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Nostalgic and Romantic Tendencies in our Training

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Lately, in one form or another, there has been a lot of discussion on the prominent role referring to a golden past, or to a single extraordinary person, etc., plays in our training. It seems like such an easy, and therefore benevolent, thing to do – to construct a relevant narrative that suits our understanding of our relation to the past, based upon some life experiences, a limited number of facts, and a whole lot of assumptions, and then to seek to put it all beyond question by employing nostalgic and/or romantic energies. To be sure, no matter how “settled” the various discussions that have taken up this topic have tried to make things appear, the critiques of such actions that have recently been raised remain vital to our on-going understanding of what it is we are claiming to do and to the transmission of those actions.

It is always easy to tear apart the various narratives that people use to make sense of their own actions – easy because the supporting experiences are often not shared and because assumption always leaves a lot of room for contradicting facts to play havoc on a position when one is concerned with what is reasonable and what is not. Not so easy is to denounce, reject, or to analyze the nostalgia and/or the romanticism that are the true structural supports for these kinds of narratives. Emotion-laden, these structural supports work in the way they are supposed to – to put key elements beyond question, beyond doubt, and beyond re-thinking. However, is this a good thing? Can something that remains beyond questioning, doubt, and re-thinking every truly be benevolent?

In my opinion, we should reject nostalgic and/or romantic references in our training. Rather, we should let our training be both its own voice and its own reason – its own justification. By doing this, the depth we are seeking can truly come to us. It can come no other way. Personally, if I would find myself saying, “Osensei said this,” or “Osensei did this,” or “My teacher did this,” or “My teacher said this,” and I was not simply providing a referent for training and/or an orientation or a context to practice, I would feel fraudulent. Why? Because it is clear that if I am needing to use the experience of another to legitimate a supposed experience of my own, then said experience is truly not my own. Deep down, at a structural level, nostalgia and romanticism, when used in an argumentative way, belie a gap between what one is doing and what one is saying. We turn to such things when we are ourselves are not so sure about what it is we are doing; we turn to such things when our actions themselves offer doubt instead of surety; we turn to such things when the purity of martial execution is void of the clarity that marks all life and death situations.

I am not against tradition or historiography. Nor am I even against lineage and the homage it is due. Rather, I am critical of the role that these things often come to play in our training when we use them in the role of justifier concerning what it is we do and do not do. This role reduces tradition and historiography to the nostalgic and/or romantic, and therefore makes such discourse if not dangerous then

at least suspicious. (Note: These labels are not a products of inaccuracy. Nostalgia and romanticism are not reserved solely for those historical or traditional narratives that are not accurate or truthful. The issue of concern here pertains to how historical or traditional narratives are often used, or better said, misused in our training.)

Aikido is now increasingly an institutional matter the world over. Fitting with the nature of the institution, Aikido has undergone a severe dose of reductionism. These reductions have taken place within the art's basic curriculum, within the art's pedagogy, within the art's philosophy, within the sensei/deshi dynamic, and even within the art's religious worldview. As a result, some aikidoka who are either knowingly or unknowingly uncomfortable with the reductions that are taking place have felt inclined to look to other Budo traditions to gain, or rather to regain, insights now hidden or lost from Aikido. Examples of this are seen in cases where Iaido is practiced along side Aikido, where weapons work from other martial traditions is practiced along side Aikido, where striking arts are practiced along side Aikido, where ground-fighting arts are practiced along side Aikido, etc. For many, one identity crisis has simply given rise to another one. While the intention may be one of regaining something lost, the sum is often nothing more than eclecticism in need of a justification. In the search for such justifications, nostalgic and romantic discourses simultaneously oversimplify matters as they put everything beyond question and reflection.

One such oversimplification pertains to the role atemi should (or should not) play in Aikido proper. The larger question of how arts like Karate are to relate to Aikido can also become relevant. For many aikidoka, atemi, and the arts that are predominated by striking, are simple processes. Striking is so simple a process that all of Aikido's "what if" questions can end with atemi as their answer. Question: "What if the attacker resists against your Ikkyo?" Answer: "Use atemi." Since atemi becomes the smallest unit of tactical measurement for such folks, it never occurs to anyone to ask the next question: "What if your attacker parries or counters or does not react at all to your atemi?" For some, atemi is the end of the road, the cure-all. Atemi is that place where the buck must stop. This is a strange attribute to attach to any tactic, but it is even more so when we are concerned with a tactic that requires high degrees of acquired skill in order to make up for its lack of capacity to provide Control Maintenance.

In contrast to the full-proof simplicity of atemi, "officially" recognized Aikido waza are considered complex and sophisticated and thus prone to failure and/or at least to needing constant supplementation. By extension, for some, arts like Karate can somehow or in some way act as precursor to Aikido training because they are considered to be less sophisticated, less difficult, less complex, more embryonic, more basic, etc. When looked at in this way, such reasoning is exposed for the lunacy it is. However, there is much in place, or much being used, in the way of nostalgia and romanticism, which keeps such lunacy from ever becoming obvious.

Karate cannot be related to Aikido as the simple to the complex. Atemi too cannot be understood in this way in regards to Ikkyo. To be sure, Karate and atemi can almost, and often does, intuitively appear to be "embryonic," but like with all things East Asian, what is minimalistic is so, or can afford to be so, only because of the immense complexity it holds. I would propose that the apparent simplicity comes not from the art or the tactic itself, but rather from the extremely limited way in which these things are often presented (by non-practitioners and practitioners alike). Trying to hit someone, taking a swing at someone, may appear to be a simple movement, but this is not Karate or atemi. This is true in the same exact way that pulling someone off balance may appear to be simple, but this is not Aikido or kuzushi. Still, between trying to hit someone and trying to pull them off balance, the former is the more difficult. The average Joe can more readily pull someone off balance then strike his/her opponent. It is odd then that aikidoka all

over the world see striking as the tactic open to anyone no matter what his or her skill and no matter the skill of his or her opponent.

Karate involves a body/mind fusion that is side by side to Aikido in how next to impossible it is to achieve. As far as striking goes, the point is not to just hit or touch something, like the air, the bag, the board, or the brick – this is not atemi. Generally, as far as striking goes, the point is to hit the target in order to incapacitate the whole organism and/or to generate key Angles of Cancellation, while preventing the same from happening to you. This level of achievement is rarely ever seen. What is most common, and what is in fact quite easy to achieve, is the following: Hitting a target but with no real capacity to affect the whole of the organism or to generate proper Angles of Cancellation, or hitting the target with a great amount of effect but also being struck to a similar degree. (Note: The popular Aikido polemic of not needing to hit the target when employing atemi does not satisfy the concern to produce proper Angles of Cancellation and/or guarantee that atemi cannot simultaneously be used against us.)

However, most often striking training (in and outside of arts like Karate) does not operate in such a way that this is revealed. That is to say, the huge amount of failure that goes with such a difficult achievement is not normally revealed by the common training practices employed – not in Karate and certainly not in Aikido. Because it is not revealed, aikidoka think it an easy thing to do this Karate basic or to strike someone. It is like this with all basics we come to connect with Karate, it is like this with basics from any art. Stances are easy, kicks are easy, blocks are easy, parries are easy, etc., but only because we do not ask of them all that is supposed to be asked. It is like this with concepts too. For example, when we “test” for power we often test for power lightly, or we test for power in a way that all other relevant factors can be vanquished and ignored.

If we want to start understanding the inherent complexity of striking a target, stop striking air, stop calling points, stop halting contests where grappling would take over, stop hitting stationary targets that don’t hit back, stop accepting clashes as valid expressions of proper technique, stop guaranteeing affect prior to any taking place, etc. Do this, and you will very quickly learn how difficult it is to strike at a target. It is because we do not do this that we, especially as aikidoka, often deceive ourselves into believing that striking at someone is not only easier to carry out but also easy to carry out. In truth, the only easy part is deceiving ourselves into believing such a line of reasoning.

Striking in a way that is prescribed by valid tactical architectures is as difficult to do as it is to drop our nostalgic and romantic tendencies. The positions that Aikido is a “graduate-school” martial art, that Osensei’s pre-war students were not really students, and/or that Osensei had finally settled the issue on the role of atemi in our practice – all things I have seen used to justify ones position concerning atemi – become entrenched in our body/mind if we let them. Through nostalgia and romanticism, we place these positions beyond question, beyond doubt, beyond re-thinking. Through such discourse, we hide a screaming inconsistency between our own actions, thoughts, and words.

If drawing on past Karate experience works for you as a person, or as a teacher, then let it do that thing – let it do that thing without feeling the need to refer back to Osensei, Aikido’s “golden past”, the “true nature of Aikido”, or impossible to draw distinctions between pre-war and post-war Aikido, etc. Whatever our position comes to be regarding things like atemi, they should remain simply that: our position. Let us leave things where we are forced to answer for them ourselves. Let us leave things where we can always scrutinize them, put them under constant reconsideration, and have them always as topics for reflection. History justifies nothing but for the fascist. Tradition legitimates nothing but for the traditionalistic.

In addition, let us finally drop the immature assumption that victory or success is based upon tactical dilemmas and tactical solutions. Let us stop asking false questions of others and of ourselves. Let us stop asking questions like “What if my Ikkyo is resisted?” believing we are in need of a tactic that is lacking – something we can just pick up off the shelf of “things to do.” If we cannot see the falsity of such a question, then let us at least see the obviousness of the one and only true answer: “Get more skilled.” Cultivate more non-attachment toward your forms so that in your spontaneity you are not so preoccupied with Ikkyo. Cultivate more non-attachment toward your forms so that you do not need to intellectually determine when and where Ikkyo will begin, end, fail, succeed, and/or even exist at all. In this way, and in this way only, Ikkyo cannot be resisted. As Ikkyo cannot work for the fettered mind, atemi, and any other basic will not work as well.