

Mental Toughness Defined

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"It's not whether you hit the target but how you hit the target." Motomatsu-sensei reassured everyone. Nearly two months of practice had passed and the members of the 16th *kyudo* class of the Tsuru ga Oka shrine in Kamakura, Japan were now masters at shooting the *makiwara* practice bails.

Most of the students still used the dojo *yumi* but some students actually had their own bows. I was given an old bamboo bow from my good friend. He said it belonged to his grandfather and I brought it in one day to ask my sensei if it could still be used. He tried to string it and immediately concluded that the bamboo was too dry and it could never be shot again.

I went home and cried. It seemed like this bow had more life in it and I hated to see it become a relic. I rubbed some clove oil (the same that I use to oil my 300 year old katana) into the old bamboo. It soaked it up like it was the elixir of life. Then I tried to string it. The bamboo agreed and I left the bow for one week and worked on reshaping the curves.

The next practice I brought the bow in and asked my sensei again if the bow could be shot. He was amazed that I had rejuvenated it and gave me the OK to shoot with it. I spent the next few weeks shooting the *makiwara* and getting used to the wonderful feel of bamboo verses the fiberglass in the dojo *yumi*. I felt so blessed because bamboo bows are extremely expensive and the only cost to me was a little TLC.

The time had finally arrived for us to shoot at a real target. The *mato* is a round wood shell with a paper target with concentric circles of black and white stretched and pasted over older used targets. Many layers develop into a thick target face that resonates with a peculiar "pop" when struck. Hitting the center creates a low resounded sound while the outer edges produce a higher pitched sound.

The instructors demonstrated how to enter the *sha-jo* (shooting range) and take position on the *sha-ii* (shooting line), which only has five positions. We watched as we had the first time they demonstrated but now we could see how the motions we had so diligently studied fit into place in the shooting sequence. Each instructor went in order connecting their motions to the first shooter creating a wave of arrows piercing the drum-like targets. It was beautiful and rhythmic. I realized then that *kyudo* was indeed an art.

The class was divided into groups of five and our names were written on a black board in the order we would enter the *sha-jo*. Each position is particular and we were given the chance to practice each. The first position was the most challenging because everyone follows your lead and you set the pace for the entire group. You cannot turn and watch the other shooters, however; you must be aware of the shooting behind you so you know when to start the sequence for the second arrow, which begins directly after the third shooter fires his/her arrow. .

Naturally, I ended up in the first position my first time. And naturally, I was absolutely terrified. However, I felt confident that I could remember the sequence. I had not only practiced during my scheduled classes but I also attended the second class that followed ours and included the other 40 members of our class. As I made my way through the 8 basic steps of the *hassetsu* I could feel the pressure from the other shooters behind me. I came to full draw and prepared for *hanare* (release). I released my arrow in hopes that it would sail down the 28 meters to the target and pierce the center with a loud burst.

Instead my arrow jumped from the bow and began a horrific wobbling path straight into the grass five meters in front of the target. Yikes! My arrow stuck out of the carefully manicured grass and mocked me. I was immediately humbled. This was certainly not as easy as our sensei had made it appear. My second arrow followed suit and landed next to my other and near numerous other arrows now scattered by the five of us.

I guess if it were easy, everyone would be doing it. Well, it was far from, but I was determined that I would get an arrow into the *mato*. It's strange now that I think about how hard I worked to get one arrow to simply hit the target. Now, if I don't hit the inner ten at 70 meters, I feel like my life is ruined. It's funny how this puts my FITA archery back in perspective. Oh, back to *kyudo*...

The day I finally hit the target felt like the best day of my archery life! The result was the direct product of executing good form. There IS no other way to shoot Japanese traditional archery. I learned quickly that form was the key to shooting well in *kyudo*. Sensei would praise me for an excellent shot, yet the arrow wasn't even remotely close to the *mato*. He would simply say the beauty of the shot was more important. Hitting the *mato* was a result of focus and internalizing the true shot. Only then would the arrow find its way to the target.

One day I was shooting and my bow started to torque in my hand, sending the string rotating out and around towards the back of my arm. It kept doing this and I approached one of the sensei and explained my predicament. No one else appeared to be struggling with this but it seemed like my shot was getting better yet my bow was acting strange.

Sensei surprised me when he told me that the bow was supposed to flip around in my hand. It was called *yugaeri* and was a necessary motion for the arrow to clear the bow. I had never noticed but when I watched the senior archers later that evening most of them had *yugaeri*. Sensei told me that it normally takes three years to master the proper grip on the bow, which allows the bow to move out away as the arrow is released. We came to the conclusion that the grip I used to when I practiced Japanese swordsmanship translated into the grip that caused my premature *yugeari*. Sensei encouraged me not to change my grip and to just let the bow move.

I started to hit the target more frequently and I was ecstatic. We would soon have our graduation test. This would require us to shoot two arrows in front of a panel of judges. They would determine whether we could graduate and be given the rite of passage to become members of the dojo. I practiced my heart out in preparation for the big day.

However, things NEVER go as planned. Such was the case with me three days before the test. I was practicing with my swordsmanship dojo and suffered a major head injury. This was the first injury I ever experienced directly from a katana **during** practice. One day I had put my sword through my foot when I stumbled at home jumping up to answer the phone while cleaning my blade.

However, this injury was due to my shoulder popping out as it does occasionally. This just happened to be when I was passing through a technique from over my head! My sword bumped my head and I didn't realize anything until I reached up because I felt a tickle. My finger went into my head up to the second knuckle. I immediately applied pressure. No one even realized what happened. I quietly approached my sword sensei, explained and walked out of the dojo to an ambulance completely unbeknownst to the other 20 people there.

The doctor sewed me back up and told me it would take a year to heal. He prohibited me from doing exercise but he never said I couldn't shoot.. Three days later I went to my *kyudo* test. I wrapped a *tenagui* (Japanese bandana) over my bandages and stepped up to the *sha-jo* entrance. No one asked why my head was covered. Maybe they just thought that's what *gaijin* (foreigners) do.

My head was pounding even worse with the flow of adrenalin but I moved in unison with four others to the shooting line. It was a dark rainy day and several judges sat at a low table in front of the *kamiza* (god seat).

A few days before, I was frightened, not nervous, that I would really screw up and not pass this test. When I actually started the sequence for my shot, all I could remember was... Well, I couldn't remember. The pain in head overpowered me and as I made my release I remember a bright flash of light. I also remember the sound of my arrow hitting the target. I couldn't believe it. It felt like the best shot of my life. However, my head was spinning as I made my final bow towards the panel of judges. As I was putting away my *yumi* someone approached me and asked if I was OK. I lied and said I was fine. But that didn't work so well when I realized that blood had seeped through the bandages and the *tenagui*. My game was up. Everyone now knew why I had covered my head.

Motomatsu-sensei approached me and I figured he was going to reprimand me. Instead he told me he was amazed that I shot so well and he praised me for my determination. He compared me to the samurai of old saying that they had to internalize the way of shooting, so should any event arise like say, a sword wound, they could still be one with their archery.

We held a celebration after the announcements. I passed my test and I was presented a photograph. Each student was given a photo taken during the test. I remembered and chuckled. It was a relief to know that it wasn't the corruption of my synapses that had caused the bright flash upon release.

I suffered dearly for pushing myself but the mental toughness that I gained from that experience is only one of the many that I would come to experience along my plight. Many more that I hope to share with you.