

Teaching Zen Bowl

Zen Bowl training got its name because to access the reward, the dog has to behave as if the reward wasn't there. It's a great exercise for all dogs to learn because:

- it teaches a dog that self-control can be rewarding
- it teaches a dog that focusing on his owner and ignoring tempting distractions can be rewarding
- it teaches a dog that a reward can be available even if his owner doesn't have one in her hand or pockets
- it is an essential foundation for all dog sports, as food and toys are not allowed in the competition ring.
- it requires really good timing on the part of the owner, so it's great training for the human side of the equation, too

What is "Zen Bowl" Training?

The basic idea of Zen Bowl training is that the reward is at some distance from the owner, rather than in a hand, pocket or treat bag. This can be discouraging for a dog because the reward is not immediately and clearly present, which leads to the common problem of a dog who won't work when there is no reward being waved under his nose. Through Zen Bowl training, the dog learns that the reward is still available and accessible, and he can earn it by paying close attention (usually eye contact) to his owner. At a more advanced level, he is also asked to perform certain tasks. Once his owner is happy with the amount of attention offered, or the required task is completed, the dog is then released to his Zen Bowl to claim his reward. Most dogs also seem to really enjoy Zen Bowl, which results in the happy, enthusiastic attitude we all like to see.

What is a Zen Bowl?

A Zen Bowl is any small, highly visible dish or bowl that contains treats for the dog to earn. The best colours for a dog are white, bright blue, or yellow (dogs do not see many of the colours that we consider "hi-viz") and the bowl should be small but still big enough that the dog can easily eat the contents – about 10cm in diameter for most dogs. It should also be robust enough to cope with being knocked about, waterproof, and washable. It pays to always use the same bowl, or identical bowls, to start with, so the dog knows exactly what it is and what it is for. It will quickly become a visual cue for the Zen Bowl game.

Zen Bowl Training

1) Start in a low-distraction environment, such as your house. Put two or three high value treats in the bowl and place it about a metre away from the dog, off to his side. Let him watch you do this and let him know the treats are there – you want to tempt him as much as possible. Stand on his other side, holding him on leash. The leash should be loose but short enough that he can't reach the bowl without permission.

2) Now wait. Don't attempt to attract his attention in any way. If he is pulling towards the bowl, that's fine – just keep hold of the leash so he can't reach it. Eventually he will glance in your direction. It doesn't matter if he makes eye contact or not, or if the glance was momentary – immediately mark that look with "yes" or a clicker, and release him to the bowl. Your timing with the marker is very important – you need to capture that glance, not the looking-away-again – so be ready!

3) When releasing your dog to the bowl, use a "get it!" type cue, rather than your "okay" release cue. Zen Bowl training works best when the dog is *really* excited about running to get his reward, so generally a more exciting cue that specifically means "race off and get those goodies!" is more effective than the much-used, generic "okay". If you are going to use a "get it!" cue, make sure it is specific to a "grab that reward!" situation, not a command to perform some other task, such as a retrieve. It also helps if you use something that you can say in an exciting tone of voice.

Important! Your dog may not understand at first that he has been given permission to take the treats from the bowl. Initially he will probably assume they are off limits. So you may need to encourage him to snaffle his reward the first

couple of times. To avoid a dog becoming hesitant or unconfident about whether he can have those treats, *never* say “no” or attempt to stop him or chastise him in any way if he takes an opportunity to eat them. The only thing that should be stopping him is that the leash is too short, not any discouragement on your part, and if you accidentally let him get too close, no problem. This is critical to maintaining a confident and enthusiastic attitude.

4) While your dog is clearing out the Zen Bowl, put a couple of treats in your hand and, when he ready to respond, call him to you and immediately give him those treats. This should also be done in as exciting a manner as possible. This makes you just as rewarding as the Zen Bowl, and makes returning to you for more work positive and fun.

5) Add more treats to your bowl, and repeat steps 1 – 4, until your dog is almost immediately looking at you as a way to get to his bowl. This often takes more than one session, but if you think you are not making progress, consider whether your timing in marking his glances is accurate, or whether you may be responding too late. When you are not actively training Zen Bowl, or if you are distracted and can’t immediately watch for or respond to offers of attention, pick the bowl up.

6) Once you are getting almost-immediate, deliberate glances, start waiting until your dog makes actual eye contact. Most dogs are used to staring hopefully into your eyes to get what they want, so you probably won’t have to wait long for this. Start with just momentary eye contact and gradually build up the length of time required. You want to always release the dog *before* he looks away, and it can take time for dogs to become comfortable with staring.

For some dogs, owing to temperament or past experiences, eye contact is something they avoid. In this case, just take what the dog can give you – maybe a nose pointed in your direction, or brief glances from under his eyebrows.

7) Start increasing your distance from the Zen Bowl. Make sure the dog always knows where it is, then walk away from it. Add some distractions and different locations. Some dogs will find it difficult to concentrate when there are other dogs or animals around, afraid that someone else will steal their treats. Work through all these things, adjusting distance and duration according to the situation and your dog’s state of mind at the time.

8) Eventually, when you have immediate, offered, sustained eye contact under most circumstances, reduce the distance to the Zen Bowl and start introducing simple tasks. Depending on what your dog finds easy, this may be a sit, static heel position, a nose touch, or any other well-known performance. The dog needs to maintain strong attention on you at all times while doing this. Immediately upon successful completion of this task, release your dog to the bowl. Over time, this task may become more complex, longer, or involve multiple tasks. In all cases, your dog should be maintaining enthusiastic attention and you should be releasing well before he gives up. At this point, you may also want to start practicing with your dog off leash. Remember – if your dog runs off to the bowl of his own accord, let him. He figures he has done enough for a reward! If it is constant, however, put him back on leash.

9) Start adding the send-to-bowl-and-recall-for-a-reward into longer sequences of tasks. For example, you may perform a Rally-O course, heel pattern, or agility course with him by sending him to his bowl at frequent, random moments throughout, then calling him back to complete a few more signs/steps/obstacles before sending him again. Calling him back to work is the reason it is so important to build a happy, well-rewarded recall into this training process. Most dogs love this racing back and forth, and done correctly and with generosity and patience, it can build huge love for the job in hand. Remember to always reward the recall before starting work again.

Caution!!!

- When working with a zen bowl, only *ever* ask for tasks your dog already understands completely and performs with perfect confidence and precision. *Never* use it for tasks the dog is still learning, or has problems with. A dog who can’t perform a task perfectly without food under his nose does not understand that task.
- Never do too much too soon. If your dog can’t manage a nice, focused start line and a couple of steps of heelwork, then don’t ask him to do an entire Rally-O course or Obedience test without any reward from start to finish. You will put yourself right back to the start if you damage his confidence and trust in this way.