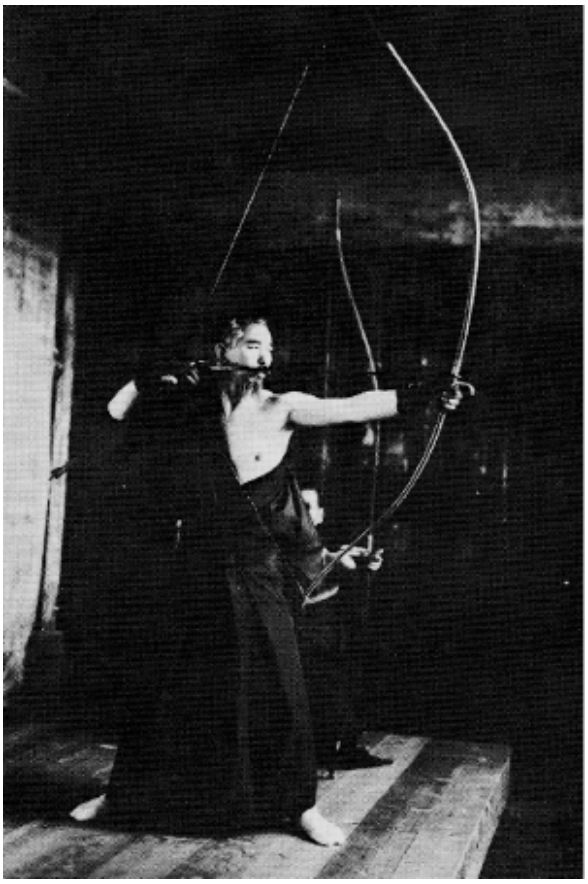
Zen in the Art of Archery - A Practitioner's View
(talk given at the Buddhist Society, London in November 2003)

In the 1920's the German academic, Eugen Herrigel went to Japan in search of the Zen experience. He had studied theology and then philosophy at Heidelberg University, and through his interest in Christian mysticism (Eckhart), he became interested in Zen which he thought of as one of the most mystical of religions. He wanted to find a way of directly experiencing living Buddhism, which he understood could be found in the practice of Zen Buddhism.

He was advised that as a foreigner without any language ability in Japanese, he would be better of if he first of all studied an art form (geido) that was related to Zen and through that to gradually find a relationship to Zen Buddhism. On this recommendation he took up the practice of kyudo – the way of the Japanese bow – and wrote about his experiences in his now famous book, "Zen in the Art of Archery". With the publication of an English language edition in 1956, further publications followed in many languages, including Japanese. This book helped to popularise an interest in Zen and kyudo and the notion that they are in some way intimately connected.

Herrigel took up his kyudo training under the Master Kenzo Awa who came from the Japanese archery tradition that evolved historically from two main lineages, the warrior tradition (bushakei) that used the bow as a weapon of war, and the ceremonial tradition (reishakei), with its emphasis on ritualised shooting form. When the bow became

obsolete in its use as a weapon it continued to be used for competition and ritual ceremony and eventually became a way for moral and spiritual training.



Awa was considered as an expert and was well known for his accuracy and being capable of, it is reported – hyappatsu hyakuchu – a hundred shots – a hundred hits – and in his earlier period as an instructor emphasised the accuracy of hitting. But at a certain point in his kyudo career, he is purported to have had doubts about his shooting and about Japanese archery as just excellence in technique. He adopted the view nani mo iranu – nothing is needed – and that practice goes beyond technique and that there is a need for the deepest effort to create a "spiritual" release with absolute effort – issha zetsumei; one shot, one life. It would seem that Awa had some insight or awakening in his own practice upon which this was founded. Awa's kyudo became more of a spiritual way, almost to the extend of being considered as a religion by some of his critics. At the time the founder of judo, Jigoro Kano created the concept of judo as opposed to the purely technical jujitsu, and kyudo also was evolving in place of kyujitsu as a way of moral training and cultivating the character. Awa's creation of his own school of the "Great Shooting Way" (Daishado) reflected this shift of focus but to his own extreme of spiritual intention.

Kyudo practitioners at the time considered Awa as unorthodox, if not eccentric. There may have even been some who thought he was mad. He definitely did not represent the

mainstream of kyudo. It is also not clear as to his relationship to Zen practice. He had a "brother" student, who he had undergone training with together, in the Zen master Umeji Roshi, who was also considered unconventional in his teaching of kyudo and used Zen approaches in his teaching method. It is known that he was greatly admired by Awa and that they trained together even after they had established their own training practices (dojo). But it seems that Awa never actually formally adopted Zen training, or practised sitting meditation (zazen). His approach was most definitely about using the vehicle of kyudo as a way of transcendental experience, and he used Zen concepts and terminology to illustrate this, but this is as far as the connection seems to have gone.

For Herrigel in his own quest for insight through a "Zen practice", Awa was custom-made. He must have fitted completely Herrigel's romantic notion of the mysterious and mystical master. As was mentioned earlier, Herrigel did not speak or understand Japanese and this lack of communication would not have helped Herrigel to have understood that Awa never considered himself a proponent of Zen, or that kyudo and Zen are in some way synonymous. It would seem that Herrigel constructed his own interpretation of his experiences with Awa to enforce his own romantic view of kyudo as a form of Zen practice.

One example of this can be found in Herrigel's book, in which he asked Awa what you needed to do to hit the target. Awa is reported to have said that you do not need to think about hitting the target. You do not need to aim at it. Herrigel challenged this by declaring that if you do not aim at the target you cannot hit it.

Awa ordered Herrigel to come to the practice hall that evening. In the semi-darkness, he placed a stick of incense in front of the target so that only the light of the incense stick was visible(the target butts are 28 meters from the shooting line in a standard shooting

situation). Awa shot his first arrow and it was heard hitting the target, he then shot his second arrow (arrows are shot in pairs) which also hit. It would seem that the first arrow hit the centre of the target, and the second arrow split through the shaft of the first to embed itself beside it.

Herrigel declares in his book that Awa said that through experience it is acceptable that the first arrow hit, but the second arrow was evidence of shooting without self, and that this shot was not created by him. As if something mysterious had taken place. Herrigel says in the passage that relates to this incident that Awa said, "…"It" shot and "It" made the hit. Let us bow to the goal as before the Buddha."

However, other sources reported Awa's explanation of the incident quite differently, saying that Herrigel went to retrieve the arrows and when he did not return, Awa called to Herrigel, but received no answer. When Awa went to the target butts he found Herrigel sitting speechless in front of the target with the arrows embedded in it. Awa said that this was just coincidence and that he had no intention to demonstrate such a thing. Awa placed no special mystical significance on the shooting and may have even been irritated that the second arrow had damaged the first.

In my experience of kyudo and my limited experience in Zen practice, they are treated in a very matter of fact way without mystification and yet still containing an unspoken reverence for the profound which is not seen as different from the ordinary.

In the situation illustrated above, although somewhat dramatic, Awa wanted, I am sure, to demonstrate that with the correct alignment to the target and the correct conditions to make a natural release, the arrow will be sent to the target. He had the believe and trust in the shooting situation, and that at his level as a master, he did not need any special control, only the years of training that had created the concentration and balance that had embodied him in the practice. He wanted, I am sure for Herrigel to have faith is this, rather than to see it as extra-ordinary, or mysterious.

This example is also important in understanding kyudo because the romantic mystical notion of kyudo sometimes gives the idea that you do not need to hit the target, or implies that it is hit by some mysterious process that happens without the struggle or effort of proper training.

Beginners can find a way to hit the target but the training demands that the arrow is sent to the target following the correct form. Although in mainstream practice students are allowed this compromise, and encouraged to enjoy the situation, through competition and without too many immediate expectations, it is however, gradually applied, and senior grades must meet these stricter requirements. They must obey the concept of "seisha seichu" , correct hitting is correct shooting. They must meet the challenge and discipline of creating a true and natural release based on the correct and natural use of form.

The target is there for a reason. It reflects your shooting in an uncompromising way. If the arrow does not go to the target then there is something lacking. Of course there may

be impressive effort and a sincerity in the performance of the shooting, and these qualities by themselves are admired, but to keep to the discipline of “seisha seichu”, the arrow must go to the target. The target also gives you the opportunity to meet desire. Everyone has the desire to hit the target, but in thinking about the result, we are already separated from the moment and the conditions of the full draw, which create a proper release. Desire is always an idea, a hope, or expectation that can lead us away from the real situation.

We have to work with desire, and the sense of frustration that we create from our expectation. This is a normal condition of the learning process. Those who want to do “spiritual” kyudo, and pretend to be unconcerned about the result, are deceiving themselves. In many kyudo practice halls, you can find the calligraphy, “Mushin”, which is a state when the person is transcended and there is no separate conscious awareness. This is considered the highest state of shooting (a concept taken from Zen). Many kyudo students attempt to emulate this condition, but this is not possible intentionally. My own teacher would always say that you must first of all have “Yushin” the heart full of desire if you are to find the transcended heart.

Awa was uncompromising, and would have set the ultimate goals of practice from the beginning. His most radical view and central theme in his teaching was that one should not to be caught by anything (torarunai). This is to surrender yourself completely to the shooting and the situation. For this to be possible one must recognise that we do not own our body, spirit, or thoughts and that they are their own life as part of Life.

In kyudo, the handling of the bow requires an empathy towards the bow that allows it to express completely its energy and life. It is a relationship and dialogue far removed from any idea of the bow as a tool to be manipulated for some result. The body is used in a natural way so that the alignment of the joints and use of muscle power is natural and correct. The breath and posture must also obey the natural law. And this is where we must understand Awa's position on “nani mo iranu” – nothing is needed . I do not believe as is thought by some that in this approach, he abandoned all technique, because this is frankly impossible, what I am sure Awa meant is that nothing extra is needed. When we learn to use the body in the right way, or recognise the natural functioning of the bow, then there is the understanding that nothing is added on, or no separate agency is needed to operate them. There is just the natural functioning of the situation.

The paradox we experience is that we feel separate and lacking something, and yet there is nothing to gain. In acquiring “naturalness” in the situation, we need to become less than more. It seems as if we are developing and advancing – which we are in a relative sense – but we do this by removing misunderstanding and our own ideas of how we should do something. This is why we need relational attitudes such as acceptance, trust, and reliance more on our felt experience than our understanding.

We must live the paradox. In kyudo we must be in the middle of understanding and feeling, doubt and faith. Seeking for an ideal but accepting the matter of factness of the

situation. We have technical understanding but not at the expense of the felt "understanding".

Training is the foundation of all of this. While the teacher pushes you when you are lazy, or avoiding yourself, and we have the experience of all those who have gone before to helps us, the practice is the real teacher in which the truth of "seisha seishu" exists. Without the daily repetition of giving in to the practice, and confronting ourselves, then nothing is realised. But no one can do this for us. Only our own effort and perseverance can make this possible.

The process of learning is often seen traditionally in three phases; Shin, Gyo, and So. Shin is the character for Truth which represents the fundamentals and the essence of the practice, and at the Shin level the student must unreservedly copy the fundamentals of form without deviation or personal interpretation. This is essential training of the heart to establish right attitude and remove resistance. We must practice repetitively trying to keep to the established form and in so doing we meet our frustration and desire to do things in our own way. What we are taught are the fundamentals which are also the absolute possibilities of the form, so we continue to seek to make the correct stance, for example, to the end of our lives. Once the practice has become more accepting and more embodied, then the practitioner is as the gyo level, where the form is carried out with some level of naturalness. Following on from this the ultimate condition of So is the state where the practitioner and form are one. The character So is the character for grass (kusa), representing the movement with the thousand things – as if you were moving at one through a field of tall grass.

Other elements of traditional learning also emphasis the felt and intuitive approach rather than technical understanding. For example, traditional methods of learning rely on observation practice (midori-keiko) rather than simple explanation. I experienced this as a beginner, when I was asked to watch the example of an instructor and then to just copy it. In the natural world the young of animals do this and there is evidence that the acquisition of behaviour is a skill which is often only learnt in this way by observation and then internalising the action. My teacher would say to me why don't you just do it. Younger students just copy and do it. But of course, I as a westerner and older person, would have to try and filter the experience through my own understanding. And then when I felt it was mine, I would allow it to be acquired (This practice is not simply observing with the eye, but observing with the whole of our senses).

In modern kyudo, and also in the shooting of Awa, although every movement and element of the shooting offered an opportunity for self-examination and relationship, it is however, the release in which this is most evident. In kyujitsu (Japanese archery) a controlled and intentional release is used; especially, in the days when the bow was used as a weapon. But in the shooting of kyudo the creation of a natural and uncontrived release is the real challenge.

For the kyudo practitioner this is the iron wall and the glass mountain. This is where you have to choose between a “safe” controlled, and prescribed release which will give you the result you want in hitting the target, or if you follow the principle of “seisha seichu”, when the archer attempts a sincere giving in to the correct and natural release that will send the arrow to the target. The effort of Awa’s “issha zetsumei” one shot with all your life, is the effort to give in without giving up. How to let go without just letting go? In Herrgiel’s own commentary this is well illustrated. He trained on an arrow stop – a makiwara - for the first four years of his training. Quite demanding and not usual today – because most modern students in Japan and the west have different expectations and would find this unfulfilling and possibly give up. But Herrigel persevered and saw the search for a proper release as his training purpose. He had initially an idea that there was some technique to the release, like that of shooting a pistol, which he had experience of, but when we tried to create a contrived release he was admonished by Awa, and gradually realised the meaning of a natural release.

In kyudo the bow is not actually held but the pressure of the bow is used to keep it in the left hand, and on the right the power of the bow is transferred from the glove to the right elbow, which in turn takes the tension of the bow. The archer is between these two points of the power of the bow and by bring the body inside of the draw of the bow, the archer is centred inside of the pressure of the drawn bow. Through an opposite expansion of feeling/body energy the pressure gradually increases to its optimum when the string is naturally ripped from the glove hand and a natural release is expressed. Any imbalance of power through gripping in either hand, or a collapsing of this tension will result in an unsatisfactory release that will effect the flight of the arrow. The moments before the release is the time to realise the balance of body, bow and spirit, and to allow negative feelings and disturbing thoughts to disperse.

This expansion of energy (nobiai) to create the release is unique to kyudo and is not found in any other form of archery. It is at the heart of understanding kyudo. When we give ourselves to the effort of the expansion, then we are in the living moment. To stop this and make a separate action of release, is a contrived release, and as we cannot know this actual moment, only the condition of “nobiai”, then for this moment we are beyond thinking and the separate person.

Experience teaches the archer to places reliance on the situation and in accepting emotional reactions so they do not have so much hold. The shooting gradually becomes embodied and in the highest level of practice, the presence of an independent agent is not apparent. There is not a person performing the shooting, there is just the shooting itself. This "naturalness" - without the person - is the ideal of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty (Shin, Zen, Bi) . The "effortless effort" mentioned by Herrigel in his book. Effort that has nothing added, which is not seeking for anything special. From the viewpoint of the person, this is complete effort with all your heart, but without the person it is the boundless effort of ordinary doing. Effort without definition – just effort itself.

We should remind ourselves that although we seek the profound, it is also the ordinary. In the practice hall there is no philosophy, just training the body and spirit to find its true nature.

But in our own culture the body is so possessed by ourselves. Our "personality" is expressed through the face and hands. To shift energy from the hands, face and upper body, is very demanding, and with the focus of power in the upper body, and the breathing locked in the throat and upper chest, the whole body cannot function naturally. Body awareness should be centred in the abdomen just below the navel, known in mediation practices and in traditional Japanese arts, as the "tanden" or more commonly "hara". This centre is the "place" where we start to bring everything together by placing our concentration and breathing there. With this focus the practitioner expresses the natural state of non- division between the body and awareness. Without division and attachment to our experiences, feeling and thoughts, we can be what we are.

What we can see is that although kyudo and Zen are not synonymous and have their own separate form and traditions, they do seem to seek for the same reality. If Zen in its purity is not the property of any school and as a expression of Truth, is in essence without any special spiritual allegiance, then I believe that Awa's approach to the transcendental and his own search had much in common with the ideals and purpose of Zen Buddhism.

In Buddhism we question the meaning of being a person and an individual. In doing this we practise the giving up of attachment to these notions and become aware of the whole of life. We surrender ourselves. All great spiritual traditions and practices that recognise the something beyond the individual need this understanding as the foundation of training.

Traditional Japanese practices place great emphasis on subordinating ourselves beyond ourselves. Many westerners – and I guess many Japanese as well – enter into a practice like kyudo or the Tea Ceremony with the idea of an individual purpose and experience. But in Tea for example, the guest is more important than the host and in the larger Tea gathering, one must be very aware of others. The same is true for kyudo. Although we often have ceremonial shooting performed by an individual master or senior grade, and the individual performer seems quite heroic alone on the shooting area (much like the individual meditator), it is the community of the practice place and how to work together with others which is essential for training. Working with others is in some ways more

difficult than with the bow or the situation, it challenges our relationship to ourselves and in this and all the prescribed aspects of the dojo and practice there is found very little room to indulge yourself. I think this is also true for the training of Zen.

Herrigel helped in creating the myth that kyudo and Zen are in some way the same and that kyudo is an esoteric practice. As we have seen while not synonymous they do share the same reality and have much in common. However, kyudo is not seen as part of a religion like Zen Buddhism even if for some there is a recognition of the spiritual. At the time that Herrigel practise kyudo very few kyudo practitioners connected kyudo to Zen, or practices it. The same is true today. While modern kyudo owes a recognition of the spiritual to the legacy of Awa, a large majority of practitioners in Japan consider kyudo as a recreational activity used for some moral discipline or simply to have good health. Although some practitioners of kyudo in the west also have a utilitarian view, the vast majority – through the influence of Herrigel - took up the practice of kyudo on the assumption that it was imbued with Zen purpose and ideals. This understanding for many westerners was just about Zen as the sitting mediation practice (zazen) and some notion of personal transcendental experience, often ignoring the fact that the Zen schools are intimately part of the religious purpose and practice of Buddhism.

The value of Herrigel's contribution to a popular appreciation of the spiritual is unquestionable. And if it is understood that traditional Japanese practices, such as kyudo, or a religious practice such that of Zen Buddhism, require commitment and dedication, beyond any romantic view, and that they do not consider the profound as extra-ordinary, or separate from the mundane, then we will be able to understand them better and bring ourselves closer to the examples set for us by great teachers who have shown us that further along the path there is a unity that we lack at our present level – not forgetting that while we look ahead, we must also look to our feet.

Liam O'Brien, London Kyudo Society, UK Kyudo Association