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## **The Living Way: An Application of the Thinking of Thomas Merton to Budo Training** by David M. Valadez

When we practice Budo, even when we are practicing our waza and/or our zazen, we should not look for a “method” or a “system” by which we wrongly come to believe that all work can be carried out by participation alone. Though Budo is a Way, or though it is even known as a Path, we should not approach it as some thing that gets us from point “A” to point “B.” Rather, through our training we must seek to cultivate an “attitude” or an “outlook” – a process by which we come to understand everything in us and around us through a single/unified field of experience. We are working toward a type of faith, a type of openness, a type of awareness, a type of hope, a type of reverence, a type of supplication, a type of expectation, a type of trust, a type of joy. We are working toward having these things permeate our being, such that our joy is a living joy, our supplication is a living supplication, our reverence is a living reverence, our hope is a living hope, our attention is a living attention, our openness is a living openness, our faith is a living faith. For when our faith is alive, as with all these things, we are eternally in the presence of God. Moreover, we forever know and/or feel that presence no matter where we are or what we are doing. Hence, our Budo, our Aikido, becomes part of something that is much greater than ourselves, just as our self becomes part of the Greater Self. Our Budo becomes alive, and we come to live through it.

It is unusual today that one will walk into the dojo and naturally be capable of making their practice a living practice. Most of us will have to learn how to make our practice alive. That is to say, we will have to indeed undergo learning and/or experience various means by which we can transform our practice from something hollow and mundane into something that is deep and sacred. However, we should not expect to find “magical” methods, systems that make all difficulties and obstacles dissolve into thin air. Budo is difficult. We must have faith that the difficulties we bare with commitment, endurance, and patience, will at the time of spiritual maturity turn into great sources of insight, even joy. Thus, when we are still on the side of being attached to our pleasure, we should not judge our training according to how we feel. Pain and suffering, whether it be physical or emotional, are not the signs that we have departed from our own interests or even from the fruits of our Art. In fact, a hard and apparently fruitless practice may in fact be much more valuable than one that is easy, happy, and speciously successful.

Failures, and the risk of failure, are paramount to spiritual maturity. Success, and the calculating mind which seeks to ensure success, is in fact antithetical to what we do and who we are when we say we are budoka. There is a key moment in the spiritual maturity of our being. That moment can only be marked by loss, by defeat, by a dropping off of something, by a type of “death.” This death, and failure, the risk of

failure, and the fear of failure, are all intimately linked. This death marks the descent into our own being, by which we bring true depth to our practice. This death comes to us when the distractions and escapes of our own egocentrism no longer remain viable. Thus, we can say that the depth of our practice is founded upon a descent into our own nothingness, and/or via a recognition of our own helplessness, our own frustration, our own hypocrisy, our own confusion, and our own ignorance. At the moment of this death, we expose our own vanity, our own falsity, and our own capacity for betrayal toward God, toward ourselves, and toward others. This death brings us face to face with the sham of our own practice – where the darkness of a dead practice is clearly seen as such and where the light of a living practice becomes known and realized.

This alternation between dark and light constitutes a kind of dialogue – one we can say we hold with ourselves but also one that we can say we hold with God. In such a place/time we are at the center of everything and everything is at the center of us. There, our practice becomes deeper and deeper at the very moment that it becomes broader and broader. By such alternations of dark and light, we grow in our non-attachment to things of the ego, toward things that separate us from this time/place of All-ness, as we grow equally in faith and in a practice that is alive. We begin to realize that the “sacrifices,” and/or the turmoil and hardships of training, are in fact no such things – even when the positive results of such things are not clear and evident to us. We gain both the drive and the capacity to make any effort that is required to thereby bring life to our practice and to bring us in closer proximity to God. We realize that a living practice is dependent upon the effort to make it such. We realize that Budo requires well-directed and sustained effort. We realize that practice cannot exist outside of these things.

Right away then, we run into one of the problems of the living practice: that of learning when one’s efforts are well-directed and sustainable, and/or when they simply spring forth from the usual habitual attachments to our own ego and/or when they are futile. It would be a mistake to suppose that mere good will, by itself, can guarantee that all our efforts will end in a worthy result. Serious mistakes can be made, along with serious wastes of time and resources, even with the greatest of good intentions. For this reason, humility and docile acceptance of sound advice are very necessary in the true bringing of life to our practice. Though spiritual direction may not be necessary in the ordinary life of performing Aikido waza over and over again, and though an ordinary aikidoka may be able to get along to some extent without it (many have to!), spiritual direction becomes a necessity for anyone who is trying to deepen his/her practice – to any person trying to live a true or complete Way. Hence, the traditional importance of having an experienced practitioner – one already in possession of a living Way – to guide us and/or to detect in us misplaced zeal and/or wrong-headed effort. Such a guide – such a spiritual father or spiritual mother – was traditionally always listened to and even obeyed, especially when he/she cautions against the use of certain methods and practices, which he/she sees to be out of place and harmful in a particular case, or when he/she declines to accept certain “experiences” as evidence of progress. When one follows sound spiritual direction, a little effort goes a long way. Spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers can always see us, even when we cannot see ourselves. For this reason, their importance should not be underplayed.

The work of a spiritual father or a spiritual mother is not so much one of transmission. We do not go to them to receive something that they have and that we would like them to give to us. Rather their role is centered on showing us how to recognize ourselves. In our relationship with them, we come to hone our skills in patience and in humility, and thereby we come to develop the capacity to gain insight into our own spiritual difficulties. Through our interactions with them, through our intimacy with them, we come to gain skill in removing or in purifying from ourselves the obstacles that keep us from having a living practice. These obstacles may have very deep roots in our character. In fact, one lifetime, for some of us, may be barely enough time to remove them. Many of us, those who up to now have gotten through life on

our confidence, our strength, our ingenuity, and our intelligence, tend to imagine that we can quite easily learn, by our own cleverness, the “tricks” of the spiritual life. For those of us like this, one lifetime may not be enough time to realize there are no “tricks” to gaining a living practice.

Seeking to discover special “gimmicks” is to be resistant toward the True Path – which is marked more by doubt than by self-confidence. We cannot face the difficulties of a living practice successfully until we are perfectly content to be a beginner and really experience ourselves as one who knows little or nothing, and has a great need to learn the bare rudiments. For those of us that feel or think we “know” from the beginning (which is any time prior to having a living practice), very often, in fact, we will never come to know anything. In the attempts to hide from ourselves the sham of our practice, in our attempts to fruitlessly connect one delusion after another to the delusion of “knowing,” we distance ourselves from truth and from reality. Yet, truth and reality are the very soil of the living Way. When we realize that we have imprisoned ourselves in a space-time of fantasy, when we realize that against our best intentions, and in spite of every one of our efforts to the contrary, we have forever robbed ourselves of having a living practice, acedia, which is that thing that follows the enthusiasm of pride and spiritual vanity, is our tomb. Though things are here dim, all is not lost. From darkness comes light, and thus from this death, through a long course in humility and compunction, we can be reborn in the light – if we but realize the importance of being a beginner.