Rude Osolnik did it, so did Bob Stocksdale and Del Stubbs. Jerry Glaser recommends it, George Hatfield teaches it, and Japanese turners do it religiously. Peter Child and Frank Pain advocate it in their books. However, I think it is safe to say that those who hone their tools are in the minority of woodturners.

So why do so few turners take their tools to the last phase–that of honing? There are several reasons. Many hand-honing stones (Arkansas, Washita, Japanese water stones) simply don't cut the tougher tool steels well. Also some turners feel it is just easier to return to the grinder; others believe the refinement wastes time.

Honing terminology

Let's begin with some basic sharpening terms. **Profiling** or **shaping** the tool involves the form you or the manufacturer imposes upon the steel which includes bevel angles. Most people define **sharpening** as the attempt to put a sharp edge onto that shape **Honing** (or whetting) refers to the refinement and/or maintenance of a sharpened edge.

Why hone?

First, hone to achieve a keener edge when necessary. This step isn't required for every tool nor in every situation. For example, it is usually not necessary for a scraping tool where heavy stock removal is the order of the day. I find no reason to refine the edge just off the grinder on a cutting tool (skew, gouge, hook/ring tool, parting) when rough-cutting is the next step.

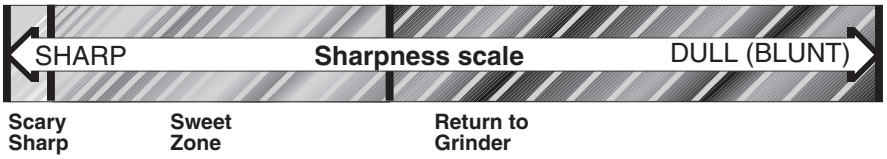
However, for clean cutting of end-grain, softer woods or just difficult wood–especially that last pass which will determine the degree of sanding–I refine the edge through honing. Honing for 30 to 45 seconds easily eliminates one or two grits in the sanding process. A skew chisel, for example, screams for a keen edge for improved control and clean-cutting.

Secondly, I hone to keep a sharpened edge sharp. This allows me to keep turning without running back to a grinder to achieve a keen edge. Just like the old-time barber honing or stropping their razor, the process was to refine and keep the edge sharp–not to take a dull tool and make it sharp. This is why many of us hone while turning–to keep the keenness within a range of sharpness. I call it the "sweet zone" that allows me to keep working efficiently, cutting cleanly when necessary, with more control or to reduce sanding time (see chart *above*). Cutting wood moves the edge to the right on the scale–with even the best of steels. With a honable edge, sharpness is pushed to the left on the same scale.

So, we should ask this question: Can you get an edge "too sharp?" Maybe the question should be, "too refined" an edge? No, we won't fuss and push to the same level as the carver or cabinet maker with a paring chisel, but we do need a sharp edge to work both efficiently, safely, and not to have a mess of things when we turn off the lathe.

Continued

Find the Sweet Zone



Scary Sharp: Extreme keeness, highly refined–but alas, in woodturning these edges usually don't last very long and usually aren't worth the extra time to produce.

Sweet Zone: Life is good here. Tool is sharp, less effort to remove wood, minimal or reduced damage to surface of wood. This is the area that honing can be used to maintain the tool's sharpness.

Return to Grinder: There comes a time whether you hone or not that you must return to the power grinder–unless you are willing to invest a lot of time with hand sharpening. If an edge does not respond to honing in under a minute or so, I head for the grinder.