

The Overstrung Bow

Erica Whittaker

It is an interesting thought to speculate on whether books that open doors to understanding are found by us in unexpected moments, or whether, in fact, they find us?

The readers of the following story may not want to concern themselves with such speculation, but nevertheless I would like to explain briefly that a book called "Die Wunderbare Katze" ("The Wonderful Cat") stopped me in my tracks a few years ago in a Munich bookshop. I made it mine in a matter of minutes, and ever since then it has been my constant companion. It contains principally a number of Zen texts, directives by famous Zen masters, as well as this example of a

One hot summer's day in Tokyo I awaited my master, Kenran Umeji, my teacher in the art of archery. I had been practising on my own for some weeks, and now I wanted to show him how well I had progressed. I was wondering, as I waited, if today's meeting would bring surprises, for each time the master came to our house something unforeseen would happen.

When one is learning an art in Japan - be it archery, fencing, flower-arranging, painting, calligraphy or the tea-ceremony - some aspects seem very strange to the student from the West. For instance, if one imagined that the aim of archery was to make a good hit, nothing could be further from the truth. So what is the purpose of these lessons? I was to learn the answer to this question today.

The master arrived punctually. After a brief cup of tea and a conversation in generalities, he and I went into the garden where the butt stood ready. However, this butt had at first been one of the greatest surprises to me: It was not the usual round disk we all knew, but a bundle of straw of about 80 cm. in diameter, laid at eye-level onto a wooden frame, and it had been explained to me that all archery students had to practise on this bundle of straw for the first three years, from a distance of about three meters. Incredible! Was that not very boring was our reaction. No, just the opposite: You learn with mounting excitement that hitting the mark is not the primary function of practising, but that everything depends on one's progress of an inner attitude.

So now: I took up my position, my master stood before me. I bowed, as is the custom, first to my master, then, turning slightly left, to the target; then I faced the master once more and began the opening movements with care. It was important that all movements from now onwards must flow evenly as waves in a stream. I placed the bow on my left knee, took up one of the two arrows leaning against my right knee and laid it upon the string. The left hand must now keep arrow and bow steady whilst the right hand is

raised slowly upwards in order to descend as I breathe out. Now this hand must take hold of the string and, as I breathe in, I must slowly raise the bow, thereby increasing its tension. This is the decisive movement which must progress steadily as the rising moon.

But before I had reached the desired height at which the arrow, lying on the fully extended bow, should touch my cheek, the master called out: "Stop!" Surprised, and not a little put out at this interruption at such a critical moment, I lowered the bow. The master took it from me, looped the string once round one end of the bow, handed it back to me, saying "Once more, please!"

Unsuspectingly I began once more the flow of movements until I reached the stage of increasing tension on the bow, when suddenly I realised that the master's adjustment with the string had doubled the tension on the bow, and I knew I had not the sheer strength to go through the remaining procedures. My arms began to tremble, I was swaying to and fro: All my practising had been for nothing. And worse: The master began to laugh. Desperately I tried again, but it was no good. I was confronted with humiliating failure!

I must have looked angry indeed, for the master asked me: "Why are you so upset?" I exploded: "You ask why? I have been working for weeks to perfect this exercise and in the very moment when all depends on my success you interrupt me before I have even shot an arrow!" The master laughed again heartily: "What do you expect? I knew, as you greeted me on my arrival, that you had achieved and learnt the lesson that was set for you these last weeks. But the matter is this: If a man has practised long and laboriously in order to reach a certain standard in work or knowledge, there is only one disaster that can overtake him: that fate will allow him to remain fixed at the point of achievement. Alternately, fate can be kind and knock that which he has achieved out of his grasp before it has become a fixture. This is the duty of a master who

personal experience by the author, Graf Durckheim, who has very kindly given me permission to translate the episode "The Overstrung Bow" for the purpose of publication in an Alexander periodical for teachers and students of that technique.

When I was a student in F.M.'s first training course in 1931 I often had great problems "explaining" the Alexander work (as we called it then) to outsiders, who invariably interrupted and argued points before I had finished the general layout of an "explanation". But I had also observed that many of the world's great religions used stories, or similitudes, to illustrate the drift of their message, for people find explanations tedious, but will listen to a story, which they can connect according to their knowledge and experience with their own lives. As their experience widens, so does their understanding of the story deepen. In "The Overstrung Bow" I seemed to have discovered a delightful story all about non-engaging!

The setting may sound strange at first, but it is important that readers follow the story through, resisting all "oh, but's": It must be remembered that in this text the reader is to discover a direction, not a formula for finished perfection. -

knows the dangers. It comes to this: what is it that truly matters? Not a successful hit on the mark. With archery, as with the learning of any other art, the important thing is not the outward appearance of success, but that which has been gained inwardly.

And what is the greatest danger that can befall this inner growth of man? It is to become fixed in that which has been achieved; a standing still. Man must always be in a state of progress, a constant increase of knowledge to which there is no end."

The master was now speaking very seriously, and thus he taught me that archery is not just an amusing pastime in which to compete with others, but is a life-school.

In the beginning, of course, one must learn the basic techniques. But once one has reached a certain stage the true effort begins: Learning to conquer oneself! It means to free oneself of the ambitious "I" which is the driving-force of outward success. But not until the "I" has been brought under control can real progress be gained By which time achievement will no longer be a matter of "doing", spurned on by ambitious will to succeed, but will be founded on a new inner "being".

Translated from the German Source:

Karlfried Graf Dürckheim's "Wunderbare Katze, und andere Zen Texte" (The Wondrous Cat and other Zen texts)

Published for O.W. Barth, 1964 & 1975, by Scherz Verlag Bern-München-Wien

Permission was given to me at my request by Dr. Graf K. von Dürckheim on 1.8.83. to translate this story with a view to publication in the A.T.A. Newsletter

Erika Whittaker
Melbourne, October 1983

Ode to Words

John Woodward

Words spidering out their word-shapes across the page.
Words hanging their word-shapes like emblems -
Symbols to hang and dangle about our ears.
Maybe the emblem word-shapes fall like meaningless pebbles
At our feet.
Maybe the symbol word-shapes lie inert and dumb-dead
Black to lend only bland whiteness to the page
Or -
Maybe the word-shapes come together
Touch each other,
And become coloured idea-shapes,
Changing in a kaleidoscope of colour
And dance -
Dance their meaning magic.

AN OPEN WORKSHOP

At Norwich Centre, 7 Earlham Road, Norwich NR2 3RA
Tel. Norwich (0603) 617709
Saturday 21st January 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.

An open workshop with no restriction of age or background which will explore the Alexander Technique.

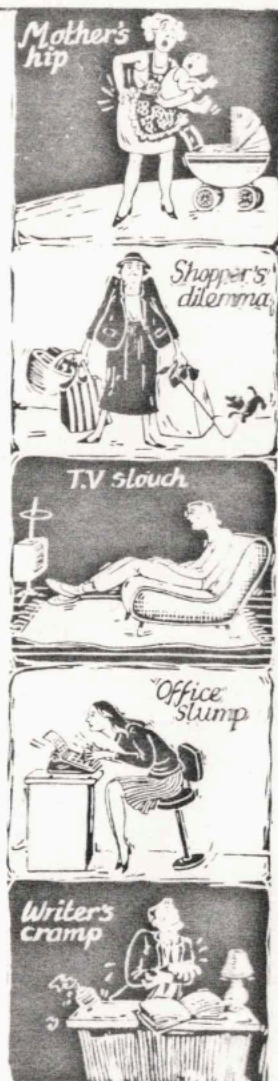
This is concerned with harmonised movement, based on stillness and increased awareness of the underlying co-ordination and use we make of ourselves in every movement of our daily life.

"A graceful posture is the end product of a way of thinking".

Leaders : Michael & Gillian Birley

Fee: £15 (unemployed & OAP's £10)

Lunch is available from a nearby pub; or you are welcome to bring your own sandwiches.



THE BACK SCHOOL

at Alexander Teaching Associates

	Jan 23	Feb 27
5 weeks of	29	5
Mondays	6 and 12	19
	20	26

Booking:- The Secretary, ATA,
188 Old St. EC1 01-250 3038
Fee £29 - Five sessions.

The Back School
at Alexander Teaching Associates
A Basic Course for your Back
at
A.T.A.
and including
Anatomy, Practical Considerations of
Walking, Sitting, Standing, Lying,
Carrying.
Theoretical Principles
and
Alexander Technique

