

## LEVEL ONE ZEN

*The dog must stay away from a treat in the handler's hand for 5 seconds. There can be only one voice cue, which will be given before the hand is presented.*

**DISCUSSION:** "Zen", as we use the word in dog training, is so important as to be virtually the foundation of civilization. It means "self-control". An untrained dog is a dog with no self-control. She wants food; she eats food, whether that food is on the floor, on the counter, or in a toddler's hand. She wants to greet someone, she greets them, whether she has to pull her handler over to them with a tight leash or not, whether that person wants to be greeted or not, whether that person is on the other side of a busy street or not. An untrained handler tries to control the dog - to keep her off the counter and away from the toddler, to hold her back with the leash, to hold her down off people, and to physically keep her out of the street.

**A trained dog understands that the way to get what she wants is to control herself, and a trained handler knows that true control of an animal must come from the animal herself, not from the handler.**

The trained dog sees a person with food, and sits, because polite dogs get treats. She greets people with all four feet on the floor because standing dogs get petted. She makes sure the leash stays loose because tight leashes NEVER go in the direction a dog wants them to go. She comes when she's called because what the handler has for her is always better than what she could find by herself.

**What does this have to do with "Zen"? Simply that the way to get food out of the handler's hand is to stay away from the hand. The more the dog wants the food, the harder she has to pretend that she doesn't want it.**

The great thing about doggy Zen is that once the dog has learned enough of it, she starts to apply the principles of self-control to her entire life. She practices "leash Zen" by keeping the leash loose, "floor Zen" by ignoring bait on the floor in the show ring, and "table Zen" by sitting and "wishing" food off the table instead of jumping up to help herself.

**EASY BEGINNINGS:** Appropriately, the easiest way to teach Zen to a dog is to do very little. Show the dog a treat, then fold the treat into your hand so it's totally protected. There must be no part of the treat available to a questing tongue or prying teeth. Put your hand down in front of her at mouth height. Note that your hand protecting the treat is a fist. This fist will be the dog's first CUE. The fist cue says "Keep away from my hand." Later you can change the cue if you want to, add a word that means the same thing, or change your hand appearance and position, but for now, your hand will always be in a fist when you're talking to the dog about hand Zen.

Trying to protect the treat by holding it up above the dog's head, or jerking it out of her reach as she approaches it, are common mistakes. Holding it up high will only encourage her to jump up to get it, and jerking it away from her will force her to grab at it to try to get it away from you. You're already protecting it by holding it in your closed fist. Let Zen do its work. Let the dog figure out how to get that treat out of your quiet hand.

**Pawing doesn't work. Mouthing doesn't work. Licking and gentle gnawing don't work. If the dog spends a long time working on your hand, trying to get that treat, great! Think of all that stamina and enthusiasm she's using to get what she wants! Once you've explained what's going to work, she'll use all that for you! If she sniffs briefly at your hand and then starts to lose interest, great! Your explanation will be short and easy!**

So how DOES she get that treat out of your hand? She moves her nose away from your hand! Yep, that's all she has to do, just get tired of fussing with your hand and start to move away. What if she's actually leaving? What if she doesn't lick it at all? What if she moved away by accident? Who cares? We don't! There's only one question - did she move her nose away from your hand? If she did, click and open your hand so the treat drops to the floor.

**That's right, drop the treat on the floor. Don't just hand it to her. You can teach her Zen by handing her the treat, but the explanation is usually shorter and clearer when you drop it on the floor. "Don't touch my hand, now eat from my hand" can get a little confusing.**

That's all there is to Zen. Keep the treat safe from her until she moves away from your hand, click as she moves away, and drop the treat. Watch for the magic moment when she realizes how to make you drop the next treat.

### **PROBLEM SOLVING:**

**EEK, SHE'S HURTING ME!** If the dog is actually hurting you with her mouth or her paws, you have several options. You could wear gloves or protect the treat under a plastic cup instead of holding it in your naked hand. You could drop it on the floor between your two (well-shod) feet and let your shoes protect it. You could pull your hand away from her mouth or paw, hold it away from her for a moment (tucked in your armpit, perhaps), then offer it to her again when she has four paws on the floor. If you're going to try this one, though, remember to pull the treat far away from her, not just far enough away to make her grab at it. If she seems a reasonable sort who is just a little over enthusiastic in her attempts to get the treat from you, you might shout OUCH! and use your folded-up hand to bop her lightly on the nose to discourage her excess enthusiasm.

Throughout the dog's training, your most important tool will be your imagination. Define your problem (I need to keep her from hurting my hand while I teach her Zen). Then figure out how you're going to accomplish what you need. Feel free to come up with truly strange and wonderful ideas when you're problem solving, because strange and unusual will open your mind to real possibilities.

**WHEN I DROP THE TREAT, SHE CAN'T FIND IT!** If the dog doesn't know the treat left your hand after the click, you're going to have to give her some clues until she starts to notice food falling. Use a dramatic hand motion as you THROW the treat down, rather than just politely opening your hand so it can fall to the floor. Work on a tile or linoleum floor with dry kibble or other hard treats so she can hear them fall. Use bigger treats so they're easier to find. Use your imagination! This is a common development for puppies and dogs with little experience in finding treats on the floor.

**SHE BOPS MY HAND AND THEN BACKS OFF!** This is a neat little chain many dogs discover - advanced work already, the clever little guys! Many dogs figure out that the necessary behaviour is a) bop the hand, b) back away from the hand, c) get the click and treat. Unfortunately, we didn't mean to teach this chain. We only wanted her to learn to stay away from the hand to get the click and treat, without that initial bump. If you notice that she has to touch your hand before she moves away from it, you could pull your hand away as she's trying to touch it, then click as she draws back when she misses. Or you could click as she's moving toward your hand, before she actually hits it. This small misunderstanding shows us a lot about training. It shows how amazing the dog is, and how fast clicker training can be. It shows us the dog learning a chain made up of several different behaviors. It shows how easy it is to teach things you don't want the dog to learn if you're not paying attention. And it shows how easy it is to get things back on track once you notice the mistake.

**ADDING A CUE:** Decide what word comes easily to you when you're thinking about keeping the dog away from something. Common cues are "Off" and "Out". "No" can be used, but most people have a very bad habit of bellowing "No!" at the dog when she's shaking after a bath, when she's chasing cats, when she's barking at the sheep on TV, and when she's drooling on the rug. What we're looking for in a cue is clear information about what the dog should be doing.

**CONTINUING EDUCATION:** I particularly enjoy teaching Zen to very large adult dogs with owners who don't think the dog is smart enough to learn her own name. Within a couple of minutes, this "crazy stupid" dog can be sitting three feet back from a coffee table, staring intently at a delicious piece of liver resting all alone on the table. Once the owner sees that the fault lies in the explanations and not in the dog, we can start forging a real relationship.

When the dog is reliably staying away from your hand to make you click, you'll notice that her "staying away" is getting harder, faster, longer. Pick one response, and shape it into something better. If you choose to work on distance, for instance, figure out how far she usually moves away from your hand (say, 6"). Click 6" and any response that moves her nose further from your hand than that. Don't click any nose that is closer than 6". In a little while, you'll see that her usual distance has increased to 7", so you start clicking 7" and beyond, and nothing closer.

**Do the same for time. A rule I like to keep in my mind is ““Ten times right, one time wrong””. If you click her for being successful at 3 seconds ten times in a row, you can afford to wait for 4 seconds one time. If she isn’t successful, well, you tried it and it didn’t work. Click her another 10 times at 3 seconds, then try for 4 seconds again. If it doesn’t work, go for another 10 at 3 seconds. If it DOES work, continue clicking for 4 seconds until you get your 10 times right. When you have 10 times right in a row at 4 seconds, try waiting for 5 seconds.**

Ooh, now the TA- DA part. When you’ve got some decent time and some decent distance, find a convenient coffee table. Show the treat to the dog, put the treat on the coffee table, and cover it with your hand. If you think this is going to be easy, think again. Staying away from your hand is NOT the same thing as staying away from the coffee table. Basically, you’ll be explaining Zen again right from the beginning. Maybe it’ll be so fast your head will spin. Maybe she’ll go right back to scratch and be trying to dig the treat out from under your hand. Both are normal.

**So, treat on table, covered by your hand. Dog can’t get it by normal means. Sooner or later, by accident or deliberately, her nose moves away from your hand on the table. Click and flick the treat onto the floor. Yes, back on the floor again. You certainly don’t want to click and then let her eat the treat off the coffee table!**

When she’s made the connection (oh, TABLE Zen! Now I get it!), live dangerously. Move your hand away from the treat. Of course, when you move your hand off it, she’s going to grab for it, so be ready to cover it again. Then, as she moves away (Duh! Don’t let mom sucker you into grabbing for it!), move your hand away again. Click and flick it off the table when she’s staying away from it. Build your time and distance until you can safely lean back away from the treat, leaving it totally available on the coffee table — except for the dog’s self-control. Wow, look what you guys just learned! When you can lean back and leave the treat alone, with the dog holding back waiting for you to click and flick it off the table, add your cue (Off, or Out, or whatever you decided on) as you’re placing the treat on the table. Use a lovely, quiet, trusting voice because that’s how you’re going to be speaking to your dog. Besides, it makes the control so much more impressive when you simply asked for it rather than bellowing and threatening!

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