

'The knightly art of archery': Is 'archery' not obviously a kind of sport, and 'art' therefore athletic technique? Do you not expect to hear of the prowess of skilled Japanese marksmen, heirs of a time-honoured and almost unbroken tradition in the use of bow and arrow? Indeed, modern weaponry superseded traditional military arms only a few generations ago in the Far East, but familiarity with their use did not fade; on the contrary, it has spread ever more widely since then. Do you then perhaps expect an account of the way archery is today, as almost a national sport in Japan?

Nothing could be further from the truth! The Japanese do not consider archery a sport, but, as odd as it may sound, a wholly spiritual process. [*'geistig' can be variously translated as 'spiritual', 'mental', or 'intellectual'. Herrigel certainly considers it as something more than a mere psychological attribute; In Zen in the Art of Archery, R.F.C. Hull translates this as 'religious'-- ed.*] The 'art' of archery is not primarily physical, a technical skill whose measure is the hitting of the target, but rather an ability whose development is to be attained through purely spiritual exercises, and whose aim is a spiritual encounter: fundamentally, the archer takes aim at himself and perhaps successfully hits himself.

This undoubtedly sounds like a riddle. What? Is he telling us that archery, once pursued as a matter of life and death, is no longer even an active sport, but has become a spiritual exercise? What are bow and arrow and target for? Has the brave old art of archery, with its clear and straightforward purpose, been replaced entirely by something vague and ambiguous, if not openly incredible?

We must first realize that the peculiar spirit of this art has simply become more apparent now that it no longer needs to prove itself in mortal combat. This spirit was not incorporated into bow-shooting merely as an afterthought, but has been bound up with it since ancient times. Only recently has it become possible to cultivate this spirit in utter purity, and to allow it to emerge from obfuscation by any secondary objective. The art of archery remains a matter of life and death, without in the least losing its urgency, for conflict still remains, though now of course it is the battle of the archer with himself. And it is precisely here that the real spirit of this art reveals itself. This inner conflict is the essential, powerful foundation of all outwardly directed conflict with an opponent. Since the latter is absent, the essence of archery has been reduced to its quintessence and made manifest.

If we inquire now after this innermost foundation of archery, of this conflict of the archer with himself, the answer must sound completely enigmatic. The struggle of the archer with himself is such that he aims at himself-- and yet not at himself; that he occasionally hits upon himself-- and then again does not hit upon himself; and consequently the essential foundation of archery is without foundation, bottomless, an abyss. To use an expression familiar to the Japanese masters: in archery, all depends on attaining an 'immovable center'. Then the art becomes artless, the shot becomes a non-shooting with bow and arrow, and non-shooting becomes shooting with neither bow nor arrow. For the Japanese, these paradoxes ring quite true and are self-evidently the crux of the matter. We, on the contrary, are baffled by them.

I would like to try to approach this from another perspective. It is no longer a secret to us Europeans that all of the Japanese arts reflect in their inner form a common root, Buddhism. This holds true for archery as it does for ink drawing, the tea ceremony, the art of the actor, flower arrangement, swordsmanship-- only to name a few-- and it implies first that all these art forms presuppose a certain spiritual attitude in their practitioners and cultivate this attitude more or less consciously, an attitude in its purest form characteristically Buddhist. Of course, it is not Buddhist in the larger sense. We are not concerned here with the speculative or reflective Buddhism which, through the available literature, is the only Buddhism known (and supposedly understood) in Europe, but with that Buddhism called Zen in Japan, which is not primarily speculation, but practice, meditative practice, where little value is placed on intellectually acquired knowledge thereof in order to inform the life therein with undiluted power.

Thus, archery is grounded in spiritual exercises, that is, precisely understood 'mystical' exercises, and consequently attaches significance not to the external bow and arrow, but to internal change within oneself. Bow and arrow are only a pretext for something that could also take place without them; they are only the means to an end, not the end itself. The goal to which this leads may be called 'unio mystica', union with the deity, effectively attaining Buddhahood. If we turn to elucidations by Japanese researchers to gain a deeper understanding, material is available. D.T. Suzuki for example has shown, in his *Essays in Zen Buddhism* [Suzuki, Daisetz T., Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series 1927], that Japanese culture and Zen are very closely knit; that the Japanese art forms, the spiritual attitude of the samurai, the Japanese lifestyle, the moral, practical, aesthetic, and to some extent the intellectual life of the Japanese cannot be understood without this Zen basis.

The writings of Suzuki and other Japanese scholars have found response in the American and European literature on Japan, but while our knowledge has considerably broadened, our wisdom has unfortunately not grown.

The Japanese lives-- whether he acknowledges this or not-- in the atmosphere and spirit of Zen, and so all is connected, inside and out, first and last, clear and distinct to him. Brief hints are sufficient for an apprentice to understand, mere indications are enough when he wants to express himself, because he has grown up at the heart of Zen and he has easy recourse to experienced teachers.

However, when he tries to make himself understood to Europeans, using familiar language, he forgets that they have another spiritual origin. He expects them not to absorb his words alone; but he knows too little about their way of thinking, he is far too little initiated into their viewpoint. For the Japanese, words are only the way to an idea which must be understood by reading between the lines; it is not expressed in a way that can be understood by all, but is only to be derived from experience. Therefore, his comments, taken literally, seem rudimentary or confusing to the European, who is used to logical intellection. Conversely, he must think us to be without intuition, if not without spirit, when we express ourselves, in spite of the sharp intellect he generously attributes to us.

In this attitude he is largely justified by American and European research to date on the topic of

Buddhism, particularly Zen. Western researchers have had no choice but to keep to the texts, translating and commenting upon them, and editing them by standard philological methods. This done, they think they have understood these arcane texts, but all possibility for real communication is crushed by this word-fetish. They are immeasurably far from comprehending the untold depths of mystical being. They do not realize that in true mysticism, experience comes first, conscious retention of experience comes second, and interpretation and classification come last. There is no way to fully understand mysticism, except by becoming a mystic.

Consequently, there is no longer any point in simply startling you with paradoxical formulas or placating you with a mouthful of words. I want more: I want not just to incite, but also to excite you. [*The original German contrast is between 'anregen' and 'aufregen', more wordplay than substance-- ed.*] I want you to become aware that understanding the words of Buddhist writings, especially Zen Buddhist literature and writings on the Japanese arts, whose roots lie in Zen, does not bring you a step closer to the quintessence of Buddhism. I will present, not the essence of archery, but simply a brief graphic account of my almost six years of instruction in this art under one of the best teachers in Japan. I have taken care particularly to record in detail my inner opposition, especially my hypercritical attitude, which I had to overcome before I succeeded in entering significantly into the spirit of this high art form. Possibly in this way I can reach your understanding. I admit that I cannot transmit with words the inner experiences on which all else depends; my narrative may require a 'willing suspension of disbelief'. But that is better than abandoning any attempt to understand the reality of this mystical art only because it seems such a steep and inaccessible road.

Preface

Section II

Section III