



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

The Non-Waza of Waza by **David M. Valadez**

In general, the forms themselves have become the apex of training in the world of Aikido. Somehow, mistakenly, many of us have come to think that Aikido waza contains all there is to contain in the art. In fact, so much credence is given to waza, that some of us even believe that Aikido forms have transcended Budo as a whole. Through such misunderstandings, the forms are thought to hold the source of the universe, the source for the ethical body, for the non-violent heart, and for the awakened spirit. Today, everything about the “official” art reflects this ignorance. Everything from rank and title (which are measured by exposure to waza), to pedagogy (which centers around the transmission of waza), to the nature of the sensei/deshi dynamic (which rests on a contract to reproduce waza), to how seminars and camps are ran (which choose to function only as regular classes that focus upon waza but on a larger scale), to the defining lines that make up a given federation (where versions of waza are given the power to identify the Same and the Other), and even in regards to what it means to be an aikidoka (i.e. “Aikidoka do Aikido waza.”), all of this works to ensure that forms hold the dominate place in our practice. All of this works together in a sort of conspiracy to misguide; to both place waza at the heart of training and to guarantee that all should be satisfied with that supposed “heart.”

However, waza is, was, and can only ever be but the most superficial doorway of any Budo. Aikido waza is no exception. Moreover, as it is for all Budo, Aikido's waza contains nothing. They are ultimately void of all content and of all meaning. Contrary to popular belief, we must conclude: If you know waza, you know nothing; If you teach waza, you teach nothing; If you have faith in waza, you have faith in nothing; If you see your dreams in waza, you dream of nothing; If you hold your aspirations in waza, you aspire to nothing. Waza are from the ultimate point of view little more than the "dances" of a given tradition. They are things any puppet or trained monkey can accomplish. What makes them seem so grand is not how sublime they are in nature but rather how crude we have allowed ourselves to become. We should not hold waza so dear. For beyond them, past their transcendence, through their reconciliation, lie not only the true heart of Aikido but also the true heart of all Budo - the true heart of every human being.

To look beyond the superficial elements of training is to understand the actual value of waza. For the essence of all waza is non-waza – what some have called, “emptiness.” Non-waza, or that which is sensed, cannot really be found in that which appears (i.e. waza). As far as waza’s place in our training is concerned, the non-waza that supports them is the true essence of Aikido praxis. Waza and non-waza however do not relate to each other as two sides of the same coin. One is not at the end of the other nor at the beginning of the other. It is a false assumption to hold that one can reach non-waza through waza. This is the great error of holding waza as the apex of Aikido training. By placing waza above all else, we are in

fact prevented from discovering the non-waza of the art. Holding waza as the doorway to non-waza, is like holding that one will go forward if he/she continues to go backwards long enough.

We have to understand that waza give direction but not motion. Waza orient but they do not center. They feed but they do not nourish. We should ask: What moves us? What centers us? What nourishes us? By what means do we actually come to embody non-waza? By what means do we truly come to the depth of the art - the heart of the art - the true heart of ourselves? There are three areas of training where our focus should be placed if we wish to answer these questions: The sensei/deshi dynamic, our efforts to reconcile the whole of training with the whole of our lives, and exposure to spontaneous training environments (e.g. zazen, jiyu waza, etc.). If waza is in need of being emphasized, it should be done only in regards to these three aspects of training. When these three aspects of training come to influence all of the other aspects of training, our practice becomes a type of "seeing" - a "seeing" of one's true self. This seeing involves not who we wish to be but rather who we actually are and what we are actually becoming. For some of us, this seeing is very difficult to take. This is undoubtedly one reason why placing waza at the apex of training is not met with such organized objection. The blindness it affords us is both consciously and unconsciously desired. Yet, for those of us truly interested in seeing, in seeing ourselves and in seeing ourselves through and within the non-waza of the art, these three aspects, and not waza, must be at the heart of our practice.

The sensei/deshi dynamic, the capacity to harmonize the whole of training with the whole of life, and spontaneous training environments correspond to the cultivation of Mindfulness, Discipline, and Wisdom. All aspects of training, including waza, should pass through these three virtues as if they were paper filters - filters that allow what is pure to continue onward and that resist that which is impure. So central are these three aspects to self-cultivation that in Zen it is said of them, "Vanquishing demons, attaining the Way, understanding the True Teaching, and returning to the Source, all depend upon the power of these three things in one's practice." So potent are these three aspects of Budo training, in fact, that through them even the nothingness of waza can become something, something beautiful and awe-inspiring.