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Training is not a Meal
by David M. Valadez

Deshi: The training never ends, does it? I am just beginning to realize that – just here as I am thinking of leaving.

Sensei: No, training is not like a meal. Training is not a thing that ends because the kitchen is closed or because one is full.

Deshi: Is one ever ready to leave, to end their relationship with a dojo, with the art?

Sensei: This question is without answer. While this question appears to make some sort of sense, it is misapplied to what we do, to who we are. Here, between us, in this place, it makes no sense.

Deshi: When I look into my future, I see a training that is little more than an interference with the rest of my life. In that future, it interrupts my career, my family, my dreams, my wishes.

Sensei: It is good then that we are talking about a future and not actually about you, your career, your family, your dreams, and your wishes. You are very young in your training. One has to be careful with hypotheticals. Pushing this very young you into the future, as if the passing of Time will have no effect on the maturity of your true self, is often a very inaccurate way of seeing things. When you look into the future, it is wise to not take the current you into that future.

Deshi: Still, I cannot help but to feel a sense of constraint, a sense of being forced, a sense of being pushed, a sense of intense pressure, when it comes to relating to the Way.

Sensei: When one first comes to zazen, the posture is difficult. As one is governed by the practice in terms of how to hold the mouth, where to place the tongue, how to hold one's eyes, how to sit, how to align the spine and the head, etc., the posture gives us this same sense of constraint. However, as we actually come to learn how to sit, the posture is quite restful. It even comes to feel the most natural. We feel the most at ease in it, while the sitting postures we are forced to adopt on couches become the epitome of an unwise and unhealthy choice in our newly cultivated subjective mind.

Deshi: So which one is it: Is the zazen posture constraining, or is it natural, healthy, and wise?

Sensei: It is both. It is both depending upon where we are in our training. Because it can be both, one should train to make it natural, wise, and healthy.

Deshi: If I continue to train, the posture comes to feel most free – free of pressure and constraint. Yet, if I do not train in the posture, this pressure is also gone. Why should I train in the posture then?

Sensei: The “why” of training is your own to find, your own to answer. I can only say that you should be ready to find a “why” that is much smaller in grandeur than you are currently looking for. As to the rest of your question, I can say this: Whether you train in zazen or not, whether you work to make the posture natural or not, is an issue unrelated to the posture one if forced to take upon a couch. While one can sit in zazen to alleviate pressure, and while one can choose to not sit in zazen to alleviate pressure, regardless, the couch will never become a wise and healthy option.

Deshi: What does this mean for my training overall?

Sensei: In other words, one can train to a point where training comes to feel natural, comes to feel the most natural, the most wise and healthy thing that one can do. Alternatively, one can choose not to do this. However, choosing to train or choosing not to train, will have no affect on how ill, how unwise, how unhealthy, it is to live a life centered around material and superficial relationships. Regardless of whatever the Way will be for you, a life outside of the Way remains the poor option it has always been.

Deshi: Should I center my life on the Way?

Sensei: Does the contrasting question really make more sense to you: “Should you center your life around material and superficial things?” Is it truly so shocking that with this single existence we should come to place such great importance upon our spirit, our soul, the deepest part of our being, the most real element of ourselves? Is it so shocking that with this single existence we should come to wonder about the meaning of life, the meaning of creation, and our personal roles in both? What should the center of our lives look like if not this? What but these things can truly act as center to all else we think, say, and do? Can my interest in professional sports be this center? Can my drive for shopping support all of me? Can my love of fine foods achieve such a feat? Should I rest upon my casual friendships, upon my career, upon my material purchases?

Deshi: What of our children, of our family, of our parents, our spouses – can these things not act as center?

Sensei: What are these things really if the spirit is not central to our life? Without the spirit as center, children become possessions, family becomes pressure, parents become burden, and spouses become competitors.