

Healing Social Withdrawal *Kyudo* – The Art of Losing?

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Summary

The primary aim of my investigations is to present to broader circle of readers how people can make a great “therapeutic use” from the means available in the realm of one’s own culture.

Streszczenie

Nadrzędnym celem moich dociekań jest przedstawienie szerszemu gronu Czytelników, w jaki sposób ludzie mogą uczynić wspianiały „terapeutyczny użytek” ze środków dostępnych w obrębie własnej kultury.

Key words: social withdrawal, *Kyudo*, Japan
Słowa kluczowe: wycofanie społeczne, *Kyudo*, Japonia

1. Introduction

Social withdrawal in Japan (*Hikikomori*) is a thorny matter. [1] Moreover, to talk about healing it might be slightly awkward. However many books you read about healing social withdrawal, it is an intricate issue, particularly if we keep in mind that this matter is not considered as a mental disorder, but as a sort of a social phenomenon. [2].

If one assumes that this is not a mental disorder, in such a case pharmacotherapy should rather not be applied. Japanese mental carers suggest various therapies like Naikan or Morita instead of using wide range of medicaments. One might be under the misapprehension that such kind of alternative treatment is close to “indigenous disease conjuration”. However, being able to trust those methods is one of the prerequisites of their effectiveness. For the skeptics, as a last method of treatment, there remains only their skepticism.

While investigating the issue of healing social withdrawal, I was strongly interested in something more than just the typical “treatment room” therapy. And I found it. But simply reading about it was not enough. It needed the real involvement. And just right now, I would like to bring you closer to the practice I experienced. Its name is *Kyudo*.

2. “Il Nome del *Kyudo*”

The name might disappoint the reader. *Kyudo* (弓道) denotes Japanese archery. For the purpose of this article it is not necessary to reveal the whole recesses of history, philosophy and techniques of this art (武道). However, remaining

without any basic information might disappoint some of the readers for the second time. That is why I will provide only the most essential elements of this art (judged by the teaching of my Master and my personal experience gained under him). *Kyudo* involves specific people, places, tools and spirit. Please, enter to the world of *Kyudo*.

2.1. People and *Kyudo*

First contact with *Kyudo* starts from the meeting with Master. The disciple has to learn from him by directly watching his technique, imagining it and meticulous repetitions. There are no mystery or hidden tricks. Watching, imagining, and repeating. That is all. Everything is done step by step, from pulling *Gomuyumi* (a gum tool for the beginner’s practice) till the shooting with full equipment and the observance of whole subtle ceremonial of this unique art. Master watches the disciple’s practice and corrects his posture, manners, and the way of breathing. This is one of the crucial elements of *Kyudo* – to trust and respect the Master. Another important factor is to cooperate with and respect other archers (shooting is conducted in a group of six people standing on the specially prepared positions). This performance takes place in very special surroundings.

2.2. Place and Tools

Usually *Dojo* (道場) is located at a distance from the living quarters due to the danger of unwittingly hitting some outsider or animal. *Dojo* consists of the place for resting, changing clothes, leaving stuff and the main practicing place which

opens to the huge grass area with the targets (的 *Mato*), sand wall (安土 *Azuchi*) [together this is 的場 *Matoba*] and small house for cleaning arrows picked from the ground. *Mato* is located at the distance of 28 meters from the shooting point inside of *Dojo* (and has a diameter of 36 cm). The essential elements inside of *Dojo* are also: straw target for short-distance shooting (巻藁 *Makiwara*), mirror (鏡 *Kagami*), small shrine with enshrined goods (神棚 *Kamidana* practice starts and finishes by giving symbolic worship to them), Japanese flag and emblems of the *Kyudo* Federation. After entering the practicing hall we are obliged to observe certain etiquette and all the steps have to be taken in a proper order. Proper manners are required toward people, the place and also things connected with *Kyudo*.

Kyudo is certainly a sort of art and it needs special tools to express itself. The most important things are a bow and arrows. The bow (弓 *Yumi*) is magnificent and its length ranges from 220 cm to 240 cm. The bow has to be adjusted to the archer's height and weight. The draft weight is also superb and ranges from 18 kg to even 40 kg. The Master is responsible for adjusting the proper bow and arrows (矢 *Ya*) to the disciple. Apart from the bow and arrows, *Kyudo* disciple needs a special glove with hardened thumb *Yugake* (楯), *Kyudo-gi* (弓道土着 - upper part of clothes) and special *Ha-kama* (袴). But all these tools, surroundings and participants refer to some *reality* beyond.

2.3. Specific to the *Kyudo* Spirit

Things have their own history. Things have also the spirit. Such way of thinking might seem suspicious to Westerners. *Kyudo* also has its own spirit. How to find its expression? Young *Kyudo* disciple will gaze at his Master, gaze at the target which fades away into the distance, and he will listen to the sound of Master's arrow hitting the target. For young disciples this is the *Kyudo* spirit. They will do everything to hear that sound. For young students this is the philosophy of the archery - to hit.

The *Kyudo* Masters usually face such problems while explaining the spirit of this art to newcomers. It is difficult to explicate the true philosophy of *Kyudo*. We can read in the *Kyudo* handbook [3] three words 真 (*Shin*), 善 (*Zen*), 美 (*Bi*), which almost with *salva veritate* can be screamed on one breath as a tirade: *Verum, Bonum, Pulchrum*. Such explanation of the *Kyudo* spirit is more familiar to Western disciples, but it does not mean fully understandable. For beginners the aim is clear – just hitting the target. But in *Kyudo* there are no shortcuts – you have to follow the proper way and per-

vade with the spirit of this art. Who derides the *Kyudo* spirit, sooner or later will relinquish the archery.

Kyudo is an art of perfect order: you can hit the target if you first prepared your mind and body. 無念無想 (*Munen Muso* -no thoughts [first - no disturbing thoughts in your mind], no illusions [next - no mistakes from the body]). Only correct shooting (well trained technique) leads to correct hitting (*Seisha Seichu* 正射正中).

However, I witnessed many shots given on trainings or tournaments by people whose technique was entirely unpleasant for the eye, but their shots were accurate. At that time my Master explained such shots are quite incidental. Those people somehow hit the target and later they tend to think that techniques taught in *Kyudo* are not necessary for it. They stop listening to Master's advice as they think they found the better, their own way for hitting. But such incidental hitting has a limitation. When such people relinquish the practice of the technique, they cannot hit at all. To watch such *Kyudo* practitioners is not only sad - observers can experience some kind of ugliness.

Kyudo together with people, *genius loci* of *Dojo*, exquisite craftsmanship of techniques and tools create very unique art which delights both archers and spectators.

Then, some vexed reader might ask how the *Kyudo* art can contribute to the healing process of socially withdrawn people? In sincere riposte I recommend taking a deep breath, eradicating all impatience from the mind and following the lines of text. *Non in commotione, non in commotione Deus* [4]. Not in commotion lies the *Kyudo* art, not in commotion lies the healing of socially withdrawn people.

3. Framework of Healing: from Rigidity to Flexibility

Properties of some things might be changed and ameliorated by different usage – that is commonly known truth professed by many explorers. People try to improve, converse, adapt things to new conditions and demands. It is also the point in the case of *Kyudo*. Someone might be baffled by the fact that *Kyudo* is used as a therapeutic method for treating the social withdrawal phenomenon. However, some care centers and hospitals are using such kind of therapy, not as a leading, but as a complementary one. What is the framework of this kind of treatment? Before answering this question, first I have to remind you of the essential features which define the person as socially withdrawn.

A socially withdrawn person has to return back to society – to continue education, work, and life among other people. The reasons for with-

drawal are diverse, but important implications of escaping are the deterioration of many abilities, primarily how to communicate, coexist, cooperate and maintain normal relations with other members of the community. Such features of a socially withdrawn person require special framework of healing. The basic idea is to ruffle defensive “shell” incrustated and strengthened by many years. This “shell” jams any communication with such a person. To find some way to slip into the socially withdrawn person’s “shell” is a task which can be fulfilled by nonverbal *Kyudo* training step by step, hour by hour. However, breaking the “shell” is not a perfect victory. Such “ghost in a shell” after releasing is shiftless, but still “equipped” with many rigid patterns of behavior. Until he has been “disarmed” and taught new techniques of acting, he cannot adjust to new, unexpected situations, which happen day by day in the real world. He needs a sort of mental flexibility, getting rid of tension and gradual adjusting to various social situations. This is one of very hard tasks to be completed by *Kyudo* practice.

The framework could not be easier: from rigidity to flexibility of acting. “But how does it work?” – a skeptical reader will mutter under his fidgety breath. I would like to reassure - there is no mystery in it. It is absolutely a non-prodigious healing formula.

4. The Non-Prodigious Formula: Through the Art of Losing to Success

The contact of a socially withdrawn person with the *Kyudo* art starts the same as the beginnings of simple disciples. The Master shows how to pull *Gomuyumi*. He encourages to repeat this training time and time again, carefully watching each step of his student. A socially withdrawn person might perceive it as one of many obligations imposed on him by doctors. This image has to be overturn by the *Kyudo* Master. Socially withdrawn person should look at *Kyudo* as a training, not a new type of therapy (as he might be biased against all kinds of therapies). Then, the *Kyudo* Master continues his teaching from the basics.

The main rule of *Kyudo* is to “open” the bow. It is not a case of strength. As I mentioned, the bow is adjusted to the height and weight of the archer. The rest is the case of diligent training only. In order to “open” the bow, archer has to “open” himself, and this is not just a metaphor. To open, to breathe, to keep a proper posture of both hands, and both legs, to put the center of gravity to proper place, seems to be simple gymnastic exercise for a socially withdrawn person. Master reiterates that important thing is the continuance of repeating the training, to relax shoulders, to

feel the confidence while pulling. Then, they can go forward to the next step – pulling the bow without arrow (*Karabiki* 空引 ぎ) [of course without releasing the string!]. Those steps are taken gradually, during many days or weeks of training. The next phase is to wear a glove and pull the bow without any arrow. The socially withdrawn person is watching, listening and repeating everything that Master is teaching. The *Kyudo* Master accompanies him with each new experience and difficulty and watches over the security of his student. And finally, the day comes when Master permits the student to use arrows. He teaches all the etiquette, from entering the practicing hall, through the way of taking, grasping, holding the bow, walking to the shooting line and setting an arrow. He helps by standing behind the student and pulling by his arms the first arrows, to show how to do this with unison power of left and right hand. Progress is made step by step. Until... Until the time, when the student realizes, that he tried already many times, but his arrow could not reach the desired target. He becomes frustrated, wavers, loses his faith and withdraws again from the contact, so scrupulously built by Master throughout so many days and weeks.

“And this is this amazing power of *Kyudo*?” – a skeptical reader might be disappointed for the third time. And I will admit heatedly: yes, this is the amazing power of *Kyudo* – the art of losing.

4.1. Direct Losses

“I have lost – I am good for nothing” – this is a bizarre phrase encoded in human minds all over the world, across various cultures and countries. This is also the main thought of socially withdrawn people. Why do we have to expose them again to this unbearable thought during the *Kyudo* practice? Some direct losses are required? They are not only required, they are necessary.

If a person puts much effort into something, great involvement, work and hopes, at that moment he defines himself by the measure of this contribution and the work he has done. And when for some reason his aim cannot be reached, although he tried so hard, he will probably break down and stop trying to reach that goal again. And so he directly loses the confidence, faith in himself and his skills, his hopes. It is similar in *Kyudo*. Although he practices and repeats so many times, he cannot hit the target. He loses and wants to give up.

At that time Master should say: “You experienced how to lose. Now, please forget the desire of hitting the target, and start to follow the technique I have been teaching you for so many days. Just forget about the goal.”

And that is the point, precisely speaking – indirect gain, although the skeptical reader might be again disappointed for the fourth time in such a short text.

4.2. Indirect Gains

Watching the *Kyudo* tournament, the astute observer can see at least a few contestants whose desire to win overwhelms everything else. It can be seen through the technique: setting the arrow, pulling the bow and *Daisan* (大三). Such view is a rasp in the aesthetics of this performance. Some people can never forget about the existence of the target.

What about socially withdrawn people and their practice of *Kyudo*? Many of them are used to losing in their daily life. They know the taste of defeat and they welcome consecutive failures with helplessness. Many of them were afraid from the beginning that they would not hit the target, and sooner or later by the reason of their decrepitude they had to give up the practice. And after the Master's appeal to forget about goal, the situation changed. They could freely lose, they understood that they had the right to lose, because losing is inevitably inscribed in the *Kyudo* art. Concentrating only on the goal or only on losing is against the *Kyudo* spirit. And it is the real cause for shame. The most important thing is to keep practicing and not to deviate from the right path - Way of Bow – 弓道.

“Keep practicing and do not give up – too easy and idealistic remedy for all the problems socially withdrawn people are burdened with” – the skeptical reader will snarl with disappointment for the fifth time. However, I will give a short remark for the exasperated skeptics at the last passage of my text. And now I will make a space for the approaching conclusion. Please, accompany me.

5. Conclusion

There are still many socially withdrawn people who suffer from having the distorted image of themselves and their acts, who continue their existence out of the community, being afraid of repudiation and shame. Some of them will never agree for any treatment, some of them being in an acute stage will be diagnosed as a “holder of socially dangerous malady”, hospitalized and with various dosages of pills restored to social life. However, some of them will be undergoing various non-pharmacological therapies, which might bring those poor people back to society.

I strongly believe that in the realm of each culture lie remedies for many distorted behaviors or attitudes. The art of *Kyudo* is not a prodigious formula which absolutely resolves the problem. No. It is only a hint disclosing human weakness

and showing the way to overcome it. People often use a lot of various expressions like *I hope for* (implicitly success) or *I am afraid of* (in short defeat). These boulotomatic modalities [5] rule peoples' lives. Ubiquitous desires and fears... Every time there is and will be something to hope for or to fear. The therapeutic power of the *Kyudo* art lies in the maintenance of special equilibrium between human attitudes and emotions toward winning and losing – two poles of our motivation [please, do not collate with Yerkes-Dodson laws!].

The conclusion cannot be different: *Kyudo* shows the right way to a socially withdrawn person, how to exist beyond victory and beyond failure, but not in one's own hermitage as they used to do by escaping from *Totalité*, but by staying within the society. *Kyudo* – the magnificent art. The Art of Losing?

But... what about *Mushin* (無心)? This is a challenge for the next expedition and absolutely new text.

Take Home Message

Even simple things might be therapeutic if carried out with passion, with the guidance of Master or some wise “conductor”, and if we keep in mind that achieving the goal is not everything. And here is the promised comment to the skeptic reader:

Please, do not be disappointed once again when you accidentally light upon some *happiness* in midway between the lips and edge of the goblet. Then take heed!



Photograph: S. Olejarz

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