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On Discussions – A Conversation Between Two Aikidoka by David M. Valadez

XX: I would like to discuss a bit more on words. Having now trained with you, and while I can say that I did not feel the amount of explanation in class was too much or out of the ordinary, I sometimes felt that there was a little too much discussion after class. Maybe this was so particularly for this week, or maybe this is usual. Please, understand. I do think it is great that the students have the chance to comment and ask questions after class, but sometimes I think that a person can trick himself or herself into believing they understand something simply by voicing an opinion aloud. Sometimes such discussion leads only to self-deception. Personally, I often find many aspects of my training so subtle that I need to ponder over them for a while. I do not ponder over things so that I can come up with a summary or something deep after each class. Moreover, if you try to do that, I think, one might lose their grasp on the important subtleties. If you always summarize, everything has to be effective right away, and deeper lines that are not visible right away might get lost. Of course, this all might be just a matter of the learning process, and thus maybe my point is not so important. Maybe this is the reason why one needs a teacher or a master – a master who sees the longer lines, and might correct you in the subtle areas all along the way. This might therefore just be an issue for me in my particular situation – where no mentor/deshi intimacy is truly possible. I have not had any Aikido teacher that I really could say is my master - though I have trained regularly with many shihan. I have therefore always had to find my own ways, to see the longer lines (or at least try to discover them) by myself - so that I could surpass the teachers that I have had access to. Knowing you always have specific reasons for why you do something and/or do not do something, I would like to hear your comments on the role discussion should or should not play in our training.

Senshin Center: Let me begin by saying that what you experienced in class that week is what we ourselves experience on an average basis. Nothing was exceptional about that week. Therefore, the amount of discussion following class that you witnessed is par for the course at our dojo.

Through our other conversations you know my position regarding the status of words, discussion, theory, etc., and in light of my own experience and that experience that I am able to witness, reproduce, and predict in my own students, that position is pretty conclusive for me: Words are not bad. Ideas are not bad. Discussion is not bad. Attachment is the culprit. Censorship, suspension, restriction, is not the solution. Non-attachment is what one should seek. Etc.

I think it is important to draw a distinction between opinions and conclusions – the latter being what one is trying to reach through such after-class discussions. Discussions that take place within a sensei/deshi relationship are not dealing merely with opinion. I do agree with an earlier comment you once made –

about how there are too many strong opinions in the martial arts. In light of that, it does indeed seem almost foolish to offer yet one more. However, there is a major difference between an opinion and a conclusion. True, both are presented via a particular point of view, and so in some sense both are subjective and/or relative. Nevertheless, a great difference remains.

An opinion's point of view is entirely egocentric in nature, whereas a conclusion's point of view is anything but. This is why conclusions readily change according to new information being gained, and opinions simply do not. Opinions are a matter of the small self, so they are selfish by nature. They require isolation more than anything else to survive – which is one reason why they are served more by silence than by discussion. A conclusion is communal, even universal, by nature, and that is why, unlike opinions, a conclusion seeks company – because it gains strength by exposure to company. When a conclusion is “defeated” by something external to it, the conclusion, and the person wielding it, knows that it is in that defeat that it will grow anew, stronger, and surer. Conclusions do not resist change – for conclusions, all change is positive. Opinions fear change because they cannot survive it. Attachment, self-deception, and silence – these things are all of opinions. They are not of conclusions.

We, at Senshin Center, are not after opinions. We are interested in drawing conclusions, ad infinitum. As a lineage, as a school of thought on Aikido, simply generating stylistic preferences does not fulfill the dojo's purpose. That is to say, things are not worthy of transmission simply because they belong to one's “stylistic” likings (which is the bedrock for all opinions). While conclusions are derived from a point of view, that point of view is a given experimental environment. Thus, one is not dealing with fancies. What is determined to be tactically valid, strategically reasonable, architecturally sound, and/or providing a mechanical advantage in one case WILL universally provide these things in all cases deemed alike. Opinions have no such aspect of universality. Neither they nor the stylistic preferences that are derived from them can be considered part of the reflection process that is carried forth in the discussions that follow class. In fact, it is in those discussions, through the sharing of one's mind with one's teacher, that opinions start to be dropped and conclusions start to arise.

The very restrictions of reason, of logical thinking, and of scientific experimentation, that take place in discussions after class and in practices during class, etc., is one of the best tools for not fooling yourself into believing something you shouldn't – even if that belief is the belief that you understand something (when you do not). For example, how long would it have taken our mutual friend to stop practicing his version of Shomenuchi Ikkyo in the comfort of ignorant bliss were it not for the discussions that passed between the three of us? Was not his silence the most conducive element to his continued rigidity and ignorance?

To be sure, I would be shocked if he changed his form to a more correct architecture following our discussions, but I can guarantee you that the ignorant bliss is no longer part of his execution of that technique. Following the discussion, his execution of that technique now rests in an ocean of doubt and non-martial qualifications – not one of surety. Though he may be doing it the same exact way, he is no longer able to fool himself into believing that what he is doing is 100% problem-free, even if he is doing it just like his teacher showed him. This is how discussion actually prevents what it is you are most concerned about regarding words – through the restrictions of reason, of logical thinking, and of scientific experimentation, we gain distance from our opinions. However, this is only one guarantee of three that prevent us from the self-deception you are concerned about. There are other means by which we are pressured into dropping our opinions and/or from generating arbitrary stylistic preferences. The other two, one of which you noted already, are the teacher/student relationship and spontaneous training. Both of these are central to our training experience at Senshin Center - we always work to temper our discussions with these other two elements of Aikido practice.

Remembering that the unsaid is not necessarily the same as the un-thought, and also re-noting that the teacher/student relationship is considered the primary gate of learning in Budo, such discussions are part of a give and take, a sharing, a reflection upon which the dynamic of sensei and deshi rests. Of course, no one is forced to communicate their ideas following class, but for those that do, and for those that find other ways of communicating with their teacher, a growing intimacy arises between mentor and disciple. This intimacy is vital to transmission. There is no transmission outside of this intimacy – at least not of anything worth having (which, paradoxically, is that which is beyond words).

This intimacy itself rests within the pressures of commitment, integrity, consistency, loyalty, service, compassion, and humility. Self-deception cannot survive these virtues, and this is why, through this intimacy, said discussions actually inhibit fooling oneself rather than being conducive to it. So vital is this type of sensei/deshi dynamic to Budo training that one should choose it above all else. In other words, and for example, if one can opt between training with the Founder himself but with a lack of intimacy and training with a nidan who can allow for such intimacy, one should always opt for the latter. In the latter, through one's own efforts to support the dynamic, all will eventually come, even the mundane architectural elements of the art will come. However, without this intimacy, what comes will be comparatively small and worth little. So potent is the teacher/student dynamic for spiritual growth that if one is faced with no such teacher then one is best served by adopting a disciple himself or herself – so they can remain and/or enter the dynamic. After all, the point is not to be on top or on the bottom – the point is to be within the dynamic. So I would say we agree 100% when you write: “This (i.e. your concern over self-deception coming to us via discussion) might therefore just be an issue for me in my particular situation (i.e. without a real mentor).”

In the process of learning, a teacher knows a student's mind long before he/she has spoken it. That mind, like the body, has to be addressed by instruction. When the student opts to speak his/her mind during a discussion, this is not the first time the teacher has seen/heard such information. The speaking of the student's mind is nothing more than the investment of the student's own being in the sensei/deshi dynamic. It is certainly not the first time the student has made use of his or her own interpretative models. Thus, discussion is just another chance for the teacher to continue his/her pedagogy. Discussion is also a chance for the teacher to continue their own spiritual cultivation, since by the pressures of certain virtues he/she is responsible to equally invest as much in that sensei/deshi dynamic as the student.

Through discussion, which is fully referenced by body practice, a teacher guides the student via a process of reflection – one in which the student can see both him/herself as well as the teacher. Little by little, through various types of sharing, various give and takes, all kinds of adaptations and adjustments, more fine tunings, etc., through what in Sanskrit is called “upaya” (trans. “skillful means”), a student comes to face themselves in a more honest and truthfully sound manner. This also happens for the teacher – though each reaches this same achievement by slightly different means (e.g. a teacher practices humility while a student practices faith). Moreover, this process is a continuous one. Its end comes not because a final destination is reached. Its end comes because one or the other participants has opted to de-invest (for one reason or another – some good and some bad) from the dynamic.

In between things, here and there, this dynamic must weave its way in and out of various spontaneous training environments. Opinions, self-deceptions, stylistic preferences, are a matter of desire. They are something we want – something we want to be true, something we want to believe, something we want to be. No desire survives spontaneous training. In a spontaneous training environment you are only what you are; you understand only what you understand; you can do only what you can do; etc. For better or for

worse, there is no space within which both what we are and what we want to be can co-exist. Opinions too therefore fall to the wayside – attachment becomes irrelevant as the clarity of victory or defeat purifies us to what we are at our core.

It is in such environments that the sensei/deshi dynamic itself comes to touch the infinitely present aspect of the Truth. In other words, said environments are like filters – filters through which only the truth can pass. They are great engines of purification. Not only do opinions not pass, not only do self-deceptions not pass, not only do stylistic preferences not pass, weak or half-baked conclusions also do not pass. Anyone who is truly interested in the cultivation of accuracy, consistency, wisdom, etc., anyone truly interested in the absence of opinion, self-deception, and/or stylistic preferences, etc., is going to find a way to have these discussions. They are going to find a way to have these discussions take place under the restrictions of reason, logic, and scientific experimentation, have them take place within the sensei/deshi dynamic as I described it above, and will have them weave their way in and out of various types of spontaneous training conditions. Opting to not have them, in my experience, will not do away with self-deception or with half-baked and/or invalid conclusions.