II.

Why I decided to study the art of archery requires some explanation. Even as a student I was interested in mysticism, especially German mysticism, and I sensed that I was missing something to fully understand it, a quiddity that I could not identify and about which I could find no information. I felt that I stood in front of a final gate, but lacked the key to it.

When I was offered work for a few years at Imperial Tohoku University [*in Sendai City, 300 km. north of Tokyo; R.F.C. Hull incorrectly credits Herrigel with teaching at the University of Tokyo-- ed.*], I welcomed the opportunity of getting to know Japan and its fascinating people and above all of connecting with living Buddhism and discovering the key to 'detachment' [*'Abgeschiedenheit', usually translated as 'seclusion, solitude', here is closer to the more modern term, 'detachment' from the world of illusion. Hull translates this as 'introspective practice of mysticism'-- ed.*]. Meister Eckhart highly values this detachment but he does not describe the way of attaining it. Soon after my arrival in Japan, I tried to realize my intention, but I was informed that direct access to the practice of mysticism was too difficult, in fact hopeless, for a European. It was recommended that I begin studying one of the Japanese arts, which all share in the spirit of Buddhism, yet are much more straightforward, allowing easier and more tangible access to understanding. My wife decided to study the arts of flower arrangement and ink drawing, while I felt more attracted to the art of archery where, as later became obvious, I wrongly assumed that my years of firearm practice would be helpful.

One of my Japanese colleagues had been studying archery for many years under the great Master [Kenzo] Awa, and I asked him to introduce me as a potential student, but the Master refused the request on the grounds that he had once let himself be tempted into teaching a foreigner, and it had been a bad experience. He was furthermore unwilling to make any concessions to his students, unlike teachers in Tokyo and other large cities, who were concerned with losing their foreign students if they overly importuned them with the real spirit of their art. Only when I vowed that a master with such a strict view of his art could treat me as his youngest pupil, because I wanted to learn not just the superficial handling of bow and arrow but the 'great teachings' of archery-- only then was I accepted as a student, together with my wife, because women in Japan also commonly study this art. And so began my rigorous instruction, in which my Japanese colleague participated as translator.

That the road toward artless art is not easy, we discovered in the first hour of study. Master Awa, asking us to watch him carefully, drew his bow and shot. It looked very beautiful and at the same time very effortless. Then he thrust a practice bow into my hands, remarking,

--Archery is not a sport and thus it does not exist to develop your physique. You cannot draw the bow using the strength of your arms, but you must learn to draw it spiritually, that is, with muscles completely loose and relaxed.

At the first try, I noticed immediately that I needed considerable muscular strength to draw the bow. What is more, this bow was not held like an English sport bow at shoulder height, so that one can press

oneself into it during the draw. The Japanese bow is raised so high that the hands are above the level of the archer's head; all pushing or pressing stops and the hands are instead pulled apart until the left or bow hand is at eye level, the left arm is straightened completely, and the hand of the bent right arm is above the right shoulder joint-- in this way a considerable span is obtained. The archer then must remain some time in this position before he can let the arrow go. Not only did my arms start to shake from the strain after a few seconds, but also my breathing became more laboured, so that I had to recover it when the arrow had been released. Repeatedly, day after day, drawing the bow remained a difficult strain and did not want to become 'spiritual' despite all my efforts. I consoled myself with the thought that the Master must be speaking cryptically, so that the student would not too soon discover there was some trick to drawing the bow which he would eventually learn.

I practiced incessantly, with German thoroughness, pondering the problem, testing what I had thought out then rejecting it as ineffective, but always expecting to surprise the Master one day with the solution to his conundrum. During the practice hours he watched me motionlessly with his deep, mild and piercing eyes, praised my enthusiasm, criticized by expenditure of energy during the draw and the release, but otherwise let me alone to advance in my own way--until I had to admit one day that I was stuck. In this manner I became more open to further instruction.

The Master explained that I could not draw the bow correctly because I was inhaling with my lungs.

--Press your breath slowly downward at the drawing point so that the abdominal wall is tightly stretched; retain the breath there, without desperately pushing; inhale and exhale only as much as you really need. When you can breathe in this way, you will be able to draw the bow effortlessly with relaxed, unburdened arms, because you will have shifted your energy center downward.

To prove this, he drew his powerful bow and asked me to feel his arms: they were indeed as relaxed as if they were not performing any work at all.

In time I could do such unusual breathing better and better, and I had to admit that the drawing of the bow was becoming easier. Occasionally the Master would step behind me and feel my arm muscles; and only after they had become completely slackened was I allowed to release the arrow.

To arrive at the correct drawing of a bow after a year of practice is certainly no impressive achievement. But I was satisfied because, using the correct breathing method, I had also learned something else that I had not grasped until then: the patience not to run ahead of inner development, to leave things to their natural inertia, as it were. I also knew that I could now be given a new task, although I had convinced myself long before of its particular difficulty.

I had until now accomplished the shot by simply releasing the arrow. One should think about the following, though: the right hand is covered with a leather glove. The thumb is well-padded and is wrapped around the bowstring under the arrow and under the fingers. Index, middle and ring fingers rest over the thumb firmly [Depending on the type of shooting glove, 2, 3 or all 4 fingers of the right hand

may rest over the thumb-- ed.] and also lend a steady support to the arrow. To release the shot, the fingers covering the thumb must open and free it. The power of the bowstring pulls the thumb out of its position and straightens it-- the string whizzes, the freed arrow hurries away. However, as often as I released the shot, I always gave a noticeable jerk. I could not but tear open thumb and fingers when I had to release my hand from the drawn bow.

That had to stop. There was no jerking when the Master released a shot; his hand opened suddenly without revealing how it occurred; it happened in a flash. I tried to imitate this, without success. And now no longer so keen to solve riddles by myself, I admitted to him that I could not advance further for the life of me.

--That, he said, is your main mistake, that you have such a good 'will'. You want to let the arrow go when you feel or think that it is time to do so; you deliberately open your right hand; in short, you are conscious of it. You must learn to be without purpose, to wait until the shot is released by itself.

--But when I wait for that, I retorted, the shot is not released at all; I keep the bow drawn as long as I can; and if I did not at last let the arrow consciously go, then the drawn bow would pull my hands together so that there would be no shot at all.

--When I told you to wait, answered the Master, it was perhaps expressed misleadingly. In all truth, you should neither wait nor think nor feel nor want: the artless art means that you become completely ego-less, that you lose yourself. And when it comes quite naturally to you, that is, when it comes to Nothing completely, then you will be able to make the shot.

I did not content myself with this, now that Master Awa had finally touched upon the topic which had been the precise reason I had chosen this art as a discipline.

--When I have come to a mere Nothing, I asked, who is doing the shooting then?

--Once you have experienced who is shooting for you, replied the Master, you will need a teacher no longer. How should I explain in words to you, that which you will understand only after you have experienced it? Should I say the Buddha shoots? In this case, what use is all knowledge to you? Rather learn to concentrate yourself, to turn yourself from the outside inward and even to gradually lose sight of that!

The Master indicated how this deep concentration could be reached: to keep oneself as quiet as possible and to compose oneself an hour before shooting, to settle oneself using proper breathing, to gradually turn off all impressions, then to draw the bow calmly and let everything else just happen. This way, one eventually reaches a condition approaching complete No-self-ness, and from there one may be able to pass over to the No-self. One is drawn back out of this state when the shot has been released, the tension has been dissipated, the endless energy has done its work.

We practiced for a long time with this in mind, at first to no effect. Every now and then, though, I had the impression that I had really reached the No-self when drawing the bow. But the longer I stood there with the drawn bow, the more I felt its strong tension, and I could not avoid thinking that it was now time that 'It' should shoot. And in the end I was still forced to open my hand consciously. Instead of letting the shot surprise me, I watched over it and I was aware of the moment the shot was fired. Days and months went by without having a single arrow released in the way it should be done. The Master did not lose patience; he reminded me that many of his students fared no better, even after many years of instruction. He told me:

--You try hard at being purposeless and so you are intentionally purposeless; this will not help you further.

But when I replied that I should at least decide to be purposeless because I did not know how else I could instill purposelessness, the Master was at a loss and could not answer me. I later found out indirectly that he had bought some Japanese textbooks on philosophy, hoping that he would find in them a way to satisfy his indefatigable inquisitor. But after reading awhile, he would shake his head and put them aside, thinking that he could now understand why nothing 'spiritually' correct could be expected of me, who occupied myself professionally with such things!

By now we were in our third year. The prospect of overcoming this hurdle had faded even more. In order to overcome my embarrassment, I told myself that the release of the shot was in truth only possible 'technically'; there should be a way of shooting whereby the shot 'purposelessly' happened. When the summer holiday started, I occupied myself completely with this problem. I concluded that the quality of the shot should depend on the way I release the fingers covering the bent thumb; and soon I discovered a clear and practical way: I told myself that if I subtly loosened and straightened the fingers, the moment should come when the thumb lost its wedged position and was therefore unexpectedly pulled out, releasing the string and arrow through no cause of my own. I practiced with this in mind and I was soon pleased to see that it was becoming an easier and more 'purposeless' release than before. I gradually acquired great technical accuracy in this way of shooting, so I was looking forward with confidence to resuming my lessons. Of course, in doing it this way, I had for the most part abandoned the prescribed exercises for concentration, which had been the reason I had wanted to learn archery in the first place. So it seemed that my fervent wish to become familiar with the mystic practice of detachment would remain unfulfilled. Did it make any sense to continue archery, which now was more a sport, a technical exercise? Should I not choose a different road for the sake of my original purpose?

The decision came faster and was certainly otherwise than I had expected. In my first lesson after the vacation, I released my new shot in front of the Master. In my judgement it was a great success. I was waiting for praise, but Master Awa said in the driest possible voice:

--Please, once more.

The second shot seemed even better than the first to me. I proudly looked at the Master. Without saying a

word, he came up to me, took the bow softly out of my hands, and stood it in a corner. wordlessly, he seated himself on his cushion and gazed straight ahead as if he were alone. I knew what this meant, and I left the dojo. The next day I was told that I had hurt him deeply with my wish to deceive him.

It was only after a long entreaty in which I was able to explain to him that there seemed to be no other way for me but the technical for something which remained 'spiritually' unattainable, he understood my misery and accepted my apology.

The most important exercises were thoroughly and constantly repeated until there was no more doubt that I was blindly following his instruction. Perhaps one more year had gone by when I succeeded in the first shot which received his full approval. The spell was evidently broken. The good shots gradually dominated over the bad ones. But when I am asked how I finally managed to release a correct shot, I must answer that I do not know. The arrow went on its way without any help from me and without my being able to understand how it happened.

After another year, a day came when Master Awa considered it advisable to give me my final assignment: to shoot at the target. Until now a straw bale, at a distance of about two meters, had served as target, so that we inevitably hit it. Now we were put in front of the real target, sixty meters away from the archer [The modern standard target range is 28 meters, while long-range targets are 55 m. or 90 m. The famous competition range at Sanjusangendo in Kyoto is, however, 60 meters. Hull inexplicably translates this as '60 feet'-- ed.], and the Master asked us just to repeat what we had learned up until then. Of course, I asked him immediately how I was supposed to aim the bow in order to hit the target. The Master answered:

--Don't concern yourself with the target. Shoot as before!

--But I must aim if I want to hit, I replied.

--No, shouted the Master, you should not aim. You may not think about the target, nor about hitting it, nor about anything else! Draw the bow and wait until the shot releases; let everything else happen, whichever way it happens.

Having said this, he took his bow, drew, released, and the arrow sat in the center of the target. Then he inquired:

--Did you observe me well? Did you notice that I closed my eyes almost completely, like the Buddha of illustrations when he is completely withdrawn into himself? I close my eyes so that the target becomes less and less distinct, then it seems to come towards me and becomes one with me. One can accomplish this only in a state of deepest concentration. If the target is one with me, then it means that I am one with the Buddha and the arrow is in the unmoving center of Being as well as Non-being-- and as a result is also in the middle of the target. It is in the center, this we can clearly see: it comes out of the center and goes into the center. Therefore, do not aim for the target, but for yourself, and then you will hit yourself,

the Buddha and the target all at once.

I tried to follow the Master's guidance, but I only partially succeeded. I could not lose the target completely from sight and consequently could not avoid aiming, yet my arrows always flew everywhere except into the target. It upset me because I was accustomed to counting my 'hits' from the days when I shot firearms. That had a lasting effect on me, perhaps unconsciously: no matter how seriously I practiced, to my disappointment I could not hit the target. The Master reprimanded me because of my impatience.

--You should not worry about hitting, he admonished, or you will never learn to shoot spiritually. It is easy, through trial and error, to find a position of the bow that can bring lots of arrows into the neighborhood of the target; if you want to be such a technician, you do not really need me, a teacher of spiritual archery.

Indeed, I did not want to become a technician and so I gave up looking for a position of the bow which would ensure accuracy. But neither did I become an archer in the spiritual sense. The fruitlessness of my most sustained efforts weighed heavily upon me. Should I give up now, just before the end? I knew that there were many people who practiced ten or twenty years and still remained students, but my stay in Japan was limited. I could not feel hopeful for the long run. And so one day I visited the Master and explained to him that I could not understand, could not learn, this hitting without aiming. He tried to reassure me, but I was so convinced of my incapacity that he did not succeed. Finally, he explained that my inhibition lay simply in my distrust. I would not let myself believe that the target could be hit without aiming at it. There was only one last remedy with which he might help me advance, a remedy he did not like to use. He asked me to come and see him that evening.

I arrived at nine and was brought in to him. He invited me to sit down, but did not look at me further. After a while he got up and gave me a sign to follow. We went into the large practice hall next to his house. He lit a mosquito candle, long and thin like a knitting needle [A type of joss stick burnt to create repellent smoke. It smoulders rather than flames at its tip-- ed.], and thrust it into the sand in front of the target. Then we went to the shooting position. The Master stood so that the dojo light glared down on him, but the target remained in utter darkness, and the glowing tip of the mosquito candle was so faint that I could discern it only with difficulty. Still without speaking, the Master took his bow and two arrows. He shot the first arrow and from the sound of the impact I knew that it had found the target. The second arrow too hit audibly. The Master now asked me to go and look at both arrows. The first arrow was sunk into the very center of the target; the second had struck the end of the first and split it. I brought both arrows back. The Master looked at them pensively and said finally:

--You may not think it extraordinary that the first shot hit the center of the target, because I have practiced in this hall for a good thirty years and I should therefore know, in spite of total darkness, where my target is located. You may be right-- but the second shot? That does not come from 'me' and neither have 'I' hit. And now, think this over: can one still aim in such darkness? Do you still want to cling to 'no hitting without aiming'? Let us bow to the target as we do to the Buddha!

I gave up all my doubts, my questions, my brooding. I continued to practice conscientiously without racking my brains about where it all would lead. I did not even worry anymore whether I would manage in my lifetime to become so unintentional that I could hit the target with certainty. I knew that it was no longer up to me. I hit the target occasionally without having aimed. The master remained unchanged in his judgment of my shots: he watched only the archer, never the target. Many a shot that missed the target he considered remarkable, because he could at least recognize my 'spiritual' form. When I began considering my hits as completely unimportant, I produced more shots that won the Master's full approval. I did not concern myself any longer with what happened around me during archery. I did not notice how many eyes were watching me. Even the Master's criticism or praise made less impression on me. I knew that I had experienced the feeling of 'It' shooting. This experience I could not lose, even if my hands should suddenly become unable to bend a bow.

One day, during our fifth year of instruction, the Master told us that we should take an examination. We passed this test successfully and received certificates indicating that we had progressed far enough to be able to practice without a teacher, that we had become teachers. We were of course students still, but with the possibility of someday becoming 'masters' of the artless art of archery.

When we left Japan, the Master presented me with his personal bow as a farewell gift.[On Herrigel's death, this and his own bow were returned to Japan, and now hang in the place of honor in the archery dojo at Engakuji Temple in Kamakura-- ed.]

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