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Zen and the Art of Archery

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Special to The Washington Post
Friday, March 29, 2002; Page WE60

WHEN I made my initial foray into the world of Kyudo, a traditional form of Japanese archery, I was taken aback to learn that before I could actually shoot an arrow, I – like all beginning students – would have to spend several sessions just becoming familiar with the form.

“Hey! This is supposed to be archery!” I thought to myself. “And in archery, the whole idea is to shoot arrows into targets. What gives?” As I learned more about the practice, however, my impatience melted away.

Kyudo is a form of archery, to be sure. But – other than the undeniable fact that it does involve using a bow to shoot an arrow in the general direction of a target – it has little in common with the varieties of archery more widely known in this country, like bow hunting or the archery practiced at the Olympics.

For one thing, in the practice of Kyudo you’re not terribly concerned about whether you actually hit the target at which you’ve aimed. Rather, the emphasis is placed on the action of shooting – the awareness and focus the archer brings to the moments surrounding and including the loosing of the arrow. For the experienced practitioner – and even at times for the novice – Kyudo is a form of moving meditation, a way to examine the self, the mind and the moment.

Another big difference between Kyudo and Western forms of archery is the equipment, especially the yumi, the elegantly curving bow. Erase from your mind any mental image you might have of the bow you shot with as a child in summer camp or the high-tech gear- and pulley-laden compound bows of today.

Picture instead something more like the handcrafted beauties the elves carried in “The Lord of the Rings.” Made of layers of hardwood topped with a layer of bamboo, the six- to eight-foot-tall yumi is a vibrant arc that holds the bowstring – or tsuru – taut. Its leather handgrip may be set off with a bit of austere decoration – narrow strips of rattan wound about the bow, accompanied perhaps by a cartouche of patterned cloth, or a geometric design formed from fine bits of rattan. The yumi is truly a gorgeous object – the sort of thing you’d expect to find on display at the Freer Gallery rather than in the aisles of your local sporting goods store.

The Miyako Kyudojo (Capital Tiger Kyudojo), the group with which I began my studies, meets every Sunday morning at 11:30 at the Adelphi Manor Archery Range just off University Boulevard, near Riggs Road. (If the weather is wet, too cold or very windy, practice moves to a gym in Takoma Park.) Driving past the area’s scruffily colorful strip malls, it was hard to imagine I was on my way to practice a centuries-old meditative art. Immersed in the practice, though, I felt far closer to the temple city of Kyoto than you might think possible.

Each practice session begins and ends with a few moments of silent standing meditation. The students form a straight line, facing the instructor. Bowing crisply from the hips, instructor and students acknowledge one another. Next, we stand silently, our legs in a wide stance, elbows bent and pointing out to either side of the body, one hand resting palm up on the palm of the other, just below the navel. We take a few moments to focus our minds.

Each time I have done this, I've found myself intensely aware of the nature of the day. I feel the sun (or lack thereof!) and the breeze, I hear the rustling of the woods and the whir of traffic from University Boulevard, I smell the scent of the earth and become aware of my own breath. It's a moment of serenity and pleasure.

"Hajimi mas'!" our instructor cries sharply. "Hajimi mas'!" we students respond fiercely. "We begin!" is one way I've heard this phrase translated. The time of quiet contemplation is over, for now, and the more active part of the practice commences.

First, an instructor will request a student – any student, not necessarily the most advanced – to demonstrate for the group. This serves as a sort of review session for the more novice archers and is a chance for everyone to focus their minds on the task at hand.

After a few arrows are shot, the instructor asks the watching students to call out the name of each of the Seven Coordinations – the essential steps of Kyudo – as it occurs. Next, the more experienced students line up to practice shooting at targets under an instructor's supervision. Beginning students work with an instructor one-on-one or in a small group, learning and relearning each Coordination.

Kyudo has such an economy of movement – each step is so elegantly precise – that it looks downright easy. But like other arts where less is more – think of the minimalism of haiku or the spare floral arrangements that characterize traditional ikebana – it turns out to be quite a challenge to achieve this level of simplicity.

Starting with Ashibumi, or Taking the First Steps, a movement in which the target is sighted and a ready-for-action stance is assumed, the archer moves in a prescribed manner all the way through to the arrow's release, Hanare, the seventh and final coordination. Accompanying this moment of release – even if you're a beginner, practicing sans arrow – is the exclamation "Hai!" a grunting shout that emerges from the very base of the belly.

After this comes Zanshin, or Lingering Mind and Body, an almost melancholy moment, in which the archer stands with arms outstretched, contemplating the energy of the shot as it subsides. Even as the rankest of amateurs, when I took my first shot, I could feel the energy thrumming out from the center of my body to my fingertips, dissipating into the air beyond me.

That first shot. It's one thing to flex a yumi without a ya (arrow). Quite another to have a shaft ready to shoot – even if its only destination is a bale of hay about six feet away. As I moved into the fifth coordination, Hiki Tori, or Drawing, I felt the ya take on a life of its own. Poised to shoot, in the sixth coordination, Kai, or Meeting, the ya was nearly bursting with a quicksilver

energy. With the moment of release, as the ya tore forward through the air, came the sobering realization: "This Kyudo is no joke! These arrows are powerful weapons!"

Finishing the practice, we students stand once again in a line, facing our instructor. "Owari mas'!" cries the instructor. "Owari mas'!" we respond. "We finish!" The practice is over, until we reconvene next week.

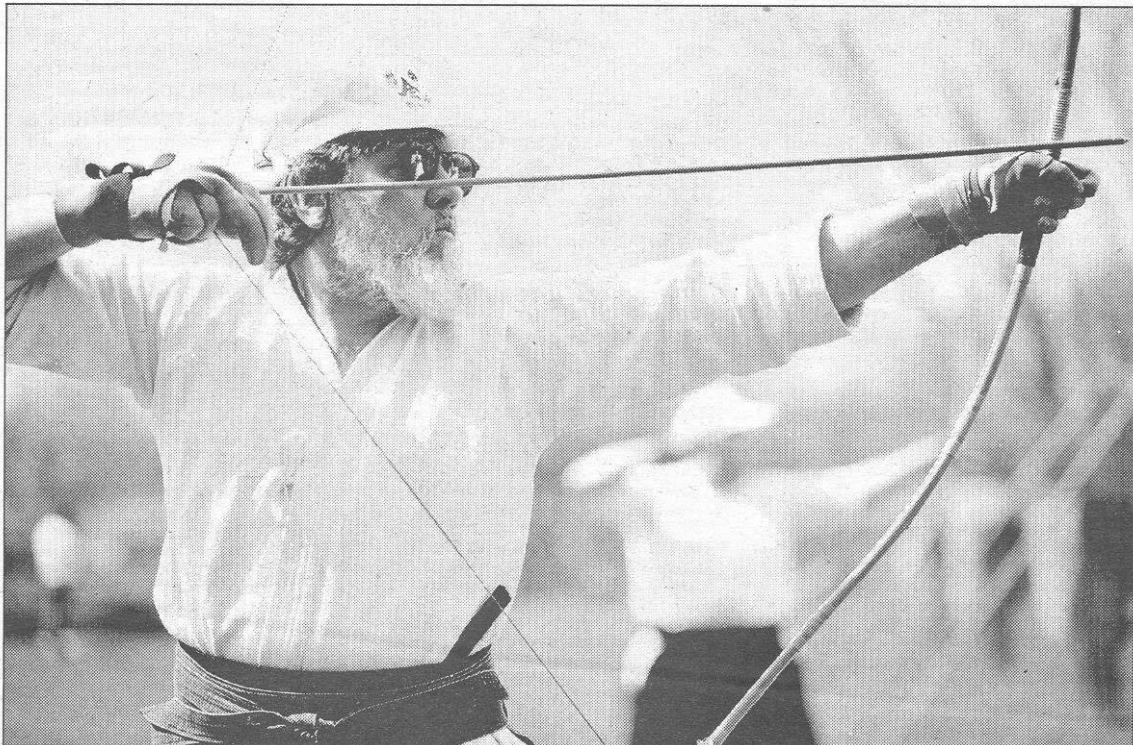
Miyako Kyudojo's Web site: <<http://users.erols.com/kenrawie/kyudo.html>>. Web site of Kanjuro Shibata XX, master teacher to the Miyako Kyudojo: <www.zenko.org/index.htm>.

Upcoming Kyudo demonstrations:

Saturday at 3, at the Tidal Basin stage, on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial. Web site: <www.nationalcherryblossomfestival.org/press_room/cultural.asp>.

April 6 from noon and 5, weather permitting, there will be a Kyudo demonstration at Federal Triangle, 12th Street between Pennsylvania and Constitution avenues. Web site: <www.us-japan.org/dc/events/performarts02.html#kyudo>.

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BY DENNIS DRENNER FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Ray Sosnowski of Ashton learns about Kyudo at a public archery range near College Park.