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Here, There, and Back Again

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The art of Aikido is important to the world. It is significant to humanity because it is a very practical means by which the individual practitioner can transform him/herself from one state of being into a more subtle and refined state of being. In other words, Aikido can be technology of the Self that is directed toward achieving and maintaining an awareness of the highest kind. Aikido has done this since its inception, and this it can still do.

Along the way, Aikido has faced its share of challenges. The art has faced things that have gotten in the way of it being the universal technology it was meant to be. There were/are its connection to governmental and/or political agendas, global modernization, and its cultural uprooting, for example. Nevertheless, Aikido has managed to survive, and has remained for the most part either intact or as pure as ever. For this we should be thankful. We ourselves are very fortunate to have a connection to an Aikido lineage that has functioned via a direct body/mind transmission - through T.K. Chiba Shihan, to Osensei, to the sacred archetype of Aikido, Okami Sarudahito.

However, Aikido still has its challenges before it. As aikidoka, we must see that Aikido's challenges become our own challenges. We must, without adopting a superficial and impotent romanticism, be weary of the effects that excess, materialism, and the displacement of the group by the individual – all trends of the present times – may have on the art. Today, we must also face the challenge of maintaining the sacred archetypes of our Art – those things that ensure that Aikido remains something for all Mankind and for all Times.

In other words, and for example, as a tenet of Budo, Aikido was born of a soil that without question held as Truth that the group came prior to the individual, ontologically speaking. Everything about Aikido's past cultural environment repeated this fact – myth, ritual, etiquette, religious practices, food practices, economic practices, kinship systems, body practices, etc., all spoke this historical Truth. Much of Aikido's awe and wonder cannot so easily be uprooted from this sense of social responsibility and orientation. Today, as our myths become silent, our meals less sacred, are kinship systems less reliable, our economics less personal, etc., we may, as members of our own age, be quite primed to weaken our link to Aikido's purer social elements. We may come to make the mistake of positing that Aikido's spirituality can exist outside of our relation to the whole of humanity. This mistake can occur even with the best of intentions to do otherwise.

Today, popular culture functions to produce, what could be called, a “secular spirituality.” One that out of ignorance denies the sacred within us all and instead functions more to serve the ego. This is undoubtedly

connected to the modern primacy given to the individual over the group. Now, martial arts in general are being redesigned to meet the desired aims of this secular spirituality. In this sense, martial arts now come to share a great deal in common with contemporary “self-help” groups. These groups, and the martial arts that are based upon them, are the product of a paradigm shift that marks our time. Aikido, having the reputation, one accepted by both Aikidoka and non-Aikidoka, of being a spiritual art, is not exempt from the pressures to follow this trend. Today, Aikido’s supposed spirituality is often presented as a very personal thing – a thing not at all designed for or capable of addressing the social at any kind of meaningful level. This should not be the case. Aikido spirituality should always reflect greatly upon how we can come to serve our fellow Man. We cannot so easily separate Aikido’s sense of the universal from our responsibility to our human family.

Without trying to sound nostalgic, Aikido was born of a soil that sought the embodiment of a particular form and function. This form and function was engineered so that it could resonate into greater patterns of the invisible/sacred - here and now in this profane world. This soil was fertile ground for self-transformation. Thus, it was a viable means of transporting the practitioner from the discursive/symbolic realm (i.e. that of knowing) to the sacred/archetypal realm (i.e. that of being). However, today, Aikido now belongs to a soil that seeks mainly self-empowerment, assertiveness, confidence, physical conditioning, self-defense, etc. It should be noted, while transformation is possible within this soil of self-help, transportation is not only rarely achieved, it is most often not even sought after. In a way, the journey from the profane to the sacred, if not extinct, is at least then absent from Aikido training when we follow these trends. We must all then wonder, if the journey is absent, what is left of the Path?

If Aikido was meant to include a journey from the concrete to the abstract, from the profane to the sacred, and if there is no process of traveling from one to the other, are we not left only with the concrete and the profane? The answer, which is given all around us, appears to be “yes.” However, this is our challenge – to bring the universal, the archetypal, and the sacred back into our practice. It is our challenge to see the concrete and the profane as only the beginning. More specifically, Aikido waza is not the whole of Aikido. We should un-prime ourselves from seeing only waza as Aikido only. For while mastery of the Art leads to a kind of physical prowess, physical prowess in no way leads to a mastery of the Art. We must challenge ourselves to not see Aikido as just another tenet of scientific cause and effect. We should challenge ourselves to see Aikido as cumulative, progressive, and holistic in nature, where the lesser elements are contained in the greater whole but not the other way around.

Obviously cultural-historical uprooting need not be equivalent with death. As was said above, Budo has always faced its own “decay” as it continued to prosper and make itself more refined. In fact, one can hardly read a major Budo treatise of the past without the author already mentioning the negative affect the woes of his period were having on the technology of Self he so dearly loved. Perhaps then it is in the perpetual “decaying,” as we come to terms with it, that the Art prospers. Perhaps it is the facing of decay that marks the journey itself, governing its length and breadth. In this sense, Aikido can be understood as the Hero’s Journey. Aikido praxis can be seen as that great trans-cultural narrative that has the warrior traveling from here to there and back again. For by facing the roots of his own decay, in these narratives the mythic warrior comes to cross those most difficult of thresholds, thresholds that demand a transformation in the patterns of not only his/her conscious life but also of his/her unconscious self.

What might this “here,” “there,” and “back again” be in our Aikido training? What is the Hero’s Journey in Budo? It seems helpful today to understand Aikido from three perspectives when trying to answer these questions. First, there is Secular Aikido, which might be thought of as self-defense, the superficial, the profane, the most material, the most readily tangible, etc. Secondly, there is Symbolic Aikido, which might be thought of as the philosophical, the metaphorical, those cognitive lessons learned by the geometrical shapes found within Aikido architectures (i.e. the circle, the triangle, the square, the spiral), etc. Lastly,

there is Sacred Aikido, which might be thought of as an extinguishing, of dropping off, of embodiment, of awareness, of being – a fusion of subject and object within the realm of meaningless-ness or of no-thingness, etc.

The Hero's Journey, by which we confront the decaying nature of our Art, by which we understand our spirituality as a social phenomenon, is made up of us traveling from Secular Aikido, to Symbolic Aikido, to Sacred Aikido. Of course such divisions are entirely arbitrary and in the end perhaps even false, but this is the whole point of the Hero's Journey. In the great myths where his adventure is transmitted, the warrior did not really go anywhere. Going somewhere is not actually the point of these great myths. The point is more that he nevertheless had to go. The point of our training then is not that we must travel from one place to another but that we cannot accept Secular Aikido as the end all.

The Hero's Journey reminds us, in a way, of the following Zen statement: "A tree is a tree; A tree is not a tree; A tree is a tree." The difference is never really the tree. The difference is the mind of the person experiencing the tree. So too with the Hero, though he/she returns, "back again," he/she really can never come back to whence he/she left. The experience of the journey has made the experience of his/her home different. Yet, from another point of view, having returned home, leaving only to return, the Hero has never really gone anywhere. Still, if the Hero never got to a place that he/she could never really leave, the journey is not complete, and thus it did not take place. "A tree is a tree, is not a tree, is a tree" – only at the end do we see the tree for the first time. Only in the end do we return to a place we never left. Only from Sacred Aikido can we see Secular Aikido for the first time – only then can all things be Aikido and Aikido all things. There are many places that we can use such thinking in our practice.

We can say, "A jo is a jo, is not a jo, is a jo." Secular Aikido sees the jo as a piece of wood – a piece of a tree. It can be burned for cooking; you can use it to point with or to even scratch your back. You can use it as a weapon. All of these things are self-severing and thus limited in their usefulness. This is "a jo is a jo." Symbolic Aikido has the jo as an emblem of power, a symbol of authority. Its rigidity may philosophically demonstrate steadfastness to the practitioner. Its proper use, the way it can become soft and even sticky, can be a metaphor for how to maintain integrity while remaining flexible. This is "a jo is not a jo." Sacred Aikido invests the jo, both weapon and metaphor, both secular and symbolic, with the Self – which makes the weapon something more – something greater than the sum of its parts. Intensity between artifact and artist is fostered and cultivated. Thus, by engaging the jo and the Self in this manner, one comes to prepare the way for developing an intimate relationship with the jo.

In the beginning, before we use Sacred Aikido in regards to the jo, the jo is unruly and does not do what we ask of it. This is an indication of one's inability to fully communicate with the jo. It remains an unrealized extension of the self – hence the lack of communication. With practice, one gradually gains control over the jo and can actually give life to the jo (making the inanimate, animate). In this way, the jo can become a conduit, the connecting link, between the ego (temporal) and the Self that is sacred (universal). Here the wood, the shapes of circles, figure eights, and spirals, etc., all fuse and resonate harmoniously through the four dimensions and through the three planes. Here the universal Self, as extender of the jo and as an extension of the jo, comes to resonate with the synergistic totality that marks this aggregate. Here, for the first time, we reach the third part of the statement: "a jo is a jo." Our journey has occurred. We both returned and never left. The jo is still in our hands, as it was in the beginning, but now the journey is complete. It is the same jo and it is not the same jo. We are complete. Aikido is complete.

Undoubtedly, Aikido is only what we make of it. However, let us remember, or at least work not to forget, that Aikido is the finger that points to the sacred – the universal archetype. Let us journey toward that. In that journey, let us go here, there, and back again. Let us take on the Hero's Journey.