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Zen Archery

Every Monday night about 20 Montrealers don white kimonos and floor-length black tunics in a converted Anglican church in the east end of the city. Slowly and silently they pick up 12 foot bamboo bows and handmade arrows and unwrap these weapons from their batik coverings with great tenderness and care. After a respectful little bow, each archer puts on a white cotton glove, then a leather one, wrapping the glove's strap a certain number of times around the wrist and finishing it with a special knot. Then they get ready to shoot.

Welcome to zen archery, or *kyudo*, an ancient Japanese martial art practised by about half a million people worldwide, from Iceland to Florida, from Montreal to Ottawa and Halifax. As formal as classical ballet and as paced as Tai Chi, *kyudo*, or "the Way of the Bow" focuses on the meditative aspects of the art, not on hitting the target. Nonetheless, if there were a bull's eye almost everyone would hit it. The target, a straw or cardboard cylinder covered with burlap, is just two metres away, right at eye level.

"There's nothing to aim for – the burlap is just to stop the arrow," explains Jean-Pierre Poggi, one of the instructors and the president of Kyudo Québec. "You concentrate on the form itself, not the result. It's a non-performance activity. We're not aiming for results, only for improvement, but you can't measure that. It's an experience," he says before executing a gracious bow on entering the kyudo room, or *dojo*. The church basement has been converted into a vast dance studio for Jean-Pierre Perreault, a Québec choreographer. But the barres have been pushed aside and eight oversized targets -- which look like bales of hay on sawhorses -- obscure the mirrors on each side of the studio. Those inside wait quietly for their turn at the targets, shuffle around noiselessly in socks or stand one-at-a-time in front of the targets, or *makiwa*, in intense concentration, arms stretching the bow to maximum tension.

There's a certain sanctity to this non-performance performance. Incense is burning in front of a portrait of the kyudo master, Sensei Kanuro Shibata XX. And except for the occasional shout that punctuates the arrow's zing, there's absolute silence. That zing is called

tsurune. A cross between a whistle and a whoosh, the sound of the bowstring is thought to express truth, beauty and goodness. That is, it expresses these ideals only if the bow is released at the moment when the archer's mind is free and clear. The distinctions between body, mind and the arrow are supposed to disappear during the ritualized series of movements -- while pulling back the giant bow and, with a sense of detachment and release, letting the arrow fly. It's flight is a literal gloss on the injunction to focus on the journey, not the destination.

Paradoxically, even if this looks like a formalized type of target practice, the point is to separate oneself from one's goals. Anger, ambition, a competitive streak or negative thoughts can easily sully the shot. "You shout when the arrow is released," says Poggi. "That sound helps to release one's expectations about the result." The zen twist is that one's own judgements are considered unimportant distractions. That's why Poggi is pleased that a reporter and a photographer are here to witness his pupils' efforts -- observers will force them to focus more intently on "their individual work, on finding their centre," he says.

Neither therapy, religion nor explicitly a healing art, kyudo's practitioners nonetheless attest to a calm and a clarity of vision that they say transfers to their daily lives. "Practising kyudo is a question of mental health," says Michele Turcotte, an investment executive who is a regular here. She says that finding one's spiritual centre this way keeps stress at bay throughout her week. Carmen Frenette, one of the instructors who modeled the balletic series of moves and led the period of meditation before the practice, agrees. A youthful-looking clinical psychologist in her 50's, Frenette is careful to distinguish kyudo, which she calls a spiritual discipline, from the self analysis that accompanies psychotherapy. "The most important thing kyudo gives me is to centre on the present, whereas anxiety is focused on the past and the future. In kyudo I'm less encumbered by my other preoccupations," she says, adding that the practice of zen archery helps her sustain her attention on just the client in front of her at that moment when she is at work. Quoting the international kyudo master, Sensei Kanjuro Shibata XX, Frenette calls kyudo "standing meditation," and equates her global sense of well-being with the relaxation that meditation elicits.

"There have been several studies of mindfulness meditation that show that it has stress-reducing properties," says Dr. Blaine Ditto, a health psychologist and a professor of psychology at McGill University. "In a ritualized activity like this you're getting rid of the repetitive self-talk that plagues many people," he added. Mindfulness meditation is a focused, detached

approach to self-observation during a structured activity, a theory pioneered by Jon Kabat-Zinn, an Associate Professor of Medicine at University of Massachusetts. An attempt to cultivate a measured, nonjudgemental approach evokes a physiological relaxation response that promotes healing, according to Kabat-Zinn. And you can even see this relaxation response's impact on the brain and nervous system on functional MRI's, according to research done by Dr. Herbert Benson, the behavioral medicine guru at Harvard Medical School and a leading member of its Mind/Body Medical Institute.

While most agree that zen archery is beautiful to watch and practitioners often find it a stress-buster, there is no research yet that proves its health benefits definitively. "Much of the available literature on kyudo in English emphasizes its meditative qualities, based on which Westerners assume that kyudo is a form of meditation undertaken primarily to reduce stress. This is a pleasant fantasy but it has little or no basis in fact," says Earl Hartman, a kyudo instructor in Palo Alto with a 5th degree ranking from the All Nippon Kyudo Federation. "Kyudo is, first and foremost, a martial art. To achieve success in kyudo one must free one's mind from attachment to ideas of success or failure and concentrate wholly on the task at hand. It seems intuitively obvious that if one can achieve this state of mind one's stress level will drop," he adds.

It may be a form of enlightened, noncompetitive marksmanship, but one thing kyudo does cultivate is an old fashioned virtue: patience. "One way in which kyudo can reduce stress is that it teaches one to apply oneself to practice with a long point of view. Through diligent practice one can learn to not lose sleep over one's inability to 'have it all, right now,' which seems to be the motto of life for many people today," commented Hartman in an email message.

Add to that a measure of self-acceptance, and the result may very well be therapeutic. Instead of worrying what others think, practitioners of kyudo focus on unifying body and mind through posture, breathing, executing certain moves not only with discipline and technique, but with beauty and a sense of detachment about the ultimate outcome – whether or not the arrow makes its mark.

Back at the *dojo* in Montreal, by the time everyone has had several turns in front of the targets, some standing, some kneeling, others in synchronized pas-de-deux formations in front of two targets, more than two hours have passed and the incense has burned out. Frenette sounds a small bell, which signals the end of the meditation period that concludes the Monday practice.

The participants scatter to change their clothes and take care of their bows and arrows, while Frenette attempts, once more to explain kyudo's calming effect to an outsider. "It's an exercise of attention to the present. With kyudo I have the right to be less than perfect and this transfers to the world outside. I stay in what I'm doing and have no time to worry about how others see me," she says evenly. Poggi bows slightly as he exits the dojo and, then adds that if there's any tension in kyudo, it's the tension between the bow and the cord. "You're in between two poles. And at the moment the arrow flies, you see yourself."

Kyudo Sidebar

Those interested in learning more about kyudo can consult the kyudo website at www.zenko.org/kyudo.htm, or call Jean-Pierre Poggi at Kyudo Québec: 514 747-4224. There will be a Kyudo demonstration weekend held at the Montreal centre, which is called Suiko Kyudojo (meaning Water Tiger) between May 31 and June 2, 2002. Call Kyudo Québec at 514 747-4224 to register or for more information. From September 27 to 29 a special open program will be held at the Halifax centre, the Kozan Kyudojo (Mountain Tiger). Call John Mills at 02-479-1876 for more information. The Ottawa Kyudo Centre is the Kanko Kyudojo, or Embassy Tiger. To join the group or observe a demonstration there call Jay Johnson at 613-741-9786.

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