

To be on the spot

“To be on the spot,” it’s called. To face every situation tailored and adequately, to observe it open and alert – this way of being is easily lost in every-day routine, but it can be practiced...

Kyudo, the Japanese way of the bow, is a wonderful method, rooted in ancient samurai tradition. The perfect control of the bow was regarded to be an art, meant to experience every moment just as it is, away from rational strategies and concepts, beyond hope and fear.

Kyudo fascinates by its precision and elegance of movement, the beauty of the bow and arrow, the atmosphere of peace and dignity – elements that demand for an inner dialogue, for personal development.

For the observer kyudo seems to be nothing more than archery. To draw the bow and hit the target comes close to a skill test, but kyudo is not a sport. To discover the true soul of kyudo, one turns the eye inside; all thought and feeling, worry, hope, doubt or fear to hit the target, or not, is cut and transcended by kyudo practice. Kyudo is standing Zen, meditation in action.

Every shot is one-of-a-kind and the archer gives all he has. He doesn’t look at the target, to see if he hit bullseye, but gazes inside, using the target as a mirror for his own emotions. Every shot clears the clouded view a little bit more, opening up the room for a spontaneous and lively experience.

Max Baltin has been practicing kyudo for more than 25 years. He is a close student of Kanjuro Shibata XX Sendai (1921 – 2013) and Kanjuro Shibata XXI Sensei . He remembers his first kyudo experience as if it was yesterday...

“A bit nervous I sit on the bench. The Japanese master speaks some introductory words – I just remember him saying that kyudo is not a sport... Zen monks sat quietly on a stone, kyudo is meditation in action, and may be practiced by young and old, men and women alike...

Now comes the demonstration. A student in a black hakama and white shirt, holding a bow and arrow, strides with measured paces through the room until he is about two meters away from the straw bale on the stander. He bows to Sensei, then to us and to the target. He rises the bow and holds it horizontal with straight forearm; the tip reaching the target. Then he lowers bow and arrow, holds them next to his body, standing still for a while. Finally, he takes bow and arrow, bringing them to his hips – in my perception a bit onerous, freezes for a short moment and starts to prepare his shot. His movements seem formal, the sequence is elegant, like a slow dance. Suddenly he releases a short war cry (kiai) and shoots the arrow two meters away in the straw bale.

The demonstration ends as he bows again, first for the target, then to us, and then to the teacher, and strides away with the same measured paces...

Is that all? I think. In a sense I had hoped for more. In a moment we will start to learn kyudo in a small group of interested beginners; give me a bow and let's start! Well, I couldn't have been more wrong. The seemingly simple and elegant dance appears to be a meticulous sequence of precisely defined coordinations. Partly the required positions completely belie my physical senses – my brain hopelessly trying to cope with all details, and Sensei just murmuring: 'Too much thinking...'

At the end of the first day I had learned the complete form, but for the first shot itself. It just came by arduous repetition, continuous correction and humorous motivation by the instructors and Sensei. Not one arrow, however, had flied. I on the other hand discovered aching muscles in places I never imagined to exist...

'Gambate,' Sensei empowered us: never give up!

The next day starts with repeating everything that we have learned the day before. Just before lunch, I am invited to the position in front of the straw bale, and finally I am allowed to deliver my first shot:

First bow for the target..... Carefully I perform the whole sequence until I reach the shooting position. Then I push the bow to the target, and draw the string far backwards. Tension builds up to a point where my arm begins to tremble – then I release the arrow and simultaneously the kiai is drawn from my lips... The arrow vibrates in the straw bale and all tension falls away... After one-and-a-half day my first shot! It's an indescribably personal moment – wonderful!

After a short moment I remember to end the form, bow for the target and need a moment before daring to deliver the next shot.

At the end of the program Sensei assures us: 'Keep your open kyudo heart – don't be a three days monk, but come back.' For me, not coming back was out of question, it was crystal clear that I would take the first opportunity to practice further..."

Max Baltin.