



# The Way of the Bow

Zen archery is a powerful moving meditation. By Debra Bokor

**T**HE SOLES OF MY BARE FEET push solidly into the rough earth beneath them. Taking a deep breath, I lift the well-balanced bow, slip the arrow into its slot, and raise my eyes to the target. At the suggestion of my sensei (teacher) at the Shambhala Mountain Center ([www.shambhala-mountain.org](http://www.shambhala-mountain.org)) in Colorado, I let go of all hope and expectation and feel the quick pace of my heart begin to slow. My mind is clear save one simple thought: All is well.

A discipline once reserved for Japan's elite Samurai warrior class, *kyudo*—known also as zen archery or The Way of the Bow—is emerging anew as a potent mind-body exercise. By its very nature, *kyudo* is a deeply contemplative practice that seeks to spark spiritual development while strengthen-

ing mental discipline. Its elaborate, ritualized movements might be compared to those of the martial arts, and the mental focus required is akin to seated meditation. Practitioners define *kyudo* as the manifestation of fierce gentleness and list among its goals the forging of character, or the concept of the “right mind.”

The tools of *kyudo* are lovely in their simplicity. Two arrows, loosed in succession, are known as *ya*. The lightweight bow, or *yumi*, is fashioned from a blend of bamboo and hardwood, and measures between six and seven feet in height. The archer holds the bow in one hand and the arrow in the other as she first defines the parameters of her sacred space by pacing its boundaries. She then turns to face the target, displayed

against a bank of sand that is lodged within the *maro* (target house) up to 90 feet away, depending on the level of proficiency. Next comes a sequence of deliberate movements that helps initiate a state of intense awareness, and ultimately, harmony between body and mind.

Though the gaze is fixed on the target, hitting it is not the motivation; instead, *kyudo* is an exercise in quieting the mind—the path of the arrow and the place that it lands is a reflection of its purity. The bow, in essence, is simply a point of departure—as in any meditation practice, it is the act of letting go that is most difficult. When the arrow is finally let fly, it is with a beautiful release—a communion of prayer, surrender, and grace.