

## Beginners heart

*Without looking for it, life offered me several opportunities to practice the art of dying. And everytime that such a chance appeared, I took it with both hands.*

*I don't refer to the moments in which you inadvertantly find yourself in a life-threatening situation, where your life flashes in front of you, or where you see a bright light at the end of a tunnel. Those kind of situations I know too, although I 've never seen the light, and waited in vain for the movie to start. I was still very young by then, and there probably hadn't been shot enough footage to edit a good film.*

*No, I refer to the times that I could wholly surrender myself to a premeditated fall. A good two decades ago, I made, together with a few good friends, my first parachute jump. We drove together to the island of Texel and rented a cottage. The night before the jump we exchanged personal stories with a good glass of wine, and also some anecdotes about people who had gruwesome jumping accidents. The heart-to-heart stories about life, and those few anecdotes about sudden death, made me realize that the next day a unique opportunity would be offered to me: at the moment that I would jump out of that plane, I wittingly would take a fair chance that my life after just a few minutes would end with a tremendous blow. How did I feel about that?*

*The next morning offered little possibility to meditate on this, but the idea didn't leave me for a second, and at the moment that, at ten thousand feet, the door of the plane opened, I was prepared. Although to my knowledge I still had a whole life in front of me, at that instant I was ready to let it all go. And with that in mind, I took, maybe for the first time, the plunge into the here and now.*

*My best friend, who also jumped, told me a day later that the night after the jump she had fallen over and over in her dreams. For both of us, our social outing turned out to be a life-changing experience. I didn't dream, but for a long time I stayed hyperconsciously aware of the moment that I let it all go – and plunged into the here and now. It appeared to be a directer confrontation than any form of meditation that I had experienced in my years of spiritual training. Over the years I had become certain that meditation was not my thing. To sit still in an erect positon on a small cushion was a kind of torture that my body and mind weren't built for. I contented myself to take life as it came. That was enough here and now for me, I thought.*

*Years later, the same friend told me that she had again repeated one experience a whole night. Only now it wasn't after a parachute jump, but after her first shot, at an introductory course in kyudo. And her dreams weren't about falling, but about opening up at that first shot. A long slumbering fascination with the spritual secrets of Japan came to life, and I registered for the next introduction weekend.*

*Kyudo appeared to be a bulls eye.*

*For the first time in my life I got acquainted to a form of meditation that my body can handle, that eases my mind and simultaneously mirrors my inner thoughts and feelings; confronting as well as compassionate. Kyudo absorbs me in a good way and provides a physical ritual of positions and actions that have become home to me.*

More important however, Kyudo gave me a teacher, for whom I wasn't prepared at all. I don't favour guru's, don't believe in the complete and comprehensive wisdom of one man or woman that can guide thousands, let alone millions of others. So it took me a while before I saw in Kanjuro Shibata XX the sensei to whose insights I would like to tune my compass. That process succeeded, because I got the chance to develop a personal connection with him. And in doing so, I discovered that Sendai not only was dead sure about his own wisdom, but also was very open to dialogue. When I once asked him why he had given up his position in Japan to teach western students, he told me that he favoured the idea of rebuttal. That gave a lot of fuss, but was much more interesting than the obedience that he knew from his native country. In the years after I always reminded him of these words, before voicing a critical opinion. He could stand that very well.

It also was Sendai who let me slowly comprehend the moment in which you can let it all go, to take the plunge in the here and now. This is not only the core of the samurai philosophy, it is also a task that doesn't allow you to build any routine. Every day I am challenged to face life with boundless curiosity, without fear, and without any experience. This awareness makes me the learning being that I am and want to be.

'Beginners Heart' Sendai called this. You are never accomplished: every day you get the chance to face life with an open mind and open heart.

That is infinitely more difficult than it seems.

But to that, Sendai also had a good advice: 'Gambate!' Never give up!

Peter Fokkens