

# The Zen of Kyudo

## The Goal-less Goal

In the early 1950's when Western culture was reaching a zenith of materialistic expression, a German professor of philosophy, Eugen Herrigel, wrote a book about his experiences while living in Japan during the 1920's. This small and rather modest book, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, is today an Eastern philosophy classic and has greatly influenced the way many people perceive the Japanese essence.

The book, a simplistic but to the point introduction to the Japanese traditional archery skill called kyudo, is from the Western perspective an intriguing and fascinating compendium of contradictions. Nevertheless, what seems to be contradictory to some often makes perfect sense to others.

While Christianity, the foundation of Western cultural identity, entertains the belief in a Creator and a Divine Plan for each individual, in Zen there is no Creator and no predestined end to anyone or anything.

In disregarding the idea of a beginning and/or an end - those concepts that would give value to an existential moment - Zen disposes of the characteristically strong Western sense of purpose and in doing so neutralizes most of the Western aggressive traits that ensue from the belief in a mission that would supposedly justify all individual existence.

### I Act, Therefore I Am

Zen attends to a reality that can only be understood by a mind that has already emancipated itself from the unrestrained chains of thought, it thus can fully concentrate on the very present - the Now.

Springing from a World view that heavily leans on result focused action - on Doing - as opposed to inner development, art in the West concentrates on expression rather than on understanding and consequently expects or demands either the conveyance of a message or the achievement of an aesthetic goal. A "master" in the West is often considered the one who can translate an idea, or feeling, into a material medium. Conversely, Japanese traditional arts (kyudo, kendo, sado, kado, etc.) involve a recognition of inner states without fixation on achievement or goal. A master in any of these skills (the suffix "do" pronounced with a long "o" as in door means "way") is not one who best expresses thought through striving and achievement, but rather one who best bypasses conceptualization and striving to achieve. In other words, a master is one who "masters" his/her inner states.

### Kyudo x Sports

Zen considers that skill - most precisely for the purpose of this article, the do of kyudo - starts when intellectualization is brought to an halt.

Masao Iijima, an eight-dan kyudo teacher told me, 'kyudo is exactly that... and everything else one wants kyudo to be too.'

With more than 50 years of uninterrupted practice, Iijima is perhaps one of the most qualified individuals to speak about kyudo; today he travels the world to share his knowledge with anyone interested. Nevertheless, he lives modestly and expresses his views on the subject in clear and simple language.

He describes what he identifies as three types of today's kyudo practitioners:

One comprises those "who practice it as a sport and wish to test their skills." Another is made up of "the ones that come to kyudo because they have time and want to make new friends and gather in a clubby-like atmosphere. The third group, consists mostly of people who come to kyudo because they want to learn how to become better human beings."

Rather than making judgments of value, Iijima considers that, "each of these three groups practicing kyudo today are in equal amount important and representative of what kyudo is or stands for."

The first group seems to consist mostly of young people: naturally, people who want to show off and use their strength and ability to measure out and take their place in the world. To them kyudo can be very helpful and might teach them form as well as discipline.

The second group seems to be largely composed of people in the autumn of their lives, most of them have recently retired from work and need something to fill what they perceive to be a (new) void. To them, kyudo personifies a friend, in some instances a form of therapy, helping them to ease the mind, diminish fears, while at the same time sharpening their senses.

The third group encompasses people of various ages who, independently of their age or gender, seem to share in the hyperactivity of their intellectual faculties. This last might constitute the most interesting of the three groups, since its members tend to be focused on the content of kyudo, rather than on what can be obtained from it.

Most of what has and is being written about kyudo originates from within the members of this group. Most of the practitioners of of Kyudo outside of Japan fulfill the characteristics of this third group, but to persons endowed with the personality traits of this third group kyudo might help them to attain a good quality of direct attention, by restraining their tendency to fantasize.

But not every one in the West has had his/her first contact with the East through books or careful media; it seems that the vast majority has met the East through some pop cultural medium.

## Oriental Fantasies

A string of European and American writers and painters, later including musicians and movie stars such as The Beatles and David Carradine - with the media eager to promote them - opened doors to a different world, the East. Although great changes have occurred since, to many Westerners the exotic and fantastic still seems to lay on the other side.

Memoirs of a Geisha, the Last Samurai, all add to the creation of inaccurate and misleading stereotypes and such a simplistic entertainment acts as a barrier to grasp the fundamental discipline that all oriental arts share.

"To say what is or is not an martial art is very difficult, because is not what you do, but rather the way you do it that might make one an artist."

To the first two groups practicing kyudo today, besides the clothing and form, kyudo seems not to differ greatly from "ordinary" archery. But to the third group the difference seem even greater than the distance separating East from the West.

To hit the center of the target is the goal of conventional archery; consequently a great effort is spent designing better and more efficient equipment, always in the hope to obtain more accuracy and results compatible with the practitioner's desire to excel. While the bow of kyudo has remained unaltered for over 500 years, the bow used in conventional archery has been continuously improving from ancient times, when it was the essential tool of war and hunting. Nowadays,

conventional archery's bow is a highly sophisticated high-tech instrument and still open to future improvements.

While Westerners rely heavily on innovation and creativity kyudo, like most traditional Eastern disciplines, dispenses with individuality and relies instead on experience and obedience to perpetuate wisdom.

Traditional practices, like kyudo, rest on a foundation of an established (fulfilled) level of knowledge that can only be maintained but never improved, therefore the importance given to form in Eastern practices. In the absence of the sage to transmit knowledge, if practiced with intention, dedication, and perseverance, the time-proven form(s) might lead the practitioner forward in the path of wisdom.

## A Weapon for Peace

It is believed that kyudo originated at a time when guns began to replace the bow. Since kyudo is not target oriented, it required a time of 'peace' to develop and mature.

While the warrior elite is a class that seems to have always existed in Japan, it was only when the bow lost its military importance that it could be removed from concerns of target accuracy and developed into a "way."

To facilitate this transition, kyudo propitiated a advent of a padded glove with a hook-like thumb that makes it easy to pull the bowstring. This invention provoked a modification: from using all the archer's physical and technical resources in the releasing of the arrow, to the effort now focused in the holding of the arrow. This apparently minute shift transformed the bow from an aggressive weapon into a passive instrument, which hopefully would transform the warrior into a monk.

What reshaped the bow into a peaceful object was not just the hegemonic takeover by the gun. Historical events - not often necessarily associated with this process - developed in such a fashion so as to favor the politico-philosophical transition of this cultural artifact.

In the year 1603, Ieyasu Tokugawa came to power, his shogunate centralized the government in Edo (now Tokyo), and Japan entered a long period of peace and national isolation. To stabilize the country and assure the continuity of peace, Tokugawa imposed strict rules and regulated the possession and use of arms, leaving in the hands of the state the actual monopoly of violence.

To consolidate its power, the shogunate institutionalized various aspects of Japan's national life. It naturally placed a heavy emphasis on obedience and loyalty, by enforcing surrender of the popular will to the will of the government.

Individual volition and expression were restrained by the threat of the death penalty for all who confronted the central government, either physically or intellectually. Japanese martial arts intermingled in this manner aesthetics with Japanese philosophical/religious thought, in a manner befitting the new government (Shogunate).

Perhaps kyudo best reflects the contrasts between Eastern and Western conceptions of skills. With the predominance of Western culture in these times of globalization - Western culture becoming the norm - Eastern traditional practices have enormously increased their appeal in the West. Eastern disciplines offers countless alternatives to a material culture that places major emphasis on acquisition, achievement and affluence.

As Iijima remarked, "People come to kyudo because they want to learn how to become better human beings."...