

Interview 08.1991

*In August 1991, kyudo master Kanjuro Shibata Sensei conducted an intensive at Gampo Abbey, in Cape Breton. During the course of that program, Scott Amsden and Marcia Shibata interviewed Sensei about his experience teaching kyudo to Western students.

SCOTT AMSDEN: Sensei, in the West, the approach to archery is more sports-style, either hunting or competition. In both of these, the idea is to hit the target; to either get something or win some kind of prize. Could you say something about how the approach in kyudo is different?



KANJURO SHIBATA SENSEI: When I first met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, he told me that his grandfather had been a yumi-maker, a bowmaker, in Tibet. Just like my grandfather had been a yumi-maker in Japan. We were talking about how in Tibet, as everywhere else in the world, the main purpose of using a bow and arrow had been for sports-style competition or for killing animals for food. In either case, the person shooting the bow hopes for victory. Their shooting is based on hope. Rinpoche told me that his grandfather had taught him that from a Buddhist point of view, there should not be any hope involved with archery: that one's shooting should not be founded on the idea of [hitting] the target, winning victory or fame.

Now at that time, I didn't know Trungpa Rinpoche very well; I didn't yet realize the depth of his understanding. So when I heard him say this about no hope and kyudo, I was amazed - this was exactly what my own grandfather had taught me as a transmission concerning the profundity of kyudo as a practice of moving meditation. So our two grandfathers had told both of their grandsons at different times and in different cultures about this way of using a bow and arrow with no gain involved.

So this is how kyudo differs from the common approach to archery. In kyudo, there is no hope. The point is that through long and genuine practice your natural dignity as a human being comes out. This natural dignity is already in you, but it is covered up by a lot of obstacles. When they are cleared away, your natural dignity as a human being is allowed to shine forth.

Sensei, in the East it seems like the teacher-student relationship is more important than in the West.

The foundation of the two societies, East and West, is different. This leads to the main differences between a teacher-student relationship. Historically, in the East, all teachers were highly revered and students related to the teacher in a humble way so as to give the teacher a seat from which to teach. There's a proverb, "Three feet behind don't step in the shadow." The student behaves with so much

humility that he or she would not even step into the teacher's shadow. In this style of teacher-student relationship, even if the teacher makes a mistake in teaching, the student would not call attention to it in the teacher's presence. Perhaps he would never call attention to it.

In the West, because of the foundation of democratic thinking, students feel that they are on equal ground with the teacher, so the atmosphere of teaching or the seat from which the teacher teaches is already undermined by the students sitting on the same seat. So between East and West the atmosphere around the situation of teaching and learning from the very onset is different; one is more open, and the other doesn't seem as open, actually.

Another important difference is that in the West, people tend to cut off their relationship with the past. They throw off the knowledge from their family lineage. People are constantly reinventing the wheel; they seem to learn all of what they have to learn about life by themselves, if they learn it at all.

In the East, there's an unbroken line of wisdom and learning that's passed down through the family from generation to generation. This style of passing wisdom down through generations is the result of the Buddhist foundations of Eastern society. This is a Buddhist way of approaching things. One doesn't throw out everything all the time, but one reveres what's happened in the past.

Kyudo was born out of the samurai tradition. I think in the West people often misunderstand the true sense of what being samurai was all about. Could you say something about genuine samurai spirit?

There's a line that people walk on called the present moment. Behind you is the past and in front of you on that line is the future, which is death. But you don't walk in the past and you don't walk in the future, you walk in the present. When you walk on this line in the present, you go over the obstacles that you encounter smoothly; you aren't stopped by them. And you develop the ability to walk this line smoothly and with clarity through the practice which has preceded you in the past. So if the step that you just took in the past was taken with clarity it will enable you to walk this line at the present smoothly, and then walk the line of the present into death smoothly as well. Without fear.

So, you see, for the mind of the samurai, this walking to death was not a fearful event. It was just a continuation of what one already had been doing. For example, if circumstances were such that it became appropriate to offer one's body, which was how seppuku was regarded, this act was not a fearful thing but just a continuation of one's walk on that line of the present.

Many Buddhist teachings also came into the code of the samurai. The idea of putting others before oneself comes from the Buddhist teachings, or the idea of giving your teacher an honorable place from which to preside in relationship to you as a student.

Have you altered your way of teaching for Western students?

It's difficult to teach Western mind. It would be easy to give up on these people. After 10 years their concentration is still on hitting the target! It's taking an extremely long time to get the point across. What's happened is that my own practice has become learning patience and not losing my temper quickly.

Did you ever feel like just moving back to Japan?

Oh, yes, even now it flashes into my mind that I want to go back to Japan. But I don't. I continue with my practice of patience and putting one foot in front of the other, slowly and deliberately. This is Chinese style. Chinese tend to do everything very slowly and very mindfully - while the Japanese, in cultural form, do everything quickly and precisely. So in this case my approach with Western students has become Chinese style. For more: www.zenko.org