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The Dark Nights of Spiritual Maturity by David M. Valadez

In order to elaborate upon certain points, our teachers often speak of stages of training. Some categorical breakdowns of Budo are quite common; some are not. Some are often talked about; some are seldom talked about. Nevertheless, whatever divisions we are using to bring attention to some point we deem significant, we must always keep in mind that such breakdowns are purely subjective. They do not really exist outside of an experience that is brought about by the adoption of a particular perspective. The stages we experience are by our own designs. In truth, Budo is stageless. However, this is not to suggest that such breakdowns are without purpose. Some serve us quite well.

While not so much a matter of clear-cut levels, Iseri Shihan often used to speak on issues of “spiritual maturity.” Maturity, like stages, implies some sort of progression; a movement from one point toward a more evolved or refined point. In looking at Budo training from this perspective, I think it is important that we do not let the ego be caught up on the word "maturity." Sensei, of course, was not referring to folks that suck their thumb at age twenty-eight when he noted that someone carried within them an aspect that he would label “spiritually immature.” Rather, in its most simplest form, Sensei was referring to a process by which one travels from a state of being that is out of harmony with Budo practice to a state of being that is in harmony with Budo practice. Sensei held that as the body most obviously matures through training, going from weak to strong for example, the spirit too demonstrates a progress from immaturity to maturity. This progress is noted by many contrasts; many progressions from one point to more evolved or refined points.

When we first come to training, we often experience a stage of euphoria. It is the time when we love everything about Aikido. We are excited to be at class. We have “finally found what it is we have been looking for all of our lives.” We gain joy from being near our peers and our teachers. We love the costume, we love the atmosphere, and we love the way we feel after class. Our lungs feel clearer. Our bodies feel more flexible. Our headaches disappear. Our backaches diminish. Our range of motion increases. Etc. We read about Aikido, we watch Aikido, and mentally we seem to only bounce back and forth between anticipating our next class and actually being there. Aikido preoccupies a great deal of our time, our thought, and our energy. At this stage, the pleasure of training is as much a marker of our practice as it is a motivation for our practice.

As great as this euphoric stage may sound, it is a very spiritually immature stage. This is because any euphoria the student is likely to feel at the beginning is almost entirely based upon a misunderstanding of the art and of what the training involves. Such euphoria thus comes, for the most part, from a juxtaposition

of one's desires and one's delusions – things a person holds before and regardless of the training. This stage, more times than not, is plagued with ideas of quick and easy learning, of mastery being inevitable, of fulfilling fantasies of violence, etc. It is a stage more supported by Hollywood myths of martial arts and ethnocentric reactions to the exotica of other cultures than it is by actual reason and/or experience.

On the other hand, though born in ignorance, fueled in desire, and sustained in delusion, this stage is also the soil out of which a seed of spiritual maturity may grow. There is a ratio of intensity to gain concerning euphoria and its relation to maturity. That is to say: The quality and the level of the spiritual maturity gained as we come to realize how euphoria is irrelevant to the training process is related to how great our attachment levels were to having pleasure be the main marker and motivation for our training. Unfortunately, this ratio is only one out of a possible two that may be present. The other ratio that may be present exists between intensity and failure (i.e. cessation of one's training). In this ratio, the same transformative energy is equally at work; only it may end up working toward our cessation of training, not toward reconciliation in our training.

Prolonged and intense training is of such a nature that the futility and irrelevance of all desires and delusions come to our attention eventually. Euphoria then, as a marker and motivation for training, comes to eventually be placed in a state of serious doubt as we come to face more moments where training is needed but pleasure is completely absent. If at such moments we are able to reconcile the false position that at first appeared viable to us through our habitual use of ego-attachment, we will proceed to spiritually mature as we enter other stages of self-refinement. Yet, if we are unable to undergo the task of seriously doubting what should be seriously doubted, reconciliation between the joys and needs of training will forever elude us. The pressure to halt our training rises equally with the pressure to find reconciliation in our training.

Spiritually speaking, and following Nietzsche, what does not kill us makes us stronger. As our habitual ways of being, our ego-attachments, our delusions, etc., are brought to our attention via the training, our chance for reconciliation and thus for spiritual maturity is at hand. The incongruence between our current state of Self and the requirements of continued practice create the opportunity for spiritual maturity as they create the need for spiritual maturity. Such moments are charged or pressurized with great transformative energy, and this energy increases or decreases in correspondence with how much resistance we hold toward the maturing process.

Without reconciliation, the several means by which our euphoria was first supported will come to produce in us states that are quite opposite to joyfulness. These new states lend themselves to resisting the training process even further and thus they are often strong motivations for quitting. Our own authorship of such motivations escapes our conscious attention, and we are left facing only their "reasonableness." Such motivators, unless distractions can enter into our training, exponentially increase in intensity as the years go on. For example, ideas of quick and easy learning can transform into boredom and impatience, notions of mastery being inevitable can turn into feelings of being unworthy, of frustration, and even depression, while fantasies of violence can become great moments of fear and repulsiveness, etc.

Those that can practice reconciliation at the end of the euphoric stage will most likely go on to reconcile many other aspects of their heart/mind (and their body) as it relates to continued training as a whole. This is the path of spiritual maturity. This process of reconciliation following reconciliation is the training, the practice of Budo. As for those of us that cannot so easily progress in this manner, a couple of options stand out for us as the ratio of intensity to cessation increases. Of course, many of us will opt to halt our

training. Others of us will continue training as we opt to divert energy that could go toward self-transformation and thus toward spiritual maturity to resisting change or maintaining the status quo.

Of the former, if we halt training early enough, we will be able to brush past all of the early gains of euphoria. The early sense of fulfillment, and even the minor accomplishments that brought us a given sense of personal growth, will be ignored and/or be seen as having never taken place. It will be as if there is no, nor ever was a, relationship between these things and the training. Minds will easily alter in their position, moving from, “I’ve finally found what I’ve been looking for all of my life,” to “I’m not sure Aikido was ever right for me.” After quitting, some of us may speak of restarting our training later, though the When and Why of such training will never reach a practical end. Thus, the mind will be able to fully disengage from the training but do so in a way that cessation is understood in a more positive light. This positive sense is vital to the overall disengagement of the training process and to the means by which the habitual mind maintains the status quo concerning its level of spiritual maturity (or lack thereof).

Of the latter group, the group of practitioners that opt to forestall opportunities for reconciliation but push on in their practice, a kind of spiritual stubbornness marks them. This stubbornness, like the euphoria that preceded it, is also a state of spiritual immaturity. Pride influences this stubbornness the most. Though humility lies upon the horizon, stuck in issues of pride, practicing various forms of resistance, we only work to charge the ratio of intensity to cessation. While of course this increases the quality of our potential reconciliation (should it come), the chance for such reconciliation decreases as the intensity levels of such moments become almost unbearable. Training, at best, feels like pushing a great stone up a hill, or dragging a great weight through a quagmire.

With the euphoria long gone, when we enter this stage of resistance, we are not without accomplishments, nor even without a sense of accomplishment. We are not ignorant of what we are experiencing, and/or even what we are supposed to be experiencing. We can see some direction in our training. We can attain goals and capture important details. Moreover, through such things, we even gain a certain level of satisfaction.

Unfortunately, because we have yet to reconcile our pride and our resistance to the training, because we have not yet cultivated humility and non-attachment in our practice, this sense of accomplishment and this level of satisfaction come to dominate our training in the same way that euphoria once did. That is to say, a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction become as much markers of our practice as they are motivations for our practice. In this way, the reduction of one’s practice to the omote aspects of the art is almost guaranteed, since it is these aspects that can be easily qualified according to such standards and not the ura aspects.

When such standards become impossible, or do not deliver as much a sense of accomplishment and/or satisfaction as they once did, we will often search for distractions which will allow us to further forestall the transformation that is both possible and needed. Such distractions could be things like rank, title, fame, social power, etc. Unfortunately, or fortunately, the process of spiritual maturity is not fully captured by technical matters, and institutions of cultural capital can offer nothing in regards to spiritual cultivation. Technical matters are more vessels for the expression of transformation than they are means for transformation. The institutions of rank and title, etc., are merely great obstacles to the Way when they become distractive. As such, though it may appear that we are loosely addressing great parts of our training, when we are in this stage even greater parts are going ignored. In many ways, because of how our practice is being reduced to the omote aspects or the distractions of training (i.e. technical accomplishment, rank, title, etc.), it will be as if our practice never really commences. Ironically, depending upon our innate capacity for resistance and/or to be distracted, we can remain in this stage for a very long time, perhaps never moving past it, as much of the institution of Aikido does support it fully.

Still, in this same moment, like when we faced the irrelevance of euphoria, as we are facing the irrelevance of accomplishment and satisfaction we are facing the same chance and need to spiritually mature. These times when the irrelevance of our ego-attachments hits us like a hammer are like the Dark Nights of St. John. These are the moments when our chance for growth lies only through a darkness that is primed to beleaguer us. It is the time when spiritual, mental, and physical hope seems impossible. It is when we are required to persist in our own spiritual maturity or to relax in the darkness of spiritual slumber. We can only avoid these times in our training for so long. Our facing of them is inevitable. It is better then to embrace them. Better to see how our resistance toward them is charging them with the energy that is working against us. Better to see how through them we can work toward ourselves. Better to see how these dark nights are very much a part of the process of spiritual maturity and thus of the practice of Budo.