

A taste of kyudo

For experienced *Oku* students, 'taste' is a word with a special meaning. Kanjuro Shibata XX Sendai every now and then referred to 'the five tastes', but was never clear about their nature, and how one could experience them during practice. So the five tastes are kind of a 'best kept secret' of kyudo. Only just before he passed away, Sendai gave a hint that the five tastes might be connected to the energy of the five Buddha families. For some of us, this only enlarged the mystery. For others it was a moment of enlightenment. Being intrigued by Sendai's statement, I tried to discover more about it. More often than referring to the five tastes, Sendai explained a certain position or movement with an analogy or metaphor. Over the years, I discovered that these analogies reveal a lot about the energy that is connected to a certain movement or position, and maybe even something about the 'taste' of it. At the 2020 program at Dechen Chöling, I was invited to share my thoughts about this. So I put them on paper, and we had lively discussions about them. Disclaimer: as all interpretation of the deeper aspects of kyudo is personal, this text is not to be confused with any kind of generalizable 'truth'; my sharing these findings is just an attempt to establish a lively conversation, and not to make a statement. After all, one can't argue about taste, can one?

Not being a sangha-member or intimately familiar with Buddhist teachings, I soon left Sendai's remark about the five Buddha families for what it was: a hint for insiders. The subject continues to intrigue me, but it is for others to say more about it, if at all. In this text, I will restrain myself to descriptions that might, at best, not contradict the ideas of more involved students.

To the seven coordinations in kyudo practice I have some clear associations. These run parallel to the metaphors or analogies that Sendai used to describe certain elements of the seven coordinations. In the next paragraphs I will walk through the *sishido* coordinations, and combine them with these metaphors and analogies that I have come to incorporate in my kyudo practice. Being still a beginner, I don't claim that I am conscious of the energy connected to the analogies at every step, but in my better moments they are almost tangible.

We begin our *sishido* practice with *Yo-i*, a moment of contemplation. I use this moment to clear the mind and get a sense for the space around me.

Going from *Yo-i* to *Yumi Daoshi*, one can just lift up and lower *yumi* and *ya*, but I have been taught to make a wider movement with my arms, almost as in an

embrace. The connected analogy is that of taking my emotional/mental baggage up and putting it in front of me on the floor, at the tip of the yumi. Once I have made Ashibumi, I will lift up my yumi with a short decisive gesture, 'sweeping away all obstacles, all mental ballast'. In this way clearing the mind becomes a more conscious action.

In Ashibumi, taking the steps, I turn my head to the target with a curious gaze, as if hearing the faint sound of a distant temple bell. Then I calmly drop my gaze, as if observing the slow descent of a snowflake or cherry blossom to the ground. I feel curiosity, surprise and expectation. When my gaze reaches the ground, another energy comes to the foreground. This is described as 'drawing the line', associated with the chalked line that the carpenter draws between two points and then 'whips' to show an imprint of the line on the floor. This line is most clearly pointed out in Sumi, the movement in hitote when we align our body and yumi with this line.

Although sumi reflects a moment of full consciousness, the steps in Ashibumi are not that of one placing his feet carefully, looking at them and correcting them when necessary. Ashibumi is, as explained in the Shi Kan No Sho, 'placing your feet in the dark': the alignment has to be felt in the body, not observed with the eyes, and is therefore more an act of intuition than one of sight.

Because of this, my 'taste' of Ashibumi is one of hope and expectation. The emotional value is that I make a connection with that which is outside of me, calling me to action. At the same time this energy invites me to encompass all elements that I will encounter with 'curious equanimity'.

Dozukuri, joining heaven and earth, is described as the energy of a tree, rooting itself to the ground, and at the same time giving space to its branches and leaves to move around freely. I root my feet in the ground, tighten the muscles in my buttocks and pelvis, and at the same time I give room to the upper body movements of lifting the yumi, placing the ya on the tsuru (Yatsugai), then concentrate once more on the rooting stance, and then placing the right hand on the tsuru (Torikake).

In the movements of Dozukuri, I join heaven and earth and take position in the center, unattached, but not ignorant to what happens around me. In that sense the 'movements without a name': – moving the yumi to the center of my body – Yatsugai – rest – Torikake – holding my arms in the shape of a circle (the 'big Wa, or circle of peace), are all different actions that I carry out with equanimity, as well

as discriminating awareness. The 'taste' of the tree, with its roots and waving branches and leaves, is one of self-consciousness. Dozukuri is at its best: mindfullness acting on my motoric memory. When practicing synchronized shooting, Dozukuri also challenges me to be aware of myself as well as of what's happening around me; to feel an encompassing awareness.

Going from Dozukuri to Yumi Gamae or Yugamae is a shift from equanimity to passion. This shift is almost like entering a whole different realm. The energy shifts from earth to fire.

The key element in this shift is my gaze. I turn my head to the target and simultaneously move the yumi to the target, arms still round as in an embrace. This time my gaze is not curious and expecting as in Ashibumi, or mindfully untouched as in Dozukuri. The way I look at the target should now be that of 'a tiger looking at a rabbit', as Sendai used to call it. The 'taste' of this gaze is tense, alert, piercing, one of excited surprise, almost similar to a first strike of love.

Uchiokoshi follows Yugamae, and is in that sense an extension of the passion that will, through Hikitori and Kai, bring me to Hanare. Uchiokoshi is often described as the movement of an element, just a little lighter than water, being deeply submerged, but now slowly floating to the surface. The hint of love that is Yugamae, now emerges into a tense reality.

In Uchiokoshi the grip of my left hand on the yumi is strenuous. I have to make an effort to make the shot happen. (Falling in love often comes with different and even contradictory emotions.) At the last stage of Yugamae I turn my left hand around the grip, until it lies between my thumb and index finger. With my little finger I control the balance of the yumi, and I balance the strength of the grip of this little finger to that of the right hand. This is the preparation for tenuichi or tigers' mouth, holding the yumi with the firm-soft grip of a mother tiger that holds her cub in her mouth. While lifting my hands, the left hand reaches the position of tsuru no kubi, the neck of the crane. Just left of this hand is the target, where I still look at with a tigers' eye.

In Uchiokoshi it is important that the ya stays almost horizontal: a drop of water, hanging on the middle of the ya, should slowly run down to the tip. This is because the Heki ryu shooting style demands for 'zen ken hikuku, ko ken kakaku': the right shoulder is a little bit higher than the left.

The 'taste' of Uchiokoshi is one of passionate awareness, tension and emergence, as the silence before an upcoming thunderstorm: the moments before the first roll of

thunder and crack of lightning. In a few seconds, the first liberating gust of wind will free me from this tension, but at the moment nature holds its breath.

In Hikitori, pushing and pulling the yumi and tsuru to its full extension, a whole new feeling comes to expression. The passion opens up and passes the point of no return.

Pushing the yumi forward with the left hand is like setting a straight course to the target; pulling the kake hand in a wide curve over my head is like painting a rainbow in the sky.

To my experience, Hikitori strongly evokes the energy-pair of hope and fear that is central in kyudo: the hope that my shot goes well and that I will hit the target, and the fear of failure and exposure, much similar to the emotions connected with falling in love. In Hikitori all the distracting emotions that I want to leave behind, are fully present.

However, another feeling is even stronger. Hikitori is like blowing up a balloon: expanding my energy not just in two, but in all directions to the max, holding just before explosion. This is a feeling of joy. It's the feeling that in a few seconds everything will come together, and fit like the pieces of a puzzle.

The 'taste' of that is one of fulfillment, of gratefulness and joy. For me this taste, paradoxically mixed with that of hope and fear, brings kyudo to life.

Kai, balance, represents the full draw, in which the five crosses (body-arms, yumi-ya, kake hand-tsuru, tenuichi-yumi, jugular vein-tsuru) emerge from a stable, completed stance. Kai is of utmost importance for a good Hanare, the release. Without Kai, my Hanare will reflect all the unbalanced emotions that are present in Yugamae, Ushiokoshi and Hikitori. Kai is the moment where I have to let go of them, and come to Mu, nothingness. In this sense Kai is the culmination of all that is zen in kyudo.

Kai prevents a 'premature release' – which would show that I have not yet mastered my emotions and am still afraid of what I might see in the mirror of my shot.

As I was told that Kai means 'balance', I associate this position with that idea, and this fully expresses the taste of this coordination for me.

Kai is depicted with a full-drawn yumi, the archers' heart in the center of five concentric circles. This heart-in-the-center I associate with a centered energy as well as with space. In my view this is similar to what Sendai often referred to as 'Mu', emptiness. Once he said: "Kokoro is Mu," in answer to a question about 'open

heart'. He explained that the 'kyudo heart' is not something that you can point out, like the physical heart, and that 'opening your heart' is the same as 'going to the center of all-encompassing wisdom, where there is nothing but space: the absence of all down-drawing emotions in the true sense of zen'. In that sense, Kai is a moment of complete silence.

To me Hanare, the release, reflects a combination of different energies. In releasing the ya, we look in the mirror that is the mato, so we look ourselves straight in the face. To give the final push, as if I am simultaneously hitting two taiko drums that are positioned almost out of reach of my both hands, is a special act: it is sharp, intense, fierce, like an explosion. But it is also an act of courage: daring to stare at the mirror and deeply inspect what is there. This is an almost tangible feeling, like staring into the sharp cold of the east winter wind that freezes the waters.

Hanare can come with a kiai, the outburst of bodily energy that is expressed in a grunt-like cry. Although to my experience the kiai is not necessary for a good Hanare, the kiai, and consequently the Hanare itself, reflects the energy of the archer: accomplished, unattached, self-conscious, eager, proud, anxious, aggressive, passionate or even ignorant.

The heart that is needed to look in the mirror is also the heart that is needed to attain result. As Kanjuro Shibata XXI Sensei once said, referring to a famous saying of his father: "'Target don't mind' doesn't mean that you should miss it." The ya isn't pointed into nowhere. It takes heart to practice, over and over, until result is noticeable. As Sendai used to say: "Don't be a three-day monk; gambate!"

The moment of Hanare is short and clear-cut, but hard to grasp. In the Hanare it becomes clear what tenuichi means. Sendai used to compare this with the grip of a bird, sitting on a wire. In order to relax, the bird only grips the wire when needed, good enough to re-establish equilibrium, but so short and crisp that it doesn't disturb its relaxation. It is this grip, he always said, that we should practice in Hanare., and, as he used to say: "Sharp Hanare is the best."

Hanare is also described as the moment where you open your heart. To me, this is the wind energy of Hanare. At my best moments, it feels like throwing open the doors to an all-encompassing space. In Hanare my 'heart' becomes one with this space and dissolves into Mu. A good Hanare gives me the taste of opening up the sky with a crack of lightning. It is a taste of freedom and space, similar to the energy of the east summer wind, bringing warmth under a cloudless sky.

Zanshin, the final stage, represents to me the savoring of Hanare: enjoying Mu. Hanare shows us the result of our shot, and by doing that it challenges us to stay untouched by what we see.

Sendai, as long as I knew him, never said much about Zanshin. What is to be said about Mu? But in practice, to me it is a moment of utmost importance. The visible result of my shot immediately provokes my mind to start racing; analyzing, rationalizing, justifying, correcting, planning the next shot. But when I succeed in discarding these distractions, Zanshin enables me to stay a while in Mu, silently celebrating, regardless of whatever the result of my shot might be. Even if my former positions weren't mindless, at least this moment can be mindless and mindful at the same time. In that sense, Zanshin is my gateway to all-encompassing wisdom. "Too much thinking!", Sendai often said when a shot wasn't perfect. I always try to remember that, when Zanshin sets in, and for a short while try not to think at all.

'Too much explanation!' might be the reaction to this text. Maybe that is true. However, since Sendai's passing away, I have talked with my best friends in the kyudo-family about how to conserve his legacy – spiritual and otherwise. This has proven to be a very hard question to answer, leaving alone the question if this would be the task of some or many.

But leaving the question altogether isn't satisfactory to my warriors' heart, so I devised my own answer, which consists of sharing my deepest kyudo experiences with others, in the hope that they will do the same. In this way I hope to learn more and more about kyudo, and contribute in keeping the energy alive that made and makes the kyudo family come together with a kindred spirit, a lot of warmth and true open heart.

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