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## Archery and spirituality - 2

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Archery is one of the oldest practices of humanity. We discovered flint arrows that were 30.000 years old or more, from a transition period which goes of the Upper Paleolithic to the Mesolithic. It seems that after the end of the Glacial era, the use of the bow spread to the rest of the world, Australia excepted.

In Ancient China, archery had a fundamental importance, according to a classic text of the Confucianism dating from the dynasty Shang and the third dynasty, the dynasty of Zhou (1146-256 BC) which was the longest dynasty in power in China. The Zhou used for the first time the idea of a divine mandate to justify their domination. Archery was considered as one of the six arts a knight had to master: politeness, music, riding, calligraphy and mathematics.

To start the ceremony of the profoundly spiritual rite that is the shooting of an arrow, the archers greeted each other by curtseying. Two archers were associated, one younger and the other one older and they formed a team. They had to launch four arrows each, at the tempo of the music which accompanied the ceremony. At the beginning of the shooting, the archer held the bow in hand and held the arrow between the fingers of both hands, in a moment of deep attention and immobility. The slow and harmonious movements, the attention, the respect for the correct gestures and attitude were often more important than to reach the target. At the end of the ceremony, all the archers drank together.

*"As it is difficult to launch an arrow in harmony with the music and to shoot without forgetting the objective, only an archer of great virtue can achieve it".*

Confucius 551 - 479 BC.

In Ancient Greece and during the Mycenaean period, the bow and arrows gained enormous popularity for going to war. This situation changed at the beginning of the Iron Age and with the important changes in the ethics of the Greek war. The Greeks considered that their use was unethical, because the best warrior could be killed from afar, without it being able to see where death came from. Ethics and honor prevailed over winning or losing a battle.

In Ancient Europe, the Romans and the Celts have left some traces, but we have no clear evidence of the use of the bow by the Iberians. The oldest bow we have today is in Denmark, and it dates from 8,000 to 10,000 years ago.

During the Hundred Years War, the bow that became popular was the *"longbow"*, a long English bow measuring between 1 meter 70 and 2 meters. Its power ranged from 90 to 100 pounds (about 40 to 50 kg) and its wood came from *Tejo* (the power of a bow is the force we have to overcome to tighten the rope, it is usually measured in pounds). The first archery federation, the *"Grand National Archery Society"* (GNAS), was established in Britain in 1861. In Germany, in the 14th century, peasants had regularly to practice archery as a defense, then they shifted to crossbows. In France, a country with a great archery tradition, the *"Fédération des Compagnies d'Arc de l'Île de France"* was created in 1899.

As one can see, in what is now Europe, there is no indication that the bow was used for anything other than war and hunting, or used to practice a "spiritual way". As in other cultures, archery was considered as a sport, and the same happened with the arrival of firearms.

In 1967, Master Taisen Deshimaru arrived in Paris from Japan and immediately began teaching the practice of Zen and zazen. Before his arrival in Europe, Zen was known only through literature. In half a century, Zen spread in different countries of Europe, an infinite number of dojos were created, gathering peoples from different social strata. Upon his arrival in France, Taisen Deshimaru encountered a society apparently different from the Japanese one, but not so much. Differences can be cultural and traditional, but what is the difference between an olive tree and a pine tree? The difference is only external, because they essentially are the same trees... And as for the bows, what is the difference between a *Yumi* (the Japanese long bow) and a *Longbow* (or traditional curved bow)? Just the shape of it. For each of them, we will have to make an effort to tighten the rope and charge the arc with energy, so that the arrow can be launched.

Zen is a way of living and understanding existence as the unity of the "All", a profound experience, and Zen impregnates our daily lives. According to Baso Matsu, "*Zen is the daily consciousness*".

*"The darkness of the pines shadow depends on the brightness of the moon"*, said Kodo Sawaki.

"It is the *zanshin* spirit: the mind which remains watchful, without being distracted, attentive to the present moment and to the next one... "

Intuition dictates the gesture. "*Those who practice zazen can easily understand this. And all those who have experienced at the same time martial arts and zazen obtain a great wisdom and a great efficiency.* ", said Taisen Deshimaru Roshi in his book "Zen and Martial Arts".

Zen influenced thus certain groups of archer's who practice at the same time zazen and the archery. They have, with their bent *longbows*, the same attitude sitting in zazen than when they launch their arrows.

We are thus confronted with a fact: the practice of the archery is under the influence of the Zen mind. Our attitude towards the way we do things changes everything ... This way of living the Western archery includes attention, peace, breathing, inner silence and transmission. It is the practice which aims at self-control, at control of the energy in the relinquishment of the ego, at training the consciousness and communion with the cosmic order, in an exercise of attention, breathing, and awareness of gesture, posture and mind.

An archery session is under the influence of the Zen mind and begins with zazen. Then we prepare our bows and our protections, silently, slowly, serenely, to enter finally the dojo. In groups of 4 or more, the archers are placed near the line of fire, in front of the targets, with in a hand the bow and two arrows in the quiver (bag to carry the arrows). Fists are closed and rest on the iliac crests (crests of the pelvis). Then looking at the target, we bow slightly in salutation.

Then, we stand in the line of fire, we take a slow and deep inspiration, finishing by a retention of the breath in the *hara*. It helps to find a state of mental peace and strength. During the following inspiration, even slow and deep as the first one, and while feeling the fresh air going

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through our nostrils, we select an arrow in the quiver, the eyes focused on the arrow and the hand which feels the contact. We place the arrow in the bow with great caution, as if it could break. Then whereas we expire completely, with again a final blockage of the breath, the arrow is placed on the rope, the extremity of the bow resting on the knee and the fist of the hand holding the rope hand on the iliac crest. We inspire again slowly, completely, with total attention, and while looking at the arrow, we take the rope with our fingers and direct the bow towards the target. The bow is then raised over the head and at the same time as we breathe in. The arrow parallel to the ground, we then lower the bow slowly by paying attention to shoulders, until the correct height is reached. The eyes see the target, the bow in the hand, the rope, the arrow, the hand on the rope. The pectoral muscles are perfectly released, whereas those who tighten the rope, those of the back (serratus, trapeze, etc.) increase in volume as we tighten the rope. The abdominal muscles press towards the *hara*, whereas we expel with strength the air by the nose, making this coincide with the moment when the fingers let the rope go with the last breath of air. We hear then a soft "plop" as the rope hits slightly the fingertip. The rope which holds the arrow and the hand of the rope are thrown towards the back by the inertia, caressing the face towards the nape of the neck. And we see then the arrow fly towards the target ...

But it does not matter whether it reaches the target or not, because with a shot experienced in this way, the archer reached himself, in total unity, without separation. *Ki* appears and fills everything in a single moment: the bow, the rope, and the archer! It is the experience of the fusion between the archer, the bow, the arrow, the target and the "I".

When the first group of archers have launched their arrows, they take a step back. Facing the target, with their fists on iliac crests and holding the bow in one hand, they bow slightly in salutation towards the target. Then the group leaves the shooting range, making space for the next group.

A session can last 2 or 3 hours, and at the end we practice zazen again. Then we drink tea and we eat. This way, we see how Zen, which influences our actions in daily life, also influences traditional Western archery.

It is a *mushotoku* practice, without purpose or profit, without discrimination, only the experience lived at each launch of the arrow and the perception of the totality of that moment.

Only our attention and our attitude can change the way what we do.