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Etiquette and Imitation

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Generally, at the beginning, training a minimum of two times per week is recommended. Of course, this depends on the individual. If we are in good physical and emotional shape, we may wish to attend more classes – perhaps three or four per week. If our body/mind requires us to immerse it into Aikido at a slower pace, we must do so. We have to allow our body/mind the necessary time to become accustomed to the demands of training. A goal for new practitioners is to learn to monitor the effect training is having on the body/mind – both positively and negatively. To be sure, the ultimate goal is daily training. Nevertheless, in the beginning, most of all, we must be attentive and patient in how we relate to the practice. We must be attentive and patient with all things.

In the beginning, attentiveness and patience are mostly cultivated in two traditional aspects of training: etiquette and imitation. The practices of etiquette and imitation have been set in place to assist us in dealing with the possible resistance our ego may offer toward training. In particular, etiquette and imitation are in place to purify our practice of the vices of unawareness and anxiousness. This is possible because underlying the practice of etiquette and imitation is the antithesis of all resistance: the cultivation of humility.

Humility is non-attachment to the small self, or the material self, and/or we can define it as the capacity to practice non-egocentric speech, thought, and action. Etiquette, which is the awareness of ourselves in relation to others, and imitation, which is the awareness of ourselves in relation to our perceptions of self via an ideal, will always manage to escape us until we are ready to cultivate a humble spirit. Etiquette and imitation are perhaps the most viable tools we can ever use to get beyond that part of ourselves that is blocking us from what is sacred all around us. This is why etiquette and imitation have always been part of any well-grounded spiritual tradition.

In matters of etiquette, we should seek to be attentive. We cannot practice etiquette and be unaware of things at the same time. We should develop the keen eye necessary to see what others are doing and/or not doing. To see clearly what must be done, how it must be done, why it must be done, etc., is to de-centralize ourselves for the sake of something that is greater. Etiquette, like imitation, is about engaging ourselves with an ideal; only all of this is done socially. Etiquette then will touch parts of our spirit that imitation alone cannot and/or will not. Etiquette cultivates a humility that is not bound by personal gain. Rather, etiquette cultivates a humility that is posited in a kind of spiritual submission, a forfeiting of any sense of gain. Until we can understand this, until we are able to cultivate this level of humility, etiquette will forever remain an external constraint. More times than not, it will work only to humiliate us

and/or to make us angry. When our pride comes up against an inability to displace ourselves for the sake of a social ideal it will be enraged to such a degree that we will become blind to even the most obvious connections between our capacity to practice good etiquette and our capacity to demonstrate martial spontaneity. For example, we will not see how the attachment to egocentric behaviors both subverts proper etiquette and the martial application of aiki.

As for imitation, here too we should learn to let go, learn not to be judgmental, and learn not to be so attached to our own points of view. To be sure, attentiveness is most obviously a part of imitation. Hence, imitation is also purifying unawareness out of our body/mind. In imitation, we also learn to see clearly. However, we must be prepared to see a technique at least ten thousand times before we can truly see it. This is an integral part of imitation. Of course, this is not to suggest that we need to see something so many times in order for an accurate point of view to manifest itself. Rather, we are dealing with the capacity to see something ten thousand times as if we are seeing it only once, for the first time. Through the proper practice of imitation, we take responsibility for our own training, and in that responsibility we remove ourselves from practicing egocentricism. This occurs because we are opting to understand ourselves in relation to an ideal, an ideal that exists eternal to ourselves. We seek not to confront this ideal only once. We seek not to displace our egocentric practices only once. Rather, we seek to engage ourselves with the ideal countless times, eternally, but we seek to do so as if every encounter with the ideal is marked by an ever-lasting newness. In this way, while repetition occurs in our imitation, it is void of its usual staleness and/or boredom. When repetition occurs, it lacks the anxiousness that is usually geared toward disengaging ourselves from the ideal. All that exist is patience, which we can define as the capacity to neither be bored nor anxious. All that exists is patience and the humility that is at the heart of it.

In regards to self-cultivation, etiquette and imitation are two wheels of a cart. Humility is the axle. To practice proper etiquette we must be humble enough to place someone else or something else above us. To imitate accurately, we must be humble enough to engage the ideal eternally, but we must be void of any sense of eternity. To cultivate humility we must practice non-attachment to our various forms of egocentricism. Paradoxically, as the small self becomes more de-centered, we come to gain a sense of being more centered, more balanced, more in harmony with all that surrounds us. When this occurs, etiquette and imitation, and the non-attachment to ego that supports them, will be natural expressions of our greater self. None of this can be willed to happen. We must practice it. We must step onto the mat, we must engage our peers, we must engage our teachers, and we must engage the tradition. This is the practice and cultivation of humility that comes to us through etiquette and imitation.