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To Face the Bare Minimum by David M. Valadez

Training involves us learning many things. Equally then it involves putting ourselves in a place where we are able to learn many things. We may believe that the teachings will come to us all on their own, or we may believe that they will come to us because we are out of options to avoid them, but this is just not true. Only the lessons we seek will become our own. Moreover, we will never reach so "rock bottom" that we will begin to automatically receive what is right over what is wrong. Insight cannot be ours by default. Similarly, mediocrity, or the lack of depth in our training, may come to us against our best intentions, but it will nevertheless always come to us by our own action of not acting.

Of course, we must learn to accept what and where we are in the training. We cannot and should not criminalize ourselves for being unable, for example, to commit to the practice in the way our seniors are able to, etc. Criminalizing ourselves for where we are at a given point in our lives is very much in discord with the training. Training is highly individualistic. It does allow us to be who we are and where we are. However, this is not to say that there are no formulas to training and to progressing in our training. There are things that should always be a part of training. There are things that can be combined with other things in order to guarantee progress in our training. There are things that should not be a part of training at all. All of this, while often quite adaptable, will always apply to every one of us as we face our training and our attempts to bring depth to that training.

A dojo should set things up according to these formulas. However, each member should understand that in its attempt to speak generally to the masses, a dojo's pedagogy and its training curriculum is most likely only able to represent the bare minimum of what is truly required for training to occur. As a bare minimum, Time will not alter the importance of these things. The basic elements of a dojo's curriculum will always be needed and these things will always be the bare minimum of training. These things are: an intimacy with one's teacher; opportunity to train daily; weapons training; forms training and analysis; spontaneous training; a proven method and means to address one's fear, pride, and ignorance; historical and philosophical references which provide context and orientation; comradeship among peers; and varied perspectives and means for spiritual development.

As the minimum of training, these things are not the end-all of training; they are the beginning of training. If we in our practice are unable to include them all, then we should be in a state where we are working up toward them. Working toward their inclusion is part of the training. It is a fine thing. If we are achieving them all, then we are fine as well. If, however, we begin to rate what is below minimum as sufficient, or if we come to see the minimum as some kind of excess, then we will have lost touch with training as a whole. Progression, advancement, gaining depth, etc., will be unlikely.

Those who are able to bring depth to their training are those that partake in these minimum requirements fully. Those who cannot bring depth to their training are those that for one reason or another will not participate fully in these minimum requirements. The relationship between bringing depth to one's training and participating in these minimum training requirements can almost be considered a Law of Nature. So sure is the relationship that not only can we use it to explain depth, we can come to predict the presence or absence of depth in accordance to this law. This is why we see such direct correlation between things like total mat time per week and staying up to date with provided reading materials. This is why a level of correspondence presents itself between addressing one's fears on the mat and having an ever-growing relationship with one's teacher. This is why there is a correspondence between reconciling the conditioning of one's body (e.g. strength, flexibility, endurance) and the capacity to continue training beyond issues of convenience. Etc.

In the end, nobody's Aikido is mediocre without them working toward that end. Whether we are superficial in our understanding of the art, or whether we have depth in that understanding, it is solely because of what we do and/or did not do in our training. As we accept where we are in our training, we cannot seek to reject the practical nature of this law on how depth is related to these minimum training requirements. As we accept where we are in our training, we must work to be further along in including these elements. Let us accept our current levels of investment while we continually work to reconcile those aspects of our being that are preventing us from gaining more depth in our practice. Let us freely accept who and where we are as seek to empower ourselves to be able to do all that is needed.