

Kyudo - STANDING ZEN

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Kyudo, the way of the bow, is a living tradition of meditative archery, rooted in the old warrior traditions of Japan. The perfect mastery of the bow was considered an art by the Samurai, an art that knew no other goal than the highest experience of the here and now, of the moment as it is, beyond any strategies of thought and concept. Christopher and Katja Triplett on the history of the bow and the way of the bow.

Today Kyudo is being practised by thousands of people all over the world for their mental schooling as well as for their spiritual development. The simple elegance of the movements, the beauty of the bow and the arrows and the atmosphere of quietness and dignity predominant in the practice place, have a great fascination for those of us who wish to walk upon the path of self-knowledge. Because to set out on the path of archery means to set out on a journey of understanding where you learn to see with a new set of eyes and to listen with new ears. If you look at it from the outside, Kyudo seems to be archery. Drawing the bow and shooting at the target resembles a test of skill, but Kyudo is no sport. To discover the true nature of Kyudo, through hitting the target one has to look inside and cut through and go beyond any kind of preoccupation, whether it be worry, hope, doubt or fear. Although the actual form of Kyudo has changed over and over again and become more sophisticated over the past centuries, and has been subdivided into various teaching schools (Ryu) and those in turn into subgroups (Ha), according to style (Kata) and specific techniques (Waza), the essence of true Kyudo practice always remains the same. It is standing Zen.



Ritsuzen - Zen im Stehen

The development of the bow

The fertile ground on which the Japanese way of the bow grew to become as we know it today, is composed of various layers of spiritual traditions of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhist teaching. From the mainland these traditions came to the Japanese archipelago at different times, where they interlaced inextricably with the native web of concepts in a very specific "typical Japanese" manner. Of course, not just religious ideas and practices or models for social organisation came to Japan from China and Korea, but also innumerable material and cultural assets. Thus also the prototype of the asymmetrical Yumi (bow) was probably not invented in the archipelago, but introduced to Japan through the carriers of the Yayoi-culture during about the third century BC.

These immigrant ethnic groups of unmistakably Mongoloid origin used the bow and the arrow mostly in military conflicts over land and water rights. To a certain degree they intermingled with the local Jomon people who on their part had brought their own knowledge about the manufacturing of ceramics, bow and arrow hunting, as well as other cultural achievements from the mainland (from about 10,000 BC onwards). The excavated Jomon and Yayoi bows, as well as the bows of the ethnic group of the Ainu, who were later driven away to the north, are made from a single piece of wood, i.e. so-called stave-bows, in contrast to the far more elastic and stable composite bows or reflex bows that appeared in Japan only at the beginning of the 11th century. Here too one can assume that the knowledge about the composite bows came from China. The significance of the invention of the bow for the history of mankind is definitely comparable to the discovery of fire. It is an interesting fact that the bow itself, whether as a military or hunting weapon, as a fire drill, as the prototype of a string or plucked instrument, or as a ritual object, has been invented in each continent independently.

The bow as a weapon

For military action - not only in Japan - especially the archers on horseback were of extraordinary importance. At the beginning of a military fight it was possible, within seconds and by covering the entire target area, to inflict disastrous losses on the enemy who was still far away. Archers were also employed in sieges and sea fights. Today's Japanese bow, the Yumi, is unique not only because of its asymmetrical form, but also because at 2.3 metres average it is the longest bow in the world. Its toughness and durability on the one hand, its sensitivity and tendency to change on the other, can best be compared to a musical instrument made of wood, for instance a hand-manufactured violin.

The magical bow

However, the bow in Japan was not only applied in a practical function as a weapon for killing animals or doing away with people. Even today the bow is being used as a ritual and cultic object. "The Master began by showing us various Japanese bows (...) Then he grasped the best and strongest of his bows and, standing in a ceremonious and dignified attitude, let the lightly drawn string fly back several times. This produces a sharp crack mingled with a deep thrumming, which one never afterwards forgets when one has heard it only a few times: so strange it is, so thrillingly does it grip to the heart." Thus tells us Prof. Eugen Herrigel in his famous book "Zen in the Art of Archery" about his first lesson of being instructed in "the artless art".

"After this significant introductory act of purification and consecration" the master shows Mr. and Mrs. Herrigel a first demonstration of the "proper drawing" of the bow. Indeed, plucking the bowstring forms part of an ancient ritual of the female shamans in Japan which serves to make them susceptible to messages from the unseen world. Although the material is bamboo, the magical bow Azusa-Yumi is called the "bow made from the catalpa tree". This goes back to an ancient Chinese tradition of magic regarding the appeasement of the souls of the dead. Furthermore the Hama-Yumi, the "evil-destroying bow" is used in numerous ceremonies in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, and, set up in the niche of honour or on the house shrine, protects private households from evil influences.

From technique towards the way of the bow

Confucianism taught archery as the most adequate form to shape a perfect personality. Already in the 4th century this teaching had been met with enthusiastic approval amongst the nobility. It is true that during the 9th century contacts between Japan and China were interrupted for some time for political reasons, but the influence of Chinese thinking on Japanese archery, about world order, the harmony of heaven, about man and earth, which was to be aspired, did persist. The Shogun Yoritomo spared no effort in training his warriors more efficiently. He instructed Ogasawara Nagakiyo to teach them a new way of horseback archery, the famous Yabusame, which was put into action immediately. Thus also the way for the foundation of the Ogasawara-Ryu, or Ogasawara school, was paved. Both Takeda, the founder of Takeda-Ryu, and Ogasawara were descendants of the first founder of Japan's very first archery school ever: Henmi Kiyomitsu (whose school is named Henmi-Ryu).

In the period during which the Shogunate was located in the city of Kamakura (1185-1333) the samurai took up again the methods and the contents of Zen-Buddhist teaching. Zen or meditation Buddhism had only just been introduced from China through the monks Dogen (founder of the Soto school) and Eisai (founder of the Rinzai school). The warriors were greatly interested in the monks' concept of unconditional devotion to the master, and their emphasis on strict ascetic practices, where direct and intuitive

experience of the non-dualistic nature of reality is central, they found worthy of emulation. The new Zen practices allowed them to fulfil their duties more efficiently and to go into battle unmoved by hope and fear. Only much later however, the Zen aspect within the bow practice came to full maturity.

One of the most influential archers is the legendary master Heki Danjo Masatsugu (about 1443-1502). His shooting technique which had been revealed to him in the form of a flash of inspiration, was nothing short of revolutionary and quickly spread amongst the archer warriors, and in the course of time many "new schools" were established, Heki-Ryu subgroups, some of which exist even up to this day (Chikurinha, Sekkaha and Insaiha).

Although in the beginning the Samurai regarded European fire-arms with distaste, from the 16th century onwards these, first in the form of Portuguese muskets, replaced the bow as a military weapon. Some efforts, such as the introduction of a sports archery competition at the temple of Sanjusangendo in Kyoto (which still takes place once a year today), were made, but the days of the military bow were counted. This is the reason why the emphasis in archery practice was ultimately placed on mental schooling and the forming of character, the more so as the centuries under the reign of the Tokugawa Shoguns were comparatively peaceful.

The term Kyujutsu existed well into the Edo-period (1600-1868), although Morikawa Kozan, founder of the modern Yamato-Ryu, first mentioned the term "Kyudo" even in the year 1600.

The modern way of the bow

In 1868, the year of the quasi enforced opening of Japan and the reinstatement of the emperor (Tenno) as an active political ruler, the imperial government attempted to abolish the "warrior ways" (Bushido). However, this attempt was not very successful. Simultaneously the until that time politically leading Samurai ranks were disbanded.

Around the turn of the century another reformer entered the Kyudo scene: Honda Toshizane (1836-1917) who with his new form of practice unifying the warrior and the ceremonial style, was at first met with fierce resistance from the old schools, but was finally accepted by the general public in the form of a new school, the Honda-Ryu, which has had a lasting effect on the manner of practice up to this day. During the thirties, the Greater Japanese Organisation of Warrior Virtues (Dai Nippon Butoku Kai) tried to establish practising standards for Kyudo, which in 1934 succeeded.

After the defeat of World War II, the martial arts were prohibited at first. After being readmitted in 1952, the classic martial arts, organised in clubs, are now open to everyone, regardless of their financial situation, and, for the first time ever, for women as well.

Since 1946 most schools are a member of the all-Japanese Kyudo Federation (Zen Nihon Kyudo Renmei) which in 1953 established practising standards that are now being observed by its members, even in those groups outside of Japan. Today the number of Kyudo practitioners is estimated at about half a million.

A spiritual path

Although Kyudo is not a religious practice, it has been deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism and Shinto. The ceremonial aspects, the etiquette and the respect given to the bow, the arrows and the practice place (dojo), are all reflections of Shinto thinking. Whereas the outer forms of Kyudo closely resemble Shinto ritual, into which in turn some elements of court archery from the Chinese tradition have been incorporated, the heart of Kyudo is inseparably linked to Zen philosophy and the interpretation of Dao melted

into it.

The teachings of Zen tell us that our true selves are hidden within deep layers of habitual thought patterns, self-delusion and ego. We live in a dream-world of our own making. The aim of Zen practices is to wear away these layers of illusion and ego so as to be suddenly free from the dualistic outlook that keeps us from understanding our true nature and living harmoniously with ourselves, others and the universe at large.

In Zazen (sitting meditation) one strives to unify body and mind the medium of the breath and maintaining a strict sitting posture. Kyudo as "Zen in action" incorporates the same concepts of mind, breath and posture working in unison; so the experience of Zen is vital to understanding the essence and philosophy of Kyudo.

To the sincere practitioner Kyudo is a way of life, and there is no separation between Kyudo training and everyday activities. Each arrow is shot as if it were the only one, just as each moment of one's life is the ultimate moment. The Kyudo practitioner does not look at the target for the result of his/her practice, but inward, for the target is not a target - it is a mirror. And if the heart is right, each shot clears away some more of the obstacles clouding the vision of one's true nature.