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Beginning Weapons Training by David M. Valadez

Weapons, as ancient as song and myth in the history of Man, have always been the artifacts by which the warrior is known both to others and to him/herself. While it may be that today mainstream Aikido has for the most part turned away from weapons training, that the Founder himself did not is a fact that cannot be disputed. There are questions we must ask then. What did Osensei see within the sword and jo he practiced with? What did he feel these already “impractical” weapons brought to his training when he himself lived in a time of firearms, air forces, and powerful navies? Why did he not lay them aside as so many today are comfortable to do so? Was not the option to delete them from his training as much his then as it is ours now? While, for some, it may be the case that sincere weapons training is irrelevant to their pursuits in Aikido, these questions, and others like them, remain eternally significant for all aikidoka.

Undoubtedly, answers to these questions are of the kinds that only speak to us through the body. Struggles, agonies, pain, and suffering then are what are to be expected in our attempts to find answers that can be deemed satisfactory. However, let us not shy away from using whatever cognitive means we may have at our disposal. Let us use our intellect as a way of providing ourselves with direction and orientation, so that no physical struggle is unfruitful, no bodily agony is without its share of wisdom, no pain is without its cultivation of endurance, and no suffering is without its honing of virtue. For there are perspectives, or assumptions, that lend themselves toward training in weapons, while there are others that do not, others that act as hindrances. Of the latter, there is seldom a better example than this one: “Aikido weapons work is nothing more than Aikido body art with a weapon in hand.”

In my opinion, we must begin the quest for answers with the rejection of this idea that one side is source for the other. We should not enter into our weapons training with the position that sword movement or jo movement and body art are analogous. Our mind should be clear of the idea that learning one will lead to the learning of the other. We should not hold the two types of training to be macrocosm and microcosm. We should not from the onset hold that this shomen-giri is that Shiho Nage. Whether these things are true or not, to hold such assumptions at the commencement of our weapons training is to practice only a regurgitation or a rehashing of old knowledge. Consequently, to hold such a view is to restrict us at the onset from ever learning anything new. As a result, and herein lies the danger, what may have been weak before will remain weak. Weakness, and other forms of superficiality, like diseases, will spread from one type of practice to the other. In this way, weapons will have little or no capacity to purify and/or amplify the points in need of refinement within our expressions of the art. At the most, weapons will be forced into a position of premature redundancy in regards to our body art. As a result, the answers Osensei sought for in weapons training will forever remain beyond our physical grasp - even beyond the grasp of our imagination.

Rather, at the beginning of our training, let us say that neither the sword nor the jo is the sun or the shadow of body art. Let it be, at least in our assumptions, as it was for our ancestors. Let the sword and jo stand on their own accord, as the weapons we reach for in times of need – nothing more, nothing less. Let us commence no weapons training with any such reduction such as this popular one of analogy leading the way. If the sword may be the father of Shiho Nage, let us see that at the end of our weapons training. Before that, let the sword simply remain the weapon of our Fathers.

In this manner, these ancient tools can come to relate to our body art of their own accord. For where we are weak, the sword will blind us with this fact; where we are vulnerable, the jo will deafen us with this charge; where we are frozen with Fear, burdened with Pride, and enslaved by Ignorance, these weapons will challenge us with the same things they have always challenged the warrior: integrity, truth, self-reflection, and awakening. In this way, there is no shadow to our training - there is only sun, only light all around us. It is under this sun, through the nourishing heat of weapon meeting weapon, that the roots of our Aikido can and will deepen.