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## **“Why do we train?” – A Conversation Between Two Teachers** by David M. Valadez

XX: My original question was: "What is present that makes some who reject the material go towards the spiritual, and what is missing that allows others to not be interested in the spiritual after rejecting the material?"

Then you started discerning between “how” and “why.” We left out “who” and “where.” It seems you see the “how” as a psychological process, and the “why” as a metaphysical one. What about the “what?” Is that the mechanical [– the mechanics of spiritual cultivation]?

What is present and what is missing [in the person that pursues a spiritual life and in the one who does not]? I think it is an interest.

What makes a person interested in the spiritual? How does one find a spiritual interest? Why does one come to an interest in the spiritual?

I think that due to your academic training, you dissect these questions to have different meanings, but for me they are all the same. The question is what is present (or absent) in the mind; [what] allows one to pursue the spiritual once the material is no longer satisfying.

Senshin Center: Perhaps my academic training is playing a role. However, so too is my practical experience. It is an experience, like yours, which is compounded by the dual role of being student and teacher. In that experience, I have come to realize that it is very important that we remain tangible in our practice. Therefore, I believe, it is very important then that we do not get too metaphysical in the explanations behind our practice. After all, the trip from the metaphysical explanation to the practice that never gets its feet on the ground is a very short one. We want to avoid that trip at all costs.

Therefore, for me, yes, one could say that the “why” of motivating oneself toward a spiritual life is more akin to metaphysical issues, or more accurately, one could say it is more akin to issues that can never provide us with concrete and/or universal answers simply because we are dealing with a multiplicity of human mentalities, histories, karma, etc. In other words, for every case where one type of motivation works to bring one to the Path, we can always find an equal amount of cases where that exact motivation did no such thing. This is life, or at least this is life as we live it.

Understanding the “why” does nothing for me as a teacher. Responses to a given impetus, and the durations and depth of such responses, are simply too varied per person, per time, per place, etc. As a teacher, I can only witness them – witnessing them is a passive action. It is as passive as watching leaves fall from a tree; some catch the wind, some do not, some do and do not, etc. Of course, I can understand the dynamics of flight in general. I can grasp the fundamentals of aerodynamics. I can understand weather patterns, of high and low atmospheric pressures, etc. Nevertheless, as to why a leaf was falling in a certain way and not another, and why the wind blew at that moment and from that direction and not from another – that I cannot know, cannot determine, etc. Not knowing this “why,” just as knowing this “why,” does nothing for me as a watcher of leaves falling or as a teacher. The leaves still fall, the wind still blows, some leaves fly, some do not, and some do and do not. I still teach.

As a student, I gain even less from knowing or understanding “why.” For example, let us say that I lost my family in a terrible accident, the world goes to war and all my friends are killed, I have no home, no job, no funds of any kind. The world as I knew it is completely gone. In that instant, I can understand intellectually that I am not truly a part of the material world. After all, it is gone, and I still exist. In that instant, I am experiencing firsthand my uniqueness from the material world. I am not just thinking it, I am living it. Then, let us say, I begin to search for something deeper. Here I am, I understand I am more apart of the non-material than the material. I am living that reality. I grasp too that there is no materiality to return to, etc. In other words, I have reached rock bottom as the material world goes. Many people believe that this stage is geared, a priori, toward the spiritual life and/or to deep and penetrating changes in ones being. I would say, perhaps it is and perhaps it is not.

Moreover, I would note that in cases where it is, I am not at all assisted in the day-to-day training of spiritual cultivation by such motivations. That is to say, even with the world gone, cultivating the spirit will still be something that is beyond motivational “whys.” When boredom strikes me, when I grow slothful, when I fatigue, when I grow doubtful, when faith has left me altogether, telling myself that the world is gone, that there are no other choices left open to me, will not make the path easier, or more attractive. It will not give me extra energy or extra discipline. It will not return my faith to me. The Path will still be difficult. It will still be difficult to find and/or it will still be difficult to keep my footing once I have begun treading upon it.

Therefore, while I can see what you are saying, in seeing the “how” and “why” as the same, I prefer to make the distinction for practical reasons – for reasons of practice.

XX: You know what I get? I think that the ego has no interest in spirituality, except superficially--to wear the mask. I think that there has to be some experience of selflessness/loss of ego that allows one to glimpse the true self that knows that love is all that matters. Then there is a deep knowing of what is important in life, and the interest in finding a way and a guide comes from that interest.

Senshin Center: Yes, I can agree that this happens quite often for those who go on to live a spiritual life. I do not think it is the only means to a spiritual life however. For example, many religious traditions speak equally of the nature of the ego and of the true self. Therefore, as the ego has its nature to not be interested in the spiritual life, the true self also has a nature to erupt into the material world. This may be one reason why many folks come to a spiritual life quite passively. For example, by an ordinary set of coincidences they come near a person or persons who are living such lives, they come near such places where such a life is practiced, etc., and over a set of other circumstances, they remain, and little by little such a life becomes their own. This can happen too.

So I think we have to allow for any entry upon the Path. In order to do that, I do not think we should place too much emphasis on the religious experience that comes to us like a lightning bolt - from out of nowhere

or all of a sudden. In fact, as a teacher, I tend to have more faith in people that come to a spiritual life passively. The practitioner that comes via an experience, and/or in search of one, tends to burn out, comparatively speaking.

XX: So we as verbal teachers are kind of in a catch-22 because the only person who can get what we are teaching is one who already knows on some level, and needs it confirmed. The importance of a physical Way then lies in the fact that we can lead them to experience a different way of being. Still, they have to be interested to have the experience--or at least to recognize the experience as profound and worth contemplation (I am reminded of the big wave surfers [who have experiences but no direction or orientation by which to grasp them fully]).

So my answer to my own question is that continuing ripples form a glimpse, and the ripples never die, and an interest grows. Some students come with the ripples, others we hope to be able to lead them to such things.

Senshin Center: Of course, this is the logical conclusion one must reach when one has set up practice as traveling from religious experience to religious experience. Personally, I cannot agree with such a practice. I can understand it, and I can see it happening in some circumstances, but like before, as a teacher, and as a student, it has nothing to do with me.

The metaphor of the rippling water makes sense – in the natural world. However, in the religious world, as was said before, some rocks (i.e. insights) might not make ripples at all. Moreover, some little pebbles might make huge waves. Some ripples might go on and on. Others might not travel far at all. Some stones will float on the water, making no splash at all. Some splashes might be so big that they break up the ripple effect sooner than expected. What do we do with such a reality? Keep throwing rocks into the pond? Do we keep throwing rocks into the pond, over and over again, saying, “Well maybe my last experience wasn’t so deep, wasn’t so real, wasn’t authentic enough?” How do I as a practitioner combat the natural inclination to halt my training now that I realize that I could have experiences (i.e. rocks being dropped into a pond) that may do nothing for me as far as motivation goes, etc. (i.e. no ripple effect)?

Do not people have experiences all of the time, only to do nothing with them, or even to burn out soon thereafter? How many people have had eruptions of clarity in their Aikido, and into the positive role Aikido plays in their life, only to quit training along the way or to continue to invest so lightly that they might as well quit? I do not think that religious experiences or intuitive insights themselves lend much toward a mature or prolonged practice.

We are teachers, and I do not believe that our experience as teachers is so uncommon that we cannot look to the masses of teachers and see at least a part of ourselves. Which Aikido teacher, then, has not had that student come up to them filled with ecstatic energy and faith, pumping with joy and motivation, and say, “Man, Aikido is the greatest!” “I am so happy I found this!” “I just love it!” “It is so good for me!” “I want to do it all of the time!” “It is so important to me!” “My life was a mess until I started training!” “I finally get it all now!” “I see my mistakes and I’m going to change how I train!” Aikido has saved my life!” “This is the greatest!” I love Aikido!” etc., and then just quit?

All of these statements come from gaining a unique experience or achieving some sort of special insight, but so too from there comes the desire to quit – in my opinion. Searching for the next experience, and/or waiting for it, training becomes a series of highs and lows, of upheavals and plateaus, of depression and of ecstasy. Between such extremes, the human soul is pummeled into failure. The mature practice is beyond all of these things. To be sure, religious experiences happen, so too does intuitive insights, but these are

not truly of the practice. They are incidental to the practice, and in the end, they are irrelevant to the practice. For this reason, I would rather not give such motivating privilege to religious experience.

Other religious thinkers, in fact, have gone further than this, such as St. John of the Cross. He said that such experiences can actually be thought of as the work of the opposition. He means, such experiences take away from the true practice. He writes: “Since [practitioners who are motivated by experiences and insight] are so used to finding delight in spiritual practices, they become bored when they do not find it. If they do not receive in prayer the satisfaction they crave – for after all it is fit that God withdraw this so as to try them – they do not want to return to it or at times they either give up prayer or go to it begrudgingly.” In a way, in my opinion, St. John’s position is quite akin to Dogen’s critique of Rinzai Zen, or the Zen that was contemporary to him, when he relayed, “The practice is Awakening.”

As was said before, the “why” for me is unknowable - but in theory and in hindsight. The “how” of living a spiritual life was mentioned in the Exchange (see “By Will Alone”). The “how” is the will. Still questions remain. We should ask and answer them:

Why does one will succeed and another fail? I have no idea.

How does one will succeed and another one fail? The former applies itself fully, the latter does not.

Why does one will apply itself fully and another does not? I have no idea.

How does one will apply itself fully and another does not? By practicing discipline, commitment, and endurance, or by not practicing these things.

Why does a person practice discipline, commitment, and endurance, while another does not? I have no idea.

How does one come to practice discipline, commitment, and endurance or not? By valuing Truth, Loyalty, Honor, and Wisdom, or by not valuing these things.

Why does one value things while another does not? I have no idea.

How does one come to hold value in these thing or not come to hold value in these things? Because one has faith in that which is beyond the immediate senses, or because one has no such faith.

Why do some have this faith and others do not? I have no idea.

How do we come to have this faith while others do not? I have no idea. But why should one care? It is all right here before you – just start at the top: Start with the will; apply it fully by practicing discipline, commitment, and endurance; give value to Truth, Loyalty, Honor, and Wisdom. Your Faith will strengthen according to these efforts and these efforts alone. In time, your Faith will come to support these efforts when nothing else will. When that happens, one will begin to understand the statement, “The practice is Awakening.”

XX: I can't get into the word thing. Maybe you are right, or maybe you are stubborn. I don't care. Why and how are the same thing to me. Look:

Why does one will succeed and another fail? Because the former applies itself fully, the latter does not.

Why does one will apply itself fully and another does not? Because one practices discipline, commitment, and endurance, and the other does not practice these things.

Why does a person practice discipline, commitment, and endurance, while another does not? Because they either value Truth, Loyalty, Honor, and Wisdom, or do not value these things.  
etc etc etc.

Senshin Center: Well, like I said, at a certain point the two may appear the same, but at a practical point, the two are very different. “How” is a matter of mechanics. “Why” is a metaphysical issue (as you worded it). I as a teacher and as a student can address issues of mechanics. As to issues of “why,” I am only left to await the arrival of its fulfillment. If I equate such fulfillment with the mechanisms themselves, or even

with the engine for such mechanisms, this type of reasoning makes things very akin to having a "calling" and/or to being "chosen" and/or to having karma work to such a degree and in such a way that one is ripe for such practices, etc. To be sure, there are religious traditions that adopt this point of view. It is just that I do not believe that such traditions are related to Budo, or are as spiritually valid as say Zen or as Christian mysticism - which opt to make a distinction between "why" and "how" as well.

I do not feel that I was "called" to such a life because the needed "why" happened to come my way. In addition, I do not like the "uniqueness" which is just on the other side of such reasoning. I do not like the idea of someone saying that they have a "why" to their training and someone else does not. I do not feel any more or less human than anyone. I am not more primed for this training than anyone, etc. I believe that the capacity for us to follow the Way exists in all of us - equally - or it is in no one. The variations we see in our differing states of practice are mechanical issues for me, not metaphysical ones. So again, at this level, like you quoted above, the words are interchangeable. I can accept that. However, at another level, "why" has a strong capacity to denote "reason" (such as when you ask elsewhere, "For what reason?") – reason as motivation - whereas "how" does not. "How" eternally remains a practical issue, an issue of mechanics. No matter how far one goes in its reasoning or in its applications, "how" will never be the final answer - as "why" can be. "How" only leads to more questions. I like that. I like that because it makes sense to me in regards to what we are doing and in what we are trying to avoid. So my "stubbornness" really only comes into play with later issues that are sure to arise from such a perspective - not with how you are using the words interchangeably above.

XX: You said: “Start with the will; apply it fully by practicing discipline, commitment, and endurance; give value to Truth, Loyalty, Honor, and Wisdom. Your Faith will strengthen according to these efforts and these efforts alone. In time, your Faith will come to support these efforts when nothing else will. When that happens, one will begin to understand the statement, ‘The practice is Awakening.’”  
What will? That's the question! Where does the will come from?

Senshin Center: It is our own will, our own capacity to choose, to pick a direction, to turn from one way toward another. It is a natural capacity of every human being. It is nothing unique to those who follow the way. Every Man has it.

XX: How does one decide to generate and maintain this will?

Senshin Center: Generating the will is a product of what I just mentioned. Maintenance is a process made up of what you just quoted.

XX: For what reason is the will manifested, directed, sustained, motivated?

Senshin Center: This is the part I tend to feel is irrelevant to what we do. It is a question that seems to make sense. However, from a practical point of view it makes little sense. For one, such a question assumes that there are wrong reasons and right reasons. Who is to say which reasons bring us to the Way and which do not? History has certainly shown that Man has come to the Way by countless reasons. Secondly, it assumes that there is a unity to such reasons. Again, history, and even personal experience, demonstrates that this is not so. On the other hand, if we look at this question in a positive sense, if we attribute sense to it, we are still left with the same uselessness I mentioned before. For example, as a teacher, once I assume that there are reasons beyond the natural capacity of will (i.e. of deciding to undertake one thing over another), do I check folks' reasons at the gate? Do I ask them, "What is your reason for training?" Many dojo do this exact thing. However, it is a joke question, as far as I am

concerned. It is like asking a baby what they want to be when they grow up. If someone were to truly ask a child that question, in all seriousness, would we not think that person is an idiot? Of course, we would, yet we accept it most commonly when a dojo asks this or a teacher asks this of their student. Personally, I, on the other hand, am very prone to say to the new student, "The reason you have now will not last as you come to know more about the Way."

How can we assume a (powerful) reason exists, how can we presume to judge them, how can we assume that such reasons will last a lifetime or that they will remain relevant to other reasons that come via a lifetime, etc. I hold that they are not even part of training. If a student came to me and I happened to ask them, "Why are you seeking the Way?" and they said, "Because the angel Gabriel told me that I should train here, and from here I could go on to save the world in the name of God." I would be quite put out. I would not be put out because they spoke of angels or of God, but because they felt sure enough that their reason could remain relevant as they moved from knowing nothing about the art to knowing something about the art. Rather, let me have that student that comes with no reason, let me have that student that isn't sure why they want to train, or at least let me have that student that has only the most mundane of reasons (e.g. "I thought Aikido looked cool."). Why? Because I do not want the reason as a calling - I do not want the reason to be primary to the experience. Because I want them to discover their own reason for the Way as they are walking upon it. More than that, as the Way becomes their life, and as their life becomes the Way, I want them to simultaneously discover their reason and the fact that they do not need a reason to continue onward. The Way does not require a reason to exist. Just like Life does not require a reason to be. When Life requires a reason, one is suicidal. When the Way requires a reason, one has not truly entered upon it - in my opinion.