

Kyudo

When people think of Japanese martial arts, Karate, Kendo and Judo are usually the first thing that comes to mind. Karate showcases flashy kicks, punches and strikes that wow people with a flamboyant spectacle. Judo utilizes strong throws and grapples which displays a user's immense power. Kendo is a loud and voicetorous sport that rewards quick and precise action in split second decisions. Plus they use iconic bamboo sabers to duel. These are wonderful martial arts that truly shine when juxtaposed with an opponent in a match. However, in contrast to these martial arts, Kyudo emphasises beauty and elegance, with focus on the self. It's a sport in which the true opponent is not another person, instead the obstacle is yourself.

Kyudo, otherwise known as Japanese archery, is a martial art that uses an extremely tall bow (*yumi*) and arrows (*ya*) to hit a 36 cm target from a distance of 28 meters. You would think the aim is to hit the target, as that would be the objective of western archery, but in Kyudo hitting the target is not the goal. Hitting the target is just the natural consequence of performing the eight stages of shooting (*shaho-hassetsu*) correctly. There is a big focus on presence of mind when shooting. It requires concentration on keeping proper form through each step, which is easier said than done.

I had no intention of doing Kyudo when I first arrived in Japan. In fact, I wanted to participate in other, more famous Japanese martial arts like Kendo or Judo. When I arrived in Nagasaki, my former supervisor recommended that I join a local Kyudojo's practice session. I was hesitant because it wasn't what I had in mind, but I wanted to experience Japanese culture that was outside of my expectations and comfort zone. I went on a whim with two other ALTs and together we fumbled our way through the lessons.

The members were extremely kind. They let us borrow equipment and took time out of their schedule to teach us the proper way to use a bow and arrow. With my broken Japanese I was able to somewhat communicate with them. I'm not great at Japanese whatsoever, but we managed to understand each other with a lot of gestures and basic Japanese. As time went on, I became familiar with the terms, rules, and understood the flow a bit better, but communication is still troublesome for me to this day.

Looking back I'm really glad I was able to join the local Kyudojo. In my tiny inaka town, I don't get to interact with the local community as much as I'd like. By joining, I get to talk with and learn from members of the community, even if the communication isn't optimal. At first I wanted to experience a unique form of Japanese culture, but now I'm invested and love Kyudo. Nothing is more satisfying than hearing the sound of a perfectly shot arrow pierce the target. When you all arrows hit, you feel a rush of adrenaline that makes missing the past 100 times worth it.

Many ALTs tend to form these “ALT bubbles” around themselves and don’t interact too much with their community, myself included. But by going to practices and monthly meetings. I can connect with people I otherwise wouldn’t normally interact with. I’ve found a welcoming community and a sport that I love. I’m sure you’ll feel similar if you give Kyudo a try.