



David M. Valadez
Senshin Center
Dojocho

Cleaning the Dojo by **David M. Valadez**

Perhaps the real value and meaning of cleaning the dojo is too esoteric for cognitive expression of any kind. We can all say, "Cleaning the dojo is part of our training," but most likely its ultimate relationship to the Aikido forging of ourselves is as much a mystery as effortlessly disturbing uke's balance in irimi-nage or seeing the unity of all kihon-waza. In the end, all we may truly understand is what we can subjectively observe: Those that clean with sincerity, move with sincerity; their center seems lower than ours; they breathe more effortlessly; their stances are stronger; their movements are more crisp. The martial ways, such as Aikido, generally leave such mysteries to the passage of Time or to the voices of Silence. However, we can directly discuss a few things when reflecting upon the relationship between training in the dojo and cleaning the dojo.

For the sake of proper understanding we really must see training as cleaning, and cleaning as training. They are the same thing ultimately. To understand these two elements of Aikido culture as separate entities is to rob ourselves of much of what Aikido truly has to offer. (Note: If I separate them here, it must be understood that it is solely for the purposes of exposition.) Perhaps the common error of believing that one can practice training without cleaning, or cleaning without training, can most accurately be attributed to a cultural/historical difference - one that separates us from our past. Cleaning in "modern" culture hardly holds the same place it once held in human ontology or soteriology. We are a long way from "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." Cultural or historical gaps aside, the link between training and cleaning is not beyond our realm of comprehension. For through the practice of self-reflexivity we can come to see the practical value of any different cultural/historical tradition - to not see them as merely arbitrary practices without reason. Therefore we can come to see the true - practical - value of cleaning our own respective dojo.

In modern culture, cleaning is something that we have to do; something we would rather pay someone else to do - if we could. We rarely feel the impulse to clean a place that is not our own abode (certainly not daily). However, in traditional Japanese culture, cleaning, and domestic work in general, has long played a central role in the cultivation of the Self. Martial arts claiming to cultivate the Self, in the face of Modernity, have tried to maintain these practices as part of their overall training curriculum. Traditional Aikido training is no different. Other traditional Japanese practices also follow this path. In fact, a position of seniority in a Zen monastery, following the Abbot, is often the cook.

Most of these Self-cultivation practices are ancient in existence and therefore it would be foolish to believe that they are entirely arbitrary - that there is no practicality in their implementation. Viewing such

practices as "for tradition's sake" often shows more a birth of ignorance in the chain of transmission than it marks any real kind of evolution in thought or practice. Thus, I would now like to discuss some of the practical aspects of cleaning in the hope of increasing awareness and understanding regarding the importance of properly maintaining one's own dojo. They are mentioned below according to a scale ranging from the more superficial to the less superficial. I have not attempted to mention all the benefits of cleaning - please remember, as I mentioned above, that the most important aspects of cleaning are perhaps mysteries solved only by the passage of Time.

Obviously cleaning provides for the continued practice of centered and purposeful movement. Cleaning is a time when we can experiment with what we are learning during class - it is one of the earliest bridges that we may use to help us take our Aikido training outside the confinement of the dojo walls - the matted area. When cleaning, we should ask ourselves, "Am I still alert?" "Am I still breathing correctly?" "Am I letting gravity determine too heavily how I step and where I step?" etc. These self-addressed questions all deal with the aspects of proper breathing and proper posture. At a superficial level, what more is there to Aikido than proper breathing and proper posture? Allowing for broad definitions of "breath" and "posture" (which is something we must do when translating the two words into English from the Japanese) one might arguably say that there is nothing more to Aikido than proper breathing and proper posture. A famous story, with many versions, offers an enlightened perspective on this position: A famous Japanese swordsman is asked to attend a Noh play by a local government official. The central character in the drama is played by the most famous Noh actor of the time. After the play the government official asked the swordsman to comment on the performance of the famous actor. The swordsman responded by saying he saw no openings during the entire drama. By this comment, the swordsman was pointing out how in control the actor was of every move he made - how his breathing and posture were at all times correct and how his mind was always alert. The swordsman ended his comments by saying, "His zanshin never faltered."

Pertaining more to this concern, aside from the somewhat abstract notions of states of mind, posture, and breath, we can ask ourselves as we clean other questions that are even more immediately apparent in their technical application: "Do we scrub the mat with our shoulders?" "Is our spine out of alignment when we are dusting?" etc. Our body awareness should not solely be of importance when we are nage or uke. Can we not use seiza and shikko to scrub the mat rather than being on all fours and shoving our shoulders downward? Can we not see the similarities between vacuuming, sweeping the walkway, and jo tsuki or irimi ashi? Moreover, can we not use ayumi-ashi or shikko to push the broom across the mat when it is being swept? The obvious answer to all these questions is "yes." We can carry over the body lessons learned in Aikido to cleaning the dojo.

Cleaning the dojo provides an opportunity to actually practice the social philosophies of Aikido. For some, the social lessons Osensei tried to instill in this most fascinating of arts operate at what can only be called a metaphorical level. We hear statements about arguments in the office where one aikidoka had to "go with the flow," "use his opponent's force against him," or "roll out of it." We hear stories of "verbal" ukemi and so on. As interesting as these stories may be, traditional Aikido is meant to function in the social experience at a level beyond that of analogy and/or metaphor, and cleaning the dojo is one very good way of returning a practicality to Aikido's socio-ethical stance. When we clean, we become aware of how our presence affects our environment, as well as how it influences those around us. In fact, cleaning can be defined as the act of becoming aware of the impact we create by our very presence. We bring in the dirt. We clean up the dirt. We leave the dirt there. This awareness of our impact on the larger environment is a very important gateway to social harmony - to peace on Earth. It is the gateway of self-responsibility, of empathy, and of sympathy. It is the hallway of Compassion. As members of a dojo, we

must ask ourselves: Though we equally make use of the dojo, do we equally share in its maintenance? When we leave early with hardly cleaning, do we think of how this makes our fellow deshi feel - those that stay behind to clean? Might they not also have a family to return home to, and work to do? By leaving early, didn't we just make them have to stay later? How compassionate can we be towards each other if we decide to routinely take cleaning lightly while others are not? How will we ever be able to practice compassion when it is most needed if we cannot even understand how our fellow deshi may feel when they work hard to keep the dojo clean and we do not? Cleaning is the social responsibility of all members, and because of this we can use the hardly volatile environment of the dojo to safely cultivate compassion within ourselves - a compassion sturdy enough to take on the burden's of today's society. Self-responsibility now, compassion later – this is what comes to us through cleaning.

A properly cleaned dojo is a dojo whose slightest detail has not escaped the awareness of its members. Cleaning teaches us how to pay attention to detail. Attention to detail is very important to Aikido training. We train not toward mediocrity - whether we train for health, self-defense, or for the totality of Budo. We can say that we train toward perfection. Perfection cannot be understood as a destination. Perfection is not a place we reach. If perfection is a locale then it is forever beyond us and of little practical good. Rather, perfection is a process. As a process, perfection still contains the notion of the unattainable. However, as a process, this unattainable nature makes perfection practical. Allow me to explain: Perfection is a process - but what constitutes this process? The process of perfection is nothing more than the continual attention to finer and finer detail - ad infinitum. We practice because there is always more to learn - more to see. Moreover, as we engage in this infinite pursuit we grow in a way that is as continual as the process itself. When we first practiced Katate-dori Ikkyo, we may have just stepped forward any amount of steps - completely unaware of their number or direction - because all we could see was our hands. Moreover, forget breathing! Right? However, in time we notice the triangular entering movement, and the hip-to-hip and center-to-center relationship between uke and nage. In more time, we feel our shoulders drop, we sense extension, we come to see the sword movements, and kokyu-ho, and in more time we come to see the potential for violence in Ikkyo and thus the opportunity to choose the Path of Peace, etc. - on and on, ad infinitum. Ikkyo becomes more and more, and so do we. Everyday our Ikkyo changes, we say “improves,” because we become more and more aware of the details that make up Ikkyo. The same can be said for cleaning the dojo. When we clean we provide ourselves with an opportunity to develop an awareness for detail at a time when we do not have to concern ourselves with thoughts like, “How will I land from these heights now?!” We merely have to breathe, adopt the correct posture, and become fully aware - easier said than done - right? But! Look and ye shall see.

Lastly, I would like to attempt to put into words how cleaning is related to our very being. I may quite easily fail in this task because I am sensing that this is one of those mysteries best left to the passage of Time. However, if the reader can keep these final feeble attempts at elucidation somewhere in the back of their mind, then perhaps somewhere, someday, he/she will comprehend what I could not make comprehensible now. When we clean, we mark the dojo as a special place. In academic circles, one might easily call it a sacred space, but today the modern public is made uncomfortable by words like “sacred.” So, let me define the term as it is used today in social/historical studies within the Academy. When we say a space is sacred, we are noting primarily that it is not profane - that it is not of the everyday ordinary space. We are also noting that the space in question provides some sort of physical and/or ideational orientation for its members - at their deepest level of being - at the level of identity. Today, by this definition, scholars call churches sacred space, and they call government offices sacred space. Today there is the sacred mountain and the sacred Capital Hill. The delineation of one space from another, the sacred from the profane, is done so as to provide value - first to the place in question, and secondly to those practices and ideas cultivated therein. As far as the dojo is concerned, we mark off

delineating boundaries through minor actions we practice daily. For example, when we enter the dojo we mark the outer boundary by bowing at the door. At the most simplistic level, in bowing upon entering the dojo, we are saying, "This space I am about to enter is not like this space I am exiting." In addition, when we remove our shoes we are saying the same thing. We change our clothes, our language, our natural inclinations, we do this all to mark off the dojo space as special - as valuable, as meaningful, as sacred. What does this have to do with cleaning? In answering this question, first, we must understand that we practice these small actions/gestures because what we ultimately put in and/or do in the dojo, we put into ourselves. If where we practice is of extraordinary value, then what we practice there too is of extraordinary value. Moreover, if what we practice is of extraordinary value, who we are - what we are trying to become - too is of extraordinary value. Cleanliness, the practice of cleaning the dojo, works toward the sacrality of the dojo, the sacrality of the actions practiced therein, and thus towards the sacrality of ourselves. In not too philosophical a way, we can say: When we leave the dojo with impurities, we leave impurities within ourselves.