



**ZEN
IN
THE ART
OF FLUENCY**

By John C. Harrison

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Zen in the Art of Fluency

One Sunday a few years ago we drove out to visit Rich and Marcia, some friends of ours who live on the other side of San Francisco Bay.

Every time we visit I always end up playing ping-pong with Rich; however, this particular afternoon Rich's 14-year-old son, Andy, was home, and since Andy was supposed to be a pretty good player, Rich said why didn't I play him a few games. I said fine. Andy was better than good. His defense was terrific, and though I'm known to have a very effective slam, to my chagrin, he beat the pants off me in the first game.

Throughout the game, I kept trying to slam the ball, but I was tight and uncoordinated, and all the balls went wild. Then we started the second game, and I found myself trying to control my wild swing and not going for broke the way I was before. To be truthful I was worried about the humiliation of losing another game to a 14-year-old. I began to play it safe.

I was a quarter way into the game before I realized what I was doing. "Hold on, John," I said to myself. "This isn't going to work. If you don't go all out, Andy's going to win again, because he's just too good."

So I made a choice to live with my discomfort about losing to

Andy and went back to slamming...and missing...and soon Andy was ahead again.

Then about half way through the game, something happened. Perhaps my muscles had warmed up. Or perhaps I'd missed so many times that I no longer cared. Maybe it was a combination of both. Whatever the reasons, I felt a change. I was suddenly confident, accurate and in control. Every shot was a winner.

Poor Andy.

From that moment on he didn't have a chance. I learned a lesson from that experience. I learned how important it was to give up trying to control the results. Had I given in to my fear and tried to over control my erratic swing, I might never had gotten my old game back, because I would have created more tightness and ruined my timing by imposing one set of controls on top of another.

Most of us who grow up with a stuttering problem see our speech blocks as threats - something we need to control. So instead of learning when to consciously focus on our technique and when to focus on the total experience of letting go and speaking, we focus on our technique exclusively.

Of course, it's important to recognize and correct improper speech mechanics. But at some point, we also have to learn when to shift our attention away from speech mechanics and onto the feelings of trust and release, even if this doesn't immediately deliver the desired results.

We need to follow the example of the Zen archers who are able to perform remarkable feats of skill, all seemingly without effort.

LESSONS FROM A ZEN MASTER

The process of effortless performance is admirably described in the classic volume, **Zen in the Art of Archery**. The book was written in the late 1930's by Eugen Herrigel, a German philosopher who was invited to teach for several years at the University of Tokyo. Herrigel perceived his stay in Japan as a unique opportunity to get to know the country and its people, and especially, to develop a more intimate understanding of Buddhism and the "introspective practice of mysticism."

But the professor was informed that "it was quite hopeless for a European to attempt to penetrate into this realm of spiritual life - perhaps the strangest that the Far East has to offer - unless he began by learning one of the Japanese arts associated with Zen." So it was that Herrigel set out to find a master who could instruct him in the "artless art" of the Zen archer, and in due course, arranged with Zen Master Kenzo Awa to take him on as a student.

This short book is a fascinating account of Herrigel's struggles to acquire proficiency...the Zen way. The philosophy teacher describes the first demonstration in which Master Awa "nocks" an arrow on the string, draws the bow, and seemingly without aiming, plunks the arrow squarely in the center of the target many yards away.

Herrigel is impressed. But how is such a feat achieved?

As Herrigel learns, to gain mastery, the Zen archer must stop trying to shoot the arrow correctly. He must detach himself from his results. He must learn to relax his body at precisely the moment he would normally be tensed, to draw the bow "spiritually" with a kind of effortless strength, and to "get out of his own way" so that his higher power can take over. When he is able to give over

control to the "it", the arrows unerringly find the bulls eye, even though the archer seems hardly to be taking aim.

This is easier said than done. To arrive at this level of mastery, the archer must be willing to shoot thousands of arrows that are wide of the mark without worrying about how he's doing or trying to consciously control the flight of the arrow. If he does try to take conscious control, he will preempt and disable his higher powers and the experience of mastery will continue to elude him.

What particularly struck me as I read the book was that it takes Herrigel a full year just to learn how to properly draw the bow. An indication of his success is when the mysterious "it" takes control of the act, unconsciously and effortlessly, and the professor is not even aware that the bow has been drawn.

GIVING CONTROL TO THE HIGHER SELF

The "It." Some call it the higher self. Until recently, this has been a foreign concept to most westerners, although it has become increasingly familiar to many Californians who have been exploring Eastern thinking since the 1960s.

One westerner who successfully translated these concepts into a contemporary setting is Tim Gallwey. His book, **The Inner Game of Tennis**, which became a best seller, applies the same Zen principles to the sport of tennis. Galway's approach is to encourage you to move your conscious mind out of the way and simply visualize, relax, and allow your inner self to take control. His technique calls for the person to develop proficiency in the sport with little conscious effort or "trying". The ideas expressed in **The Inner Game of Tennis** are a near perfect blueprint for the mindset required to speak fluently if you change every mention of "tennis" to "speaking."

Another striking example of the Zen approach appeared in the late 60s in an article in Look magazine about a fellow in the South who taught people how to shoot. He was an extraordinarily good teacher, and his students displayed remarkable results. This instructor followed an unorthodox teaching method. Instead of starting people out with 22's, he started them out with BB guns. The person was instructed not to aim, but simply to watch the moving target, quickly point and shoot at the "right" time, and see where the pellet went. Just keep doing it over and over.

Because the person could see the pellet, he could tell how far off he was and could make corrections on the next shot. By training

his unconscious mind... his "it" ...to do the shooting, the individual eventually arrived at the point where he could automatically hit the target with the pellet, seemingly without aiming. At this point the person would graduate to a 22 rifle with extraordinary results.

How does all this relate to speech? Children automatically learn to speak the Zen way - not by consciously thinking about it, but by feeling their way through the process - by watching, doing, emulating, failing and trying again until the "it" takes control. It is a process that by-passes the conscious mind. Speech is such a complicated undertaking, and must happen so quickly and automatically that it must be learned the Zen way. If you don't think so, just listen to any play-by-play sports caster. Or listen to a simultaneous translator at work. There can be no deliberate control because there is no time to operate consciously. Like the Zen archer, the person simply reacts.

WHEN THE SYSTEM BREAKS DOWN

Then what causes a child to become self-conscious about his speech and to begin exercising deliberate control? I've observed three potential scenarios:

(1) Self-consciousness can be triggered by speech blocks created when the child tries to assert himself while holding back his feelings (the classic approach-avoidance conflict).

(2) Self-consciousness can be caused by blocks created by timing problems when the child tries to synchronize low-speed voluntary control of articulation with high-speed automatic vocal syllabic control. Or

(3) self-consciousness can be caused by blocks created when the child anticipates a need to try hard to get the words out and initiates a valsalva maneuver, an act which is counterproductive to speech. Whichever scenario holds sway (and it could be any one or all three), the attempt to exercise control over a spontaneous act ends up disrupting the speaking process, leaving the child feeling helpless, panicked, and afraid of subsequent speaking situations.

Now the ironic twist. Just as the child learns to speak by following a Zen-like approach, so does he learn to employ maladaptive behaviors using the same unconscious process. He does it the Zen way, repeating these behaviors over and over until they become automatic and outside his awareness.

It's when these unconscious controls interfere with the spontaneity of speech - or when fear and panic operating outside of awareness

cause the individual to unconsciously hold back and become blocked - that the problem becomes chronic and self-sustaining.

As the child suffers the social consequences of malfunctioning speech, he changes how he feels about himself and others. He develops social strategies to protect himself from shame and embarrassment. He develops strategies for pushing out difficult words, or avoiding them. When these changes reinforce and perpetuate each other, the problem as a whole becomes self-perpetuating.

If speech therapy becomes focused on imposing a conscious set of controls on speech that is already over-controlled by fears and expectations, one simply ends up layering one level of controls on top of another.

On the other hand, if the individual is willing to address the total system - looking not only at how he functions as a speaker, but how he functions as a person - he can gradually give himself permission to let go and experience and express all those thoughts and feelings that previously made him uncomfortable.

This, in turn, can lead to a level of self-acceptance where the person no longer feels he has to control himself so tightly but can relax and give his speech greater opportunity to flow.

Certainly, one can attain a level of fluency through controlled speech, just like an archer can attain a certain level of skill by consciously drawing the bow. But just as a consciously drawn bow prevents the student from attaining the effortless and accuracy of the Zen archer, so does consciously controlling one's speech prevent the person who stutters from ever attaining speech that is spontaneous and self-expressive.

Irony of ironies, an insurmountable barrier is created by the very

method that has been employed to cure the problem.

To break through that barrier, the individual has, of course, to unlearn bad habits and become aware when the wrong muscles are brought into play. But there comes a time when he has to forget about the applying the right techniques, start allowing the "it" to take over and focus only on the feeling of spontaneity.

How successful the person is at letting go will depend upon a number of factors such as the number and intensity of bad experiences he must overcome, the intensity of feelings that must be managed, the number of bad speech habits that must be brought into awareness, the degree of support that exists in his immediate environment, genetic factors, motivation, level of perfection, beliefs, the talent of the therapist and the quality of the therapeutic relationship. Success often calls for changes across a broad frontier.

Most people like myself who have fully recovered from stuttering - people who have learned again to speak spontaneously, the Zen way - will tell you that not only did their speech have to change, but many other aspects of their life as well.

Over time, all these changes coalesced into a new system that could support a deeper level of self-expression. In short, they created a fluency system in which their new speech behaviors, as well as their positive emotions, perceptions, beliefs, intentions and physiological responses all interactively supported each other. They learned to recognize when it was time to work on conscious technique, and when it was necessary to step back, surrender control to the "it", and allow their spontaneity to carry them forward.