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## **The ABCs are not Poetry** by **David M. Valadez**

The attainment of, or the training in, the physical properties of the art must be understood to be the lowest of achievements that Aikido offers before us. If we cannot attain or are not attaining these properties in a fairly quick manner, then we must seriously question both our pedagogy and our level of investment in that pedagogy. That is to say, we must become critical of a teaching paradigm and/or of a training curriculum if we cannot demonstrate reasonable technical progress via these things. As part of becoming critical of such things, we must also work to radically improve them or leave them altogether and start over, start afresh - try something different. For the moment wishing to leave the issue of personal investment aside, too many aikidoka, who are making worthy investments into a given pedagogy, are not reflective enough concerning the vitality of their transmission models. In fact, such reflection is often deemed radical, and/or it is blasted with insults of being ignorant, being insulting, being impatient, and/or being immature in the art.

Impotent pedagogies, and the tools that supporters of such pedagogies employ to denounce accurate criticisms, are often housed in the misunderstanding of seeing the base as being the heavens. Technical matters, which for the most part are merely matters of physical architecture and coordination, are wrongly being held up as the sublime and the esoteric. Because the sublime and the esoteric are noted by the rarity of those that attain it, and because these virtues are being laid upon technical matters, an impotent pedagogy is saved from criticism and/or rejection because a person's lack of results is being subsumed under the traits that are characterizing said teaching model as viable. In truth, the attainment of technical proficiency is as small a matter as the impotency of one's pedagogy is a large matter.

One of my past teachers used to compare learning a martial art to learning a language. That analogy seems to fit here as well. When we learn a language we begin by learning things like the alphabet, and then we move on to basic phonics, basic words, basic grammatical rules, basic sentence patterns, basic essay structures, etc. From there, eventually, things like philosophy and poetry are born. The physical properties of Aikido are like the alphabet of language. They are the Alpha, not the Omega. The incapacity to obtain them, and/or the great prolonging in embodying them, cannot be the facts that work to support a teaching model that is supposedly designed to transmit such things. Such omissions or delays should always point to a need for further refinement concerning how one teaches, studies, and learns, the art.

Imagine a child of two years old coming up to a great poet after a big recital, wishing to share her own joy over her own accomplishments with language. After introducing herself and shaking the poet's hand in a polite manner, the child proceeds to say, "Hey, listen, 'A, B, C, D, E, F, G...'" Imagine witnessing that. We, and even the poet, can accept that. We can even see a profundity in such an action as we are able

to witness the base upon which our art of poetry is grounded. Now imagine it being a grown woman who approaches the poet in all sincerity. With the complete use of her intellectual faculties, she sings the same Alphabet Song for the same reasons. Can we so easily see the same profundity? Does not the woman's prolonged exposure to the alphabet diminish the level of achievement she is attempting to demonstrate? Does not the singing of the Alphabet Song in fact do the opposite for the woman of what it did for the child? Does not the singing of that song demonstrate that the woman has accomplished nothing with the language? Is it not true that we are witnessing the antithesis of the art of poetry and not its base? Thus, exposure times and levels of sophistication do indeed play a role in how we should understand the potency or lack thereof of any given pedagogy.

To be sure, personal investment marks a great deal of a teaching model's capacity to transmit both basic and advanced skills. However, issues of efficiency and potency in teaching paradigms, which are not totally captured by matters of personal investment, should remain a significant concern for those interested in reaching their greatest potential. Personal investment cannot settle all issues related to transmission and/or the rate of transmission. Attempts to make basics into the end-all of training have to be questioned whenever they are lending themselves to our denial (as both sensei and deshi) of how poorly designed our teaching and training models may be.