

# The Myth of the Myth: Re-Examining *Zen in the Art of Archery*

BY ANDREW DAVID KING

One wonders if Johannes Gutenberg had any idea as to the colossal influence his work would have on the course of human history and the world. The largely unknown state of his achievements at the time of his death in 1468 at the age of seventy did not exactly predict such an impact. Only gaining limited prosperity in his lifetime, Gutenberg's invention of the mechanical printing press—a creation which drew upon the woodblock technologies of China, used to manufacture texts as early as the ninth century, but which he altered to produce movable block type—hardly served as anything more than a means of employment.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as irony often turns out to be a handmaid to history, the work of one German man, whose name lies mostly in obscurity, has arguably had a more drastic long-term effect on the day-to-day life of human beings than all revolutions, upheavals, or wars fought since his time. Gutenberg struck a lethal blow to the knowledge monopoly of the elite, making more information accessible to those on the lower rungs of the social ladder. What started as a local phenomenon local within Europe has impacted countries all over the world. The sharing of printed mediums facilitated the collision of not only the oversimplified categories of “science” and “religion,” but cultures, lifestyles, and spiritualities from all corners of the world. This opportunity for greater understanding, however, carries with it the adverse opportunity for misunderstanding as well.

The East and West, which in recent centuries alone have merged from two almost entirely separate cultural entities into a more united amalgam as rapid globalization condenses the world, are a particularly apt example. In regard to Eastern spirituality, particularly Zen Buddhism, one text has played an especially important role in introducing the main tenets of the religion to Western audiences. From 1924 to 1929, a German professor named Eugen Herrigel maintained a position as a philosophy lecturer at Tohoku Imperial University in

<sup>1</sup> Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design* (n.p.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1998).

Sendai, Japan.<sup>2</sup> Herrigel, a Nazi, was born near Heidelberg, Germany in 1884 and studied theology and later philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Herrigel's own interest in the mysticism of the German sage Meister Eckhart later brought him to investigate Zen.<sup>3</sup> While teaching at Tohoku Imperial University, Herrigel also studied archery under the instruction of Awa Kenzo, a somewhat rogue practitioner and teacher of an unconventional brand of *kyudo*, the traditional Japanese art of archery. *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Herrigel's slender chronicle of his spiritual and physical process toward mastering the technical and spiritual skills taught by Awa<sup>4</sup>—first recorded as an essay in 1936, then published as a manuscript in 1948<sup>5</sup>—served as one of the most significant texts in the history of Zen's introduction to the West. A touchstone that still remains popular over five decades after its first appearance, the international bestseller is now regarded by many as a seminal spiritual classic that shaped, and continues to shape, the views and attitudes of countless Westerners toward Eastern thought, as well as how Easterners themselves view the cultural traditions of their own past.

In light of the excitement surrounding this book, consistent since its publication in German in 1948, and several years later in English (1953) and Japanese (1955), scholars have turned a magnifying glass to Herrigel's revered narrative, questioning both his understanding of Zen concepts within the work as well as particular expressions supposedly spoken to him directly by Awa Kenzo.<sup>6</sup> Yamada Shoji, whose essay, "The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery," published in the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* in 2001, designated much of the hype surrounding this volume as the result of the widespread misunderstanding of what is, essentially, a fundamentally flawed work. Yamada claims that several of the statements supposedly made by Awa were not accurately interpreted by Sozo Komachiya, Herrigel's translator, and so subsequently the German professor misunderstood some of the most major

<sup>2</sup> Shoji Yamada, "The Myth of Zen in the Art of Archery," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* (2001), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the Japanese custom of placing surnames before individual names, I shall subsequently refer to Awa Kenzo as Awa, Yamada Shoji as Yamada, et. al. throughout the text of the essay.

<sup>5</sup> Yamada, "The Myth of Zen," 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 16.

concepts on which he based *Zen in the Art of Archery*.<sup>7</sup> Also, Yamada argues in his 2005 book *Shots in the Dark: Zen, Japan, and the West* against Herrigel's expressed understanding of Japanese cultural heritage, stating that Zen was not nearly as integral to the culture's trademark arts as Herrigel supposed: "In [*Zen and the Art of Archery*], Japanese archery is described in even more mystical terms, and not only archery, but all of Japanese culture, is presented as being synonymous with Zen."<sup>8</sup> In his essay, Yamada explains why, based on Herrigel's supposed misconstructions, he believes *Zen in the Art of Archery* ultimately did not only offer one Westerner's commentary on his experience of Eastern traditions, but ended up invoking entirely new schools of thought within Japanese culture centered around studying Zen through archery.<sup>9</sup>

Before these recent and valid concerns are addressed, it is imperative to first explore several of the key concepts of *Zen in the Art of Archery* and understand what there is to gain from this volume—or, at the least, attempt to recognize what has driven its popularity since its initial publication in 1948 and divine its place on the hazy timeline of cultural interaction. First, it must be clearly stated that *Zen in the Art of Archery* is not anything close to a how-to manual on the specifics of hitting a bull's-eye or the types of available bows. Therefore, those who are actually studying archery in correlation to any spiritual quests—or those who are learning to practice the Japanese art of *kyudo* itself—should probably avoid coloring their own experiences by reading about Herrigel's beforehand. For the ordinary person, however, whose school day or job leaves no time for bows and arrows, the book imparts a viewpoint atypical to most Western thought regarding the process by which one becomes proficient at a skill or practice and simultaneously embarks upon self-discovery. The steps and states of mind necessary to accomplish a particular goal are explored through what Herrigel maintains are Zen viewpoints. In his short book, Herrigel details his initial aspirations, the long and difficult arc of his years

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Shoji Yamada, introduction to *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West*, trans. Earl Hartman (The University of Chicago Press, 2009), <http://books.google.com/books?id=MCaf86Fg4GEC&dq=shoji+yamada+shots+in+the+dark> (accessed November 25, 2009), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Yamada, "The Myth of Zen," 2.

spent studying with Awa Kenzo, and the culminating conclusion in which he explains his newfound understanding and adoption of Zen principles. The latter is accomplished in a tone of profound confidence—the voice of a diligent student unswervingly faithful in the revelations of his spiritual breakthroughs.

Thus, through its representation of Herrigel's processes, *Zen in the Art of Archery* provides a skeletal framework for personal journeys of all sorts. This, combined with its relatively short length and brevity with which its main concepts are clarified, may be what accounts for so much of its popularity. Of particular interest to dedicated practitioners of certain arts is Herrigel's understanding of the process of achievement as one that the striver must not actively or consciously pursue against both external and internal forces:

'Just as one uses a burning candle to light others with,' so the teacher transfers the spirit of the right art from heart to heart, that it may be illumined. If such should be granted to the pupil, he remembers that more important than all outward works, however attractive, is the inward work which he has to accomplish if he is to fulfill his vocation as an artist. The inward work, however, consists in his turning the man he is, and the self he feels himself and perpetually finds himself to be, into the raw material of a training and shaping whose end is mastery. In it, the artist and the human being meet in something higher. For mastery proves its validity as a form of life only when it dwells in the boundless Truth and, sustained by it, becomes the art of the origin. The Master no longer seeks, but finds.<sup>10</sup>

In order to achieve mastery, one must release attachment to both the desired goal and one's own ego, disregarding the past and future to focus on the immediate present—a view more foreign to Western thought half a century ago than it is today.

Herrigel places great importance on personal experience and struggle as opposed to formulaic processes, partly because that is the only reference point he has to speak candidly about his approach to of spiritual self-discovery, and partly because introspection is such a key aspect of Zen, highlighted especially in *zazen* (Zen meditation).<sup>11</sup> It is experience, and the self-knowledge that springs from it, that is the key to penetrating into "the spirit of the Great

<sup>10</sup> Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1953; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 45.

<sup>11</sup> Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, updated and revised ed. (1965; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 3.

Doctrine.”<sup>12</sup> Herrigel admonishes his readers as he himself has been admonished: “It is my own experiences which authorize me in this undertaking. . . . I speak about myself only because I see no other way of reaching the goal I have set before me.”<sup>13</sup> As vague and disputed as religious concepts such as Awa’s “Great Doctrine” and “enlightenment” are, it would be difficult for even the most well-read proponent of Zen Buddhism to refute that personal, experiential wisdom is indeed one of the mainstays of the religion (if we may even call Zen Buddhism a religion in the Western, Abrahamic sense of the term). In regard to the appearance of such ideas in the text of *Zen in the Art of Archery* that run contrary to the Western audience to which it was initially released, several key passages further help to illustrate this point. In particular, one excerpt in which Awa Kenzo converses with Herrigel about the nature of the relationship of an archer to his or her surroundings, as well as the appropriate disposition of the archer, demonstrates an obvious conflict with the Western emphasis on concepts such as the ego and having a conscious objective:

‘The right art,’ cried the Master [Awa Kenzo], ‘is purposeless, aimless! The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen. . . . Archery is not a pastime, not a purposely game, but a matter of life and death! I stand by that. We master archers say: one shot—one life! What this means, you cannot yet understand. But perhaps another image will help you, which expresses the same experience. We master archers say: with the upper end of the bow the archer pierces the sky; on the lower end, as though attached by a thread, hangs the earth. If the shot is loosed with a jerk there is a danger of the thread snapping. For purposeful and violent people the rift becomes final, and they are left in the awful center between heaven and earth.’<sup>14</sup>

It should be duly noted that Awa Kenzo did not practice or teach *kyudo* exactly; rather, he taught a rarer brand of archery that lent itself to mystical roots.

In his essay, Yamada explains that Awa was not in fact directly affiliated with Zen. Thus, the claim is true that Herrigel did not technically receive Zen training; Awa was not a Zen priest, nor had he himself even received training. As Yamada explains:

<sup>12</sup> Herrigel, *Zen in the Art*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 31.

... It appears that Awa never practiced Zen even once in his life ... Why, then, did Herrigel associate Awa's teachings with Zen? Before getting to that question, let us follow Awa's life to its conclusion. Herrigel became Awa's student ... one year before Awa began to talk about founding Daishadokyo (Great Doctrine of the Way of Shooting)—a proposal that provoked fierce opposition among Awa's students at the Number Two College and at Tohoku Imperial University. In 1927, in his forty-eighth year [at forty-seven years of age], Awa overruled the bitter objections of his students and formally established a new organization named Daishadokyo. Awa's students at the Number Two College later testified that Daishadokyo consisted of 'archery as a religion' ...<sup>15</sup>

Kelley L. Ross, Ph.D., claims that the practice Herrigel undergoes in *Zen in the Art of Archery* actually has Taoist affiliations, stating, "The Zen practice of the 'art of archery' combines Taoist theory and Taoist purposes with Buddhist theory and Buddhist purposes. The Taoist purpose of art is to perfect an art and achieve beauty. These are purposes *wholly alien* to Buddhism."<sup>16</sup> Why, then, did Herrigel associate the brand of archery which was being taught to him during his time spent with Awa exclusively with Zen? The most likely answer is simply confusion; Awa's teachings consistently emphasize concepts and notions closely aligned with Zen teachings. Also, it is understandable that a foreigner—especially a Westerner that already has both the greatest of possible cultural divides and an indirect understanding of certain aspects of Zen—would associate a man who used Zen terminology to discuss his own personal spiritual viewpoints with Zen itself.

Awa used *kensho*—a word literally meaning, "seeing into one's own nature"<sup>17</sup> and one of the most recognizable of Zen terms—to communicate one of two main precepts used during the founding of Daishadokyo: that one can "see true nature in the shot," a phrase which the word *kensho* is part of in Japanese, and that one must "put an entire lifetime of exertion into each shot," which correlates to the "one shot—one life!" statement recorded by Herrigel in *Zen in the Art of Archery*.<sup>18</sup> These statements clearly correspond to the grave importance Awa placed upon archery in his interactions with Herrigel as illustrated throughout the book.

Yamada asserts that no official connection, however peripheral, existed between Awa and

<sup>15</sup> Yamada, "The Myth of Zen," 11.

<sup>16</sup> Kelley L. Ross, "Zen and the Art of Divebombing, or, The Dark Side of the Tao," Friesian.com, <http://www.friesian.com/divebomb.htm> (accessed December 1, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Kapleau, *The Three Pillars*, 409.

<sup>18</sup> Yamada, "The Myth of Zen," 9.

Zen. This notion that Awa was neither a teacher of Zen nor even technically a practitioner is valid, since it deals with one of the most underlying, essential concepts crucial to the text. Yet, it is also worth noting that readers who are not paying close attention to Herrigel's prose may not realize that the entire book is missing a vital indicator from an external source that any of the material he learns under Awa is actually Zen. Herrigel is obviously convinced of the true "Zen" of his own experience. At no place in the book, however, is there any indication that there was direct communication between Awa and Herrigel regarding Herrigel's intent to study Zen. Rather, there exist only a few brief paragraphs that detail Herrigel's attempts to seek out a capable and proficient teacher of archery, at which point his colleague (and later, translator) Sozo Komachiya introduced him to Awa Kenzo.<sup>19</sup>

Although Herrigel himself discusses "Zen"—or, at least, what he has come to understand as Zen—at some length in the manuscript's beginning and ending, he mentions none of his Master's Zen teaching accreditations. This is because, as Yamada observed, none existed. In his essay, Yamada suggests that one of the primary reasons for Herrigel's misunderstanding of Awa's mystical teachings as Zen—in the sense of the term most loyal to spiritual understanding, and less so to Herrigel's initial technical understanding—is the mistranslation of a certain indispensable phrase mentioned when Awa attempts to explain to Herrigel the concept of detaching oneself from the temptation to consciously strive toward a goal:

One day I asked the Master: "How can the shot be loosed if 'I' do not do it?"  
"It shoots," he replied.  
"I have heard you say that several times before, so let me put it another way: How can I wait self-obliviously for the shot if 'I' am no longer there?"  
"It waits at the highest tension."  
"And who or what is this 'It'?"  
"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 would be the worst of teachers and would deserve to be sacked! So let's stop talking about it and go on practicing."<sup>20</sup>

Yamada has much to say about this passage in *Zen in the Art of Archery*, which he states Herrigel

<sup>19</sup> Herrigel, *Zen in the Art*, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 51–52.

saw as the “central pillar of Awa’s doctrine.”<sup>21</sup> According to his hypothesis, Komachiya, the translator mediating between Awa and Herrigel, mistranslated a relatively mundane statement by Awa—something along the lines of “that’s it”—into something with vaguely mystical and, coincidentally, spiritual connotations, which Herrigel then chose to emphasize in his manuscript.<sup>22</sup> According to Yamada, who points out that there is no evidence to indicate that Awa taught the concept of “‘It’ shoots” to any of his other disciples, this single instance of mistranslation is enough to cast doubts on the accuracy of Herrigel’s account of his experiences, if not Herrigel’s earnest belief that he was honestly relating Awa’s statements exactly as they were related to him.<sup>23</sup> Yamada supports the latter assertion, and mentions that Herrigel declared in his foreword to the 1956 edition of *Zen in the Art of Archery* that “The narration in this book contains not a single word that was not said directly by my teacher. I have not used any metaphors or comparisons that he did not use.”<sup>24</sup>

Yet, so many conversations concerning the metaphysical take place between Herrigel and Awa that to regard Yamada’s hypothesis as truth leads to one of two assumptions: that either all of these conversations were as sloppily translated, subsequently resulting in incorrect understanding for Herrigel, or simply that the translation of a singular phrase voids the rest of Awa’s teachings. Each of these two options seems equally illogical. The examination of another passage in *Zen in the Art of Archery* offers a third option:

Obediently we practiced letting off our shots without taking aim. . . . I fell back into the temptation to worry. The Master pretended not to notice my disquiet, until one day I confessed to him that I was at the end of my tether. “You worry yourself unnecessarily,” the Master comforted me. “Put the thought of hitting right out of your mind! You can be a Master even if every shot does not hit. The hits on the target are only the outward proof and confirmation of your purposelessness at its highest, of your egolessness, your self-abandonment, or whatever you like to call this state. There are different grades of mastery, and only when you have made the last grade will you be sure of not missing the goal. . . . These are processes which are beyond the reach of understanding. Do not forget that even in Nature there are correspondences which cannot be understood, and yet are so real that we have grown accustomed to them, just as if they could not be any different. I will give you an example which I have often puzzled over. The spider dances her web without knowing that there are flies who will get caught in it. The fly... gets caught in the

<sup>21</sup> Yamada, “The Myth of Zen,” 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 24.



net without knowing what lies in store. But through both of them 'It' dances, and inside and outside are united in this dance. So, too, the archer hits the target without having aimed—more I cannot say."<sup>25</sup>

Even if "'It' shoots" was a mistranslation by Komachiya, this passage, along with others in *Zen in the Art of Archery*—in particular the passage above—contain an embedded point strikingly similar to what was expressed in the supposedly mistranslated phrase. D.T. Suzuki, the Zen scholar who remains renowned even today (although criticized by some for his idiosyncrasy), authored an introduction for Herrigel's manuscript.<sup>26</sup> In light of this, it appears safe to assume that Suzuki felt the text offered insights related to Zen, or, at least, to his own view of Zen.

Although Yamada's work is undeniably important in that it clarifies certain particulars regarding the background of Herrigel and the passageway of the work through modern cultures, it is not reasonable to agree with the assertion made plain throughout his essay and even in its title: that what Herrigel has asserted is Zen in archery is, in fact, "myth," plain and simple. Even if Yamada's hypothesis was true—that *Zen in the Art of Archery* was founded on a single faulty elucidation and that Herrigel's recounting of the details was absolutely proven to be formed fundamentally on a misunderstanding—that nature of the book would immediately discredit such a finding as nothing more than an interesting footnote. The professor wrote primarily about his direct experience as a student of Awa Kenzo, about his struggles and shortcomings. Although incorrect analyses and judgments of Japanese culture do appear throughout the text, as Yamada expounds upon in *Shots in the Dark: Zen, Japan, and the West*—such as in regard to traditions and the relationship between pupil and teacher—they do not discount the validity of what Herrigel himself experienced firsthand.<sup>27</sup> Thus, *Zen in the Art of Archery* must be divided into two separate modes of writing, for which there must exist two separate analyses. The first section is the one with which scrutinizers of the text may find issues with the accuracy of particular details. The second section entails the narrative prose containing

<sup>25</sup> Herrigel, *Zen in the Art*, 56-57.

<sup>26</sup> Robert H. Sharf, "Who's Zen: Zen Nationalism Revisited," in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School & Zen Nationalism*, ed. J. W. Heisig and J. C. Maraldo (Honolulu: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

<sup>27</sup> Richard Katz, "Awa Kenzo," Frogjot.com, [http://www.frogjot.com/awa\\_sensei.html](http://www.frogjot.com/awa_sensei.html) (accessed November 23, 2009).

the trajectory of Herrigel's own self-exploration and self-realization—indeed, his own subjective “myth”—over which there exists no higher authority than Herrigel himself. If Herrigel testifies from a personal standpoint to find correlations between Zen and his experiences, then there exists no vehicle to disprove such subjective statements.

*Zen in the Art of Archery* is considered by many to be, if not the main, one of the primary texts responsible for the introduction of Zen thought to Western audiences in the last half of the twentieth century, and one of the first to initiate a dialogue between two distinctly different cultural traditions. As a stranger to the East, Herrigel had no previously published works, studies, or even scholars to reference in his own attempts at understanding Japanese culture. Apparently, the dearth of literature on the subject contained no works so significant as to dissuade Herrigel of the need to publish his own account of his years spent studying archery in Japan and the spiritual revelations he had there, or to clarify for him some of the misunderstandings Yamada supposes he had. Even given Yamada's research about Awa Kenzo's lack of a Zen background, this does not render Awa's teachings, or Herrigel's experience derived from them, unrelated to Japanese culture, except perhaps, in a manner that Yamada views as divergent from the mainstream. In light of the knowledge uncovered by Yamada, the specifics of *Zen in the Art of Archery* have been clarified, and Herrigel's experience placed in a more accurate context. The potency and relevancy of the text, however, principally for those practicing an art, have not been diluted by the decades.

There have been, and continue to be, countless books written on Zen by Western writers who know little about the subject save for what they themselves have read from the reports of their Western peers. The irony of this soon becomes apparent: Zen emphasizes personal, introspective experience as something of paramount importance to understanding one's self and the world; yet, in order to sell books, more authors attempting to engage in the Eastern-spirituality craze write about other people's experiences. This, combined with general disagreement over concepts not clearly defined, has resulted in the controversy over numerous texts similar to *Zen in the Art of Archery*. This applies even to British philosopher Alan Watts'

1957 book, *The Way of Zen*, still considered by many today an indispensable work in expanding the sphere of influence of Eastern spirituality to Western culture. Watts discusses Herrigel's book, affirming, "The best account of... training thus far available in a Western language is... [Herrigel's] story of his own experience under a master of the Japanese bow."<sup>28</sup> Yet, *The Way of Zen* was criticized several years after its publication by Roshi Philip Kapleau, a well-respected Zen priest, in his own volume. Kapleau's book, the similarly well-known *The Three Pillars of Zen*, published in 1965, disparaged *The Way of Zen* for subjecting the tenets of Zen to the processes and rubrics standard to Western thought when, according to Kapleau, it completely bypassed them.<sup>29</sup> Because of this, Kapleau derided Watts' book as an incorrect examination of the origins of Zen and the practices of its adherents, and recommended against it to those intending to gain some introductory knowledge about what Zen Buddhism truly is—even going so far as to call some of Watts' conclusions "highly misleading" and a "distortion of Zen."<sup>30</sup> But *Zen in the Art of Archery* is not an outsider's view of someone else's experience or perceptions, nor is its main goal to explicate the history and lineage of Zen in Western fashion; it is one man's candid, if occasionally unnecessarily extravagant, account of his own experience as a novice to a spiritual tradition, as he attempts to gain insight to its inner workings, and strives to incorporate them into his own daily life. Herrigel's forthright pursuit of these basic aims is what differentiates *Zen in the Art of Archery* from so many of the other texts about Zen, classic or not, in existence today.

Arguably, what also contributes to its enduring renown amidst the vast sea of works on the same subject is its somewhat fantastical quality—combined with already confessional and conversational prose. Although some writers, such as Earl Hartman, translator of Yamada's essay and of his book, *Shots in the Dark: Japan, Zen, and the West*, have asserted that Herrigel, in *Zen in the Art of Archery* "had no clue" as to what he was talking about, it is not difficult to perceive how the message of the book could be misconstrued as engaging in a sort of oblique

<sup>28</sup> Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (1957; New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 195.

<sup>29</sup> Kapleau, *The Three Pillars*, 97.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

romanticism.<sup>31</sup> Herrigel is not a neutral narrator, but a man relating back his own story. At times he patiently describes and explicates, at others he is so rapt to explain the seemingly unexplainable that he falls into hyperbole. Throughout, his eagerness and passion to understand Zen as well as himself is clear. Contrary to Hartman's view, it is neither romantic nor frivolous to trust in the narrative of Herrigel's personal experience as exactly that: personal experience. As previously stated, a primary Zen precept, regardless of the difference between beliefs affiliated with particular schools of Zen such as Rinzai or Soto, is faith in the validity of individual encounters with situations and circumstances and the formation of beliefs based upon them. Most of what can be related to Zen throughout *Zen in the Art of Archery* stems from Herrigel's frank depiction of his actual experience, rather than from his insights regarding the practices and more abstract theories of the religion—which in the context of the modern body of writing about Zen seem rather pedestrian, but with regard to the date and location of the volume's initial publication seem less so.

*Zen in the Art of Archery* may only be one Westerner's experience of studying Zen in Japan, yet it remains widely acclaimed by sectors of both academia and popular culture. The book, as this essay has explored, has also been criticized as inaccurate in regard to several of its key concepts. True or false as these charges may be, *Zen in the Art of Archery* stands pronounced in the canon of literature focusing on the aspects of Eastern spirituality most Westerners know little or nothing about. In spite of the large, trendy body of modern thought on the subject that has attempted to transform Zen into a buzzword for sales through numerous mentions in films and books of all genres, hawking it as a trademark of intellectuality, Herrigel's lean manuscript still emerges above them all, and for good reason. The concepts discussed in the slim tome, despite having been introduced to Western culture over half a century ago, have yet to fade from modern-day debate, significantly affecting both Western and Japanese thought and culture by turning Herrigel's personal experience into public knowledge. It is a book whose values,

<sup>31</sup> Earl Hartman, "Herrigel Had No Clue," review of *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugen Herrigel, Amazon.com, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R384AW62GE3A16> (accessed December 2, 2009).

once popularized, returned to the Japanese culture from which they were derived and applied an external influence.<sup>32</sup>

“At first sight it must seem intolerably degrading for Zen—however the reader may understand this word—to be associated with anything so mundane as archery,” writes Herrigel in the first line of *Zen in the Art of Archery*.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, there are different ways to come to understand Zen; Herrigel’s experience and approach is just one of them. There is no definitive manual on Zen, or in this case, Zen as confined to the particular processes of archery. It is worth adding that Herrigel did not have the same perceptions regarding Zen as those who were born and raised into the culture did, and he did have predisposed ideas about it.<sup>34</sup> This can be said of anyone who is transported to an alien environment and forced to adapt. The problem with Yamada’s assessment of the errors in the book, although correct in a sense, is that he applies technical understandings to a text which has its meaning rooted in the abstractions of personal testimony—enigmatic, spiritual testimony to be exact. While certain phrases may have been misinterpreted by Komachiya, it is unlikely that over the course of spending several years intimately training with Awa Kenzo, Herrigel failed to understand his main points. It is not unreasonable to expect that, in the course of such a span of time, a handful of phrases and expressions would undoubtedly be translated imperfectly. Even Hartman, purportedly a master in kyudo himself, when translating particular Japanese terms in the same essay which Yamada uses to discuss Komachiya’s supposed mistranslation, adds a footnote to one section stating, “The translation of many of these technical terms is speculative.”<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the same is true for certain passages in *Zen in the Art of Archery*, specifically the more esoteric statements of Awa Kenzo. Phrases may not have always been translated verbatim due to structural differences between the two languages, but it is the job of the translator—in this case, Komachiya’s—to ensure that the closest meaning possible is transmitted.

<sup>32</sup> Shoji Yamada, introduction to *Shots*, 6.

<sup>33</sup> Herrigel, *Zen in the Art*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Yamada, “The Myth of Zen,” 8.

A more accurate understanding of Herrigel's landmark book lies in neither a complete adoption of, or belief in, the ideas he propagates in the text, nor is it a dismissal, such as that of Yamada and Hartman. Ultimately, one should understand *Zen in the Art of Archery* as a temple of personal experience and artistic, intellectual, and spiritual pursuits—one with its share of blemishes, as this essay has explored—that helped to fan the spark of the West's interest in Eastern culture and spirituality. As Yamada demonstrates, there are discrepancies in the text that must be necessarily examined, and he provides a service by documenting them. Still, the exposure of large new audiences to certain accurate elements of Zen and Japanese culture due to the proliferation of the book's popularity, however, is tangible and remains well-acknowledged.

In modern America, Zen has both garnered a remarkable portion of practitioners as well as denigrated into a chic marketing ploy. In regard to *Zen in the Art of Archery*, the 2005 movie *The Weather Man* provides an apt example. In the film, Nicolas Cage portrays a divorced, troubled weatherman attempting to resolve problems with his life, including his ruined marriage and family life. As he does so, he takes up archery as an outlet for his frustration and embarks on a course of introspection and subsequent external progress jarringly similar to what Herrigel reported. Also, Robert M. Pirsig's 1974 book, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*, draws its title—and arguably a large portion of its popularity—from *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Examples such as these and the widespread popularity *Zen in the Art of Archery* still enjoys today illustrate that the main points of the text have retained their ability to be both relevant and fascinating, not only to the general Western audience for which the book was written, but for worldwide readers as well. Without pushing completely from mind the discussions recently induced by Yamada and his colleagues, perhaps it is time to revisit this slim, succinct volume in a quiet room with a cup of hot tea and a fresh pair of eyes.