

Stand-Up-Sit-Down-Zen!

Kyudo comes to Lotus Garden

Ken Rawie was frequently seen giving Kyudo instruction at the Shedra Retreat at Lotus Garden in June. Lotus News caught up with him over the phone while he was visiting family in Nebraska. Ken lives in Washington D.C.

Lotus News: How long have you been practicing Kyudo?

Ken Rawie: Well, this is an embarrassment. I am usually asked such a pointed question by my own Kyudo teacher, and then after I've made a mistake!

I started practicing Buddhist meditation in 1973, while in Malaysia in the Peace Corps. Some Thai monks gave me instruction while I was there. When I got back to the U.S., I looked around for a group that was practicing Buddhist meditation and found the precursor to the Washington Shambhala Center, which was then called the Washington Dharmadhatu. In 1982, because of an administrative shuffle at my place of employment, my wife and I went to Japan for a year.

I had read that Trungpa Rinpoche had invited a Japanese Kyudo master to the U.S. named Kanjuro Shibata Sensei XX. The "XX" means he's the twentieth Kyudo master in his family lineage. He is also the third in his lineage who made bows for the Emperor's shrine at Ise, Japan. When I arrived in Kyoto, I looked him up, and have been practicing Kyudo steadily since then.



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LN: You gave a talk and some individual instruction on Kyudo at the Shedra Retreat at Lotus Garden. I was wondering if you could give our readers some background on Kyudo?

KR: Certainly! But I'm much more comfortable doing Kyudo than talking about it. After one of Rinpoche's talks, she asked me to come up front and give a talk on Kyudo. It was intimidating, with Rinpoche there on the dais behind me, along with three thrones and pictures of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness Minling Trichen. It felt like they were all watching.

But Rinpoche had set up the context for my talk quite well, because Kyudo works with the same things discussed in the text she was commenting on, Buddha Nature (Maitreya's *Uttaratantra shastra*).

Sensei likes to call Kyudo "standing zazen," which is a play on words, because zazen literally means "sitting zen" – so Kyudo is "stand-up-sit-down zen!" With this standing zazen you practice mindfulness and awareness, just like in sitting meditation.

One begins by paying attention to your form, so you don't do something awkward, like holding the bow and arrow upside down. Later on, you're haunted by pesky details and bad habits, in addition to the usual discursiveness that is present while sitting.

When it is not so hard to follow the form any more, it's easier to get distracted, just going through the motions. So at that point, Sensei often adds more detail, such as synchronizing your motions with other people. With synchronization, awareness of the environment becomes important.

At another point, Sensei will often ask students to pull a slightly stronger bow and work with their energy, or their prana. But even in the beginning, we are taught to root our legs in the ground, which is the earth quality, and make the heaven quality, which is our erect posture. These two are brought together four fingers below the navel, which is the human quality. When you draw the arrow, you use your legs and stomach as much as your arms, because the prana is concentrated in the navel.

Believe it or not, this technique makes you stronger. At the full draw, you are still increasing your energy, and when you let go, it produces a shock to the system. It blows away our everyday discursive mind, and gives us a chance to get closer to the Buddha Nature, as expressed in the *Uttaratantra shastra*. That is the main point of Kyudo.



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LN: How was your experience giving instruction at Lotus Garden?

KR: It was great. We had about 15 people sign up for instruction and about 5 were able to take their first shots. Because of the complexity of the form of Kyudo, it usually takes six to eight hours of instruction before people are ready to take their first shot. At Lotus Garden it took much less time. I think the environment at Lotus Garden is particularly good for Kyudo. People were able to get the point very quickly.

Many of these people made my day! When someone already has a connection with Buddha nature and practices Kyudo, it shows as tremendous dignity and confidence. When you shoot, your connection with Buddha nature blows away your preoccupation with self and other. You are free to stand up straight and be dignified and soft. That really showed with some of the Kyudo students at Lotus Garden.

The practice was also made interesting because the Shedra administrators and I were figuring out how to fit Kyudo into the program as we went. For example, the schedule in any program is always a pretty dynamic thing, often changing by the hour. Still, we managed to make it work, often by having people come during evening chants, or even occasionally after eating during one of the usual meal periods.

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While I have a chance, I would like to answer one question people often have about Kyudo. People often wonder about how strong the bows are, and the answer is that there are light bows and strong bows. We always start everyone out with a very light bow, so they can stay focused on the form without having to worry so much about managing their energy. As they get more comfortable with the form they can use a stronger bow if they wish.

And then there is this prana thing. Working with the prana is not a particularly big deal – it's not like learning tummo. We don't get hot while doing Kyudo. Prana in Kyudo is just a natural thing, like learning how to pick up a suitcase properly. And of course, the point is training the mind. We are not trying to learn magic tricks, accumulate merit badges or even to hit the target. Rather, we learn that when you're completely blown away – and even when you're not – you are simply working with the mind.



LN: I'm not sure what else there is to ask about Kyudo. You've been so generous in clarifying it. Thanks for your time.

KR: You're welcome.

Interview: Alex Ryan

Note: Ken Rawie will continue with Kyudo lessons at subsequent Shedras as part of the ongoing Arts and Sciences component of our Shedra curriculum.

Photos: Ken Rawie prepares his bow (top); Ken takes aim (middle); Ken's students work on their form (middle); Removing the arrow (bottom). ©Mindrolling International, All rights reserved.