

## Zen in the Art of Model Flying

This is an opening extract from 'Zen In The Art Of Archery' by Eugen Herrigel. It is an account of how a German man went to Japan for several years in the 1920's to study Zen through Archery. It is a fascinating book but re-reading it recently I was struck by how similar the techniques were to those we use in flying. We only fly well when we can stop thinking about it and let our bodies and brains just do it. As Suzuki says in the foreword, 'Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. "Childlikeness" has to be restored after long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When that is attained, man thinks yet he does not think'. All I did was replace all the archery words in the text with those about flying. I changed nothing else. So comrades our flying is an exercise in Zen.

"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 model flying. Even if he were willing to make a big concession, and to find model flying distinguished as an 'art', he would scarcely feel inclined to look behind this art for anything more than a decidedly sporting form of prowess. He therefore expects to be told something about the amazing feats of 3D trick-artists, who have the advantage of being able to rely on a time-honoured and unbroken tradition in the use of radio control. For in the Far East [Cromer] it is only a few generations since the old means of flying were replaced by modern weapons, and familiarity in the handling of them by no means fell into disuse, but went on propagating itself, and has since been cultivated in ever widening circles. Might one not expect, therefore, a description of the special ways in which model flying is pursued to-day as a national sport in Britain?

"Nothing could be more mistaken than this expectation. By model flying in the traditional sense, which he esteems as an art and honours as a national heritage, the Briton does not understand a sport but, strange as this may sound at first, a religious ritual. And consequently, by the 'art' of model flying he does not mean the ability of the sportsman, which can be controlled, more or less, by bodily exercises, but an ability whose origin is to be sought in spiritual exercises and whose aim consists in hitting a spiritual goal, so that fundamentally the flyer aims at himself and may even succeed in hitting himself.

"This sounds puzzling, no doubt. 'What', the reader will say, 'Are we to believe that model flying, once practised [in full size] for the contest of life and death [see End below], ... has been degraded to a spiritual exercise? Of what use, then, are the model and radio control? Does not this deny the manly old art and honest meaning of model flying, and set up in its place something nebulous, if not positively fantastic?'

"It must, however, be borne in mind that the peculiar spirit of this art, far from having to be infused back into the use of model and radio control in recent times, was always essentially bound up with them, and has emerged all the more forthrightly and convincingly now that it no longer has to prove itself in bloody contests. It is not true to say that the traditional technique of ... flying, since it is no longer of importance in fighting, has turned into a pleasant pastime and thereby been rendered innocuous. The 'Great Doctrine' of model flying tells us something very different. According to it, model flying is still a matter of life and death to the extent that it is a contest of the flyer with himself; and this kind of contest is not a paltry substitute, but the foundation of all contests outwardly directed—for instance with a bodily opponent. In this contest of the flyer with himself is revealed the secret essence of this art, and instruction in it does not suppress anything essential by waiving the utilitarian ends to which the practice of knightly contests was put."

Later Herrigel says, 'The flyer [archer] ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the pattern [bull's-eye] which confronts him. This state of unconscious is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill, though there is in it something of a quite different order which cannot be attained by any progressive study of the art.'

A last thought. As the late, great football manager Bill Shankly might have said about flying, 'Some people believe flying [football - fitbaw] is a matter of life and death, I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.' There is more on Scottish Wikipedia at [https://sco.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill\\_Shankly](https://sco.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Shankly) and of course on Wiki [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill\\_Shankly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Shankly).