
Archery and spirituality - 1

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What do we know about archery?

When one speak about archery, the first images that come to the mind of most people are images from movies about the native North Americans, Robin Hood, or of a sport practiced at the Olympic Games.

It is a rather unknown practice, but even less as a practice of a spiritual Way. In Japan, between the VIIIth and the XVIth century, the figure of the feudal warrior or "Bushi" appeared (the "Samurai" for the Westerners). At that time, the Japanese suffered from an endless civil war.

Various religious ideologies helped them to strengthen their mind and, among them, Zen Buddhism. With this practice, the Bushi gained confidence in fate, acceptance of the inevitable, breathing and the attention for the present moment.

Among other practices developed by these warriors, the archery, practiced with extreme attention and great care, became an apprenticeship of oneself.

But with the arrival of firearms, the archery took another dimension. It was then transformed into a ceremony during which the archer aims at himself and became therefore a spiritual way.

Zen and archery

In archery as in Zen, the greatest importance is given to posture, breathing and the mental attitude.

A perfect stability is necessary to stretch the bow, aim and fire (release the cord) precisely, and this balance is possible only if the following conditions exist: relaxation, muscular tonus and immobility.

The most important thing is not to reach the center of the target, but to find a state of psychophysical and spiritual balance, so that its influence can impregnate all the actions in the daily life.

The state of mind of the archer is similar to the Zen attitude in terms of absence of intention, search for usefulness, purpose or profit. This means that the archer aims at the center of the target, but that his mind must not be contaminated by the desire to reach the target or the fear of failure.

The posture of the archer is not an esthetic element, but an essential condition for balance, precision and concentration.

Do not think to the past or the future ... The present only is important, to be attentive to every movement and to perform it with the best possible perfection.

The aim of a correct posture and the slowness of the action is the harmonization of the archer with the whole shooting process.

The archer, his mind, the bow, the arrow and the target have to become a one and same thing. Often, thoughts appear which damage the shooting process and result in a poor quality shot. These thoughts are impediments: anger, happiness, anxiety, pain, surprise, fear, thoughts and sensations engendered by our brain and which affect negatively our body and our mind. This occurs as a result of our desires and the coagulations of our mind, because of the value we grant to the outside things.

From there, (according to Joseph Epes Brown), a lot of poor quality shots happen, because they are done with the false idea of a "me": "I" am the one who launched the arrow "".

As long as this consciousness of an "I" exist, as long as this egotism is not controlled, the archer will not be completely free in his action.

The shot (the moment when fingers release the rope of the bow) is a crucial moment, and of this moment depends the result of all the stages followed to get to this point. The release of the rope has to be quite smooth and must "occur from itself", it has to surprise the archer.

The archer has to stop being aware of himself, because it is not him who really launches the arrow.

After numerous years of practice and total immersion of his life in the archery's way, it is not the archer anymore who gives orders to his actions, but he realizes that he became an observer of what he is doing.

At that moment, the "I" is abandoned.

Because who launches the arrow? "IT". "IT" is only experienced by the accomplished archer. "IT" is the presence of the mind!

But I repeat it: this occurs only when the archer, the bow, the arrow, the target and the ego are totally merged.

Books on the archery and its spirituality.

Numerous books were published on archery in the West (and in Spanish), such as " **The Art of the archery** " of Joseph Epes Brown; " **The archery** " of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy; " Kyudo in comic strip " of J. Santos; " **Kyudo, the Japanese art of the archery** " by R.B.Acker. But the most renowned of these works is the book of Eugen Herrigel, professor of philosophy and theology at the Universities of Erlangen and Heidelberg (Germany). This book was translated in numerous languages.

Between the First and the Second World War, E. Herrigel had the opportunity to teach at the imperial University Tohoku Sendai in Japan. After the courses, - and after a lot of insistence, because the Japanese believed that a Westerner would never understand this art - he succeeded and was accepted in the dojo where a colleague professor at the University practiced the way of Zen in the archery.

Herrigel lived and practiced in Japan during five years, and when he came back, this experience had changed his life.

In 1936, he gave a conference at the German-Japanese Society on the art of archery. This conference contained the first outlines of his future book named "**Zen in the chivalrous art of archery**", in which he gathers and tell his deep experiences.