when you immerse yourself in that work, shutting out everything else. For this reason, perhaps, Pirsig claims in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that the inverse side of Quality is caring – 'a feeling of identification with what one is doing'. If you care about answering a question, then a lot of components to allowing a high quality answer to that question to be produced lock into place – you become *indifferent* to distractions that might lure you away from answering the question or tempt you to rush your answer; you become *attentive* to the question – what it is saying, what issues are raised by it; and you *respond* to the question that has been set, and not a completely different question or the question that you wish had been set.

(4) *Presentness*. The last two preconditions for high quality to be produced by you require you to cultivate a 'be here now' mentality where you simply exist in the present, and focus on what is to be done right here, right now, and refuse to worry about the future and dwell on the past.

(5) *Holism*. As the examples of Suede and Oasis show, low quality activities and experiences (such as taking drugs) in one sphere of your life can prevent you producing high quality work

in another sphere, principally by destroying the peace of mind that you need to enjoy in order to adopt a ‘be here now’ mentality. So producing high quality work as a student requires that you engage in ‘right thoughts, right words, right actions’ in relation to all aspects of your life – and that requires you *in all aspects of your life* to follow the above pieces of advice on ways of removing the roadblocks that you yourself put in the way of allowing Quality to manifest itself through you. A common Zen story has it that a Zen Master (the identity of the Master varies according to who is telling the story) was asked what the essence of Zen is, and he responded, ‘Eat when hungry, sleep when tired’. Live in the present in all aspects of your life so that you can live in the present in the work you do.

(6) *Detachment*. Going through the preceding five pieces of advice as to how to enable high quality work to be produced through you, makes it instantly obvious just how far the society and culture we live in is anti-Quality in its mentality. There are so many aspects of the world we live in that militate against us cultivating the virtues required to be receptive to achieving Quality in our lives. We are surrounded by temptations to adopt a ‘that’ll do’ mentality towards our work, and to focus more on the future and the past than what needs to be done here and now. For example, I’m terrible at ‘sleeping when tired’ because even when I know I should go to sleep, chasing a YouTube rabbit hole or finishing a film on my iPad is so much more tempting. (And I’m actually finishing this essay on about 3 hours’ worth of sleep, and simply hoping that this won’t affect the quality of the essay – though I’m certain it will have low quality ramifications for other things I need to do today.) So if we are to produce high quality work, and to live generally high quality lives, we have to learn to detach ourselves from the culture and society we live in. Don’t be led around by the nose by interests and entities that could not care less for what your interests are. Think for yourself, and be highly suspicious of conventional opinion, and the ‘wisdom of crowds’. If everyone is going in one direction in the society and culture that we live in at the moment, there is a very high probability that Quality lies in the opposite direction – and you should go for it, no matter how hard it is to move in the opposite direction to everyone else.