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## **“For Me” Aikido** by David M. Valadez

Undoubtedly, we can say that there is a problem with providing our own variations of Aikido waza with inherent values, in being judgmental of others, in being exclusionary, and in not respecting the differences found within our fellow human beings. We can also say that these things are indeed problems that affect much of the martial arts world. We can even say: Special attention must fall upon the world of Aikido. This is because of Aikido's overt claim to value Harmony, which must include social harmony. As an effort toward that Harmony, many aikidoka suggest that we should understand all Aikido as a “for me” Aikido. That is to say, many aikidoka, explicitly or implicitly, suggest that we should not and cannot understand Aikido objectively. Nevertheless, before we subject everything to a relativity that we believe to be inescapable, the following remains to be asked, answered, and pondered over when it comes to determining the boundaries, and thus the particulars, of Aikido:

If, for example, there are many ways to do Shiho Nage "right," are there any ways to doing Shiho Nage “wrong”? If Aikido is infinite, is everything Aikido? Can every single difference of the art’s expression be accounted for by the use of the relativistic/subjective suffix "for me"? And most importantly, does a “for me” Aikido truly lead to the Harmony of which Aikido claims to champion?

I would of course answer, “yes” to the first question. There are many ways of doing Shiho Nage “right.” As for the second question, I would answer, “no.” The fact that there are many ways of performing a technique right does not mean that there are no ways of performing the technique wrong. The “for me” suffix does not wipe away either the qualitative differences that really do exist between things, people, and ideas. More importantly, the “for me” suffix does not at all address the social evils that are the product of the Same/Other dialectic – which precisely is what has to be addressed before Aikido’s dogma of Harmony can be put to any kind of social use.

While the “for me” suffix may be very much in vogue in today’s American spiritual movement (which must include arts like Aikido), due to residuals still floating around from the New Age movement that had its apex in the 80’s and gross misinterpretations of East Asian thought that were generated in the late 60’s and continue on into the present, the “for me” suffix only works to legitimate an egocentrism that is the real engine behind the Same/Other dialectic. In other words, it is in the end the “for me” that causes much of us, in many situations, to announce inherent values, to become judgmental, and to disrespect the differences between people by ignoring them altogether. In fact, the “for me” position only allows for a new Same to be created. The division between Same and Other still remains. In this new Same/Other

dialectic, all folks that can say “for me” are the Same, and all those that can’t or won’t are Other. Lines of aggression and hostility have simply moved – they have not disappeared or even faded.

An example: If I am teaching tai-no-henko to a student, and upon correcting said student, she says, “Well, I can see what you are saying about YOUR version of tai-no-henko, and it’s not that I want to denounce your version as ‘incorrect,’ but this here, this what I’m doing right here and now, is tai-no-henko ‘for me.’ You have your tai-no-henko, and I have my tai-no-henko. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Upon hearing this conversation, many folks would immediately denounce the student for such behavior for any number of reasons. Yet, upon hearing this same call for relativism and/or for subjectivism in the acceptable forms of “There are many ways of doing tai-no-henko,” or “There’s no “right” way of doing tai-no-henko,” or “Everyone does tai-no-henko their own way,” etc., most would rally behind this same cause then – a position that should in fact hold this student up as a champion of that cause. This does not happen. Why? I would hold because the egocentrism that is at work in the “for me” goes unquestioned, unnoticed, whenever it is mistakenly upheld as a thing that supposedly serves the greater good. In the example of the student, others reduce her “for me” to matters of close-mindedness or even of ignorance. This is because her “for me,” for some inconsistent reason, is not part of the privileged few. Her “for me” is not the “for me” of “for everyone.” Her “for me” has within it no capacity, because it lacks any true institutional power, to work as a delegate for the universal mass that remains nameless and unidentified but above all requires a voice. In short, her “for me” lacks the transforming power that allows it to blur the line between the subjective and the objective. It lacks the power by which those in power are able to speak for themselves by pretending to speak for everyone.

When “for me” is used for other reasons than simply stating the obvious, it serves only the small self. It subverts our chance for intimacy, and thus for real Harmony, because it seeks to wipe away differences – not appreciate them. This is compounded by the fact that people’s “for me” tends to jump all over the map of practice and thought. It jumps according to one’s fears, one’s pride, and one’s ignorance. No true end to the Same/Other dialectic is achieved, no real reconciliation of subject and object is achieved, and all that remains is a shallowness or a superficiality that both feeds off of and fuels an ego that is reified in the maintenance of one’s habitual ways of being.

What the student fails to take part of in my example is the suspension of the egocentrism that most likely has been ruling her life up until then. The decision to not participate in that suspension, or the unwillingness or the inability to participate in the suspension, causes a decrease in the awareness she as a human being has at her disposal – the awareness needed to create more intimacy in her life, to build firmer relationships, to gain in compassion, wisdom, and love. In short, while we may think that the “for me” suffix is the gateway to social harmony, it may in fact be its opposite. It may actually cause distance between people, ideas, and things, and thereby allow us to not engage things as fully as we can or as we should. This is how we should interpret the example of the student that offers up her own version of tai-no-henko. It is a disengagement from the training, from the learning process, and from the sensei/deshi dynamic. The suspension of egocentric practices is central to Budo training. As the sensei/deshi relationship is at the heart of Budo training, the suspension of egocentric practices is at the heart of that relationship. That said, we should be able to confront the differences in others in such a way that we are actually affected by them. This, I hold, is the seeding process of Love. The noting of difference must come before the appreciation of difference.

Another example: I am now confronted with an “equal,” a person not under a social contract with myself, and the topic of tai-no-henko comes up. Still, though we are peers, we are held apart by the “for me”

suffix: What in the world can we talk about? How in the world can we affect each other? What chance of intimacy is there? Are we not to doomed to say the following:

Person A: "This is how I do tai-no-henko."

Person B: "Oh, this is how I do tai-no-henko."

Person A: "Oh."

Are we motivated to say anything at all? Is this not the case, because every bit of discussion is going to end in an already predetermined relativistic philosophy of "for me" – what I have called the "I'm okay, you're okay" position? If it does, this would not be a very exiting moment of contact – meaning it would not be filled with the emotional and intellectual investments that mark us both as humans and as humans within a relationship. No Love, and certainly no Harmony, can be sown from that. For Harmony to exist, things must blend, things must mix, and things must engage each other. This conversation, rather, looks like a bad date. What is missing here is the chance for intimacy. What is here is two egos unwilling to risk anything of themselves. What is here is two egos that would only "open up" under the guarantee that every contact with the outside world would garner no more affect than as if they remained closed to that world.

While fear, pride, and ignorance is undoubtedly at the root of the hostilities we all would denounce as far as the Same/Other dialectic is concerned, these said things are not necessarily addressed by the egocentrism that can so easily be housed within the "for me" position. Therefore, if fear is the issue, we should work to reconcile with fear – work to cultivate fearlessness. If pride is the issue, we should work to reconcile with pride – work to cultivate humility. If ignorance is the issue, we should work to reconcile with ignorance – work to cultivate wisdom. This is the age-old formula, found in ancient traditions all over the world, and it is the formula found in Budo. However, it is not the formula found in the New Age remnants still floating around our discipline or in the gross misinterpretations of East Asian thought that many still use to transmit the Budo of today.

To be sure, subjectivism and relativism have their own forefathers in Western thought, but mostly these two philosophies are coming into the Aikido world through a loose affiliation with Buddhist thought. As always, loose affiliation only leads to superficiality, which only leads to misunderstanding. What folks most often misunderstand, when they use the Middle Way as an expression of subjectivism or of relativism, is that the Middle Way was from its inception a rejection of at least two other ways. The Buddha did the Way of Yoga. He rejected it. He rejected it not because it was not "for him," he rejected it because it was inconsistent with its own stated aims. In contemporary language, the Buddha felt the various practices that were making up his yogic training did the opposite of what they said they were trying to do. There is no "for me" in Buddhist thinking. Buddhism's position on non-attachment and on the subjective nature of reality do not equate to what we see going on in Western philosophy's Relativism and Subjectivism. All one has to do is some real Zen training, with a real Zen monk, to learn how little value and meaning is actually afforded to the "me" of "for me" within Buddhist thought.

Referring us back to my first example – the female student learning tai-no-henko: If I as an instructor would hold the high ground of "for me," and seek to enforce the social contract contained within the sensei/deshi relationship, I would be forced to impose myself upon the student. In this act, I would reduce her to nothing. And I would only be reinforcing the idea that while all views may be equal, power itself determines what is more equal than others. Her only options then: continue in silent disagreement or submit. This of course is what most would do and think should be done – even those that may in other cases hold a "for me" attitude. However, this would have me acting in a way that I would be guilty of the charges I am attempting to address here.

Rather, we can indeed use the Buddha's method of determining qualitative values. We can and should look for consistency within our given perspective, assumptions, needs, and desires. When I teach this student tai-no-henko, and should said lesson come to the point described above, I am not supposed to say, "Okay, do it your way." nor am I supposed to say, "No, you do it my way or you leave." I am supposed to all over gain, no matter how new this person is to the art, and no matter how many times I have had to do so before, review my own perspective, my own assumptions, my own needs, and my own desires. I am supposed to all over again reflect deeply upon my version of tai-no-henko and see if it remains consistent with itself. This I do WITH the student. Moreover, this the student and I do in regards to her own position as well. In this way, as a teacher, I impart to the student both the importance of and the means to practice critical thinking. That is to say, I teach tai-no-henko at the same time that I am teaching how to learn. I also respect her and her perspective by having it be equal to mine in the act of putting both perspectives on the table. I do not ever say or suggest that my perspective cannot be put on the table next to hers. By these actions I also build the intimacy between her and I – I sow the seeds of fearlessness, humility, and wisdom, and eventually Harmony. If my way of tai-no-henko proves to be inconsistent, then I correct it according to the truths she brought before me. If my way proves to be more consistent, then she makes the corrections toward her own perspective – which always remains hers. Either way we affect each other. In addition, as a teacher, I have truly made the art of teaching a technology of the Self. That is to say, teaching actually remains a part of learning and of developing. As a deshi, she too has truly made the art of learning a technology of the Self. This she does by engaging fully within the sensei/deshi dynamic. The "for me" position allows for none of this to happen.

So, yes, I say there are ways to do Shiho Nage wrong. There are ways that Shiho Nage can be inconsistent within itself (that is to say, inconsistent with its own perspective, its own assumptions, its own needs, and its own desires). In saying that, I do not have to buy into the aggression and the hostility of the Same/Other dialectic. In saying that, I do not have to cultivate more fear, pride, or ignorance, nor the disrespect and violence that follow from there. In saying that, I can denote an actual qualitative value and reject things not as "for me" but as they are. In this way, I can also say that while Aikido may be infinite in its expression, not everything that is expressed is Aikido.

When we are putting our positions on the table, confronting each other's position and our own positions "as is", not as "for me," we are engaging in a practice of intimacy, we are taking the risk of opening up, we are refining what we think and believe through the impetus of a relationship, and by this, we grow individually as we grow in our intimacy with others. "For me" Aikido is an escapism we should avoid at all costs. We should not have to ignore others and/or ask them to ignore us in order that we remain civil with those we meet along this journey. Providing a person, so that they provide us in return, with a blanket of legitimacy, one by which we never have to consider each other for a second after our initial glances, is no way to bring about the harmony Aikido longs for.