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## **Zazen and Pain** by David M. Valadez

Deshi: It was so nice to practice zazen and Iaido on Friday. It was also interesting what you said about zazen not being relaxing meditation. I have only attended one sesshin, but at that one, the concept of pain was addressed; how pain can help to keep you to task. “So what if it hurts, everyone in the room feels pain, you still have work to do, so concentrate on that.” That is what the monk told us at that time. I find that if I am nice and comfortable on my zafu, there is a lot of noise, discussion, and fantasy - in my mind. It tends to quiet down almost immediately once pain or discomfort sets in. It is as if the work does not really begin until I can feel the pain. Then I can concentrate on the form and breath through the pain. I wonder if it would be okay to just sit on the zabuton next time - to have that point come sooner.

Sensei: I think this is a very nice way of approaching training. I think this is what training is all about actually. Looking deeper, realizing more, questioning ourselves and our perceptions, meeting ideals, starting questions with our habits or our emotional states and searching for maturity from there; rather than positing such things as ends in themselves. All Very Good!

Moreover, I think there is indeed, in our practice, a relationship with forms, ideals, training discipline, obedience, denying impulses, redirecting habits, and being uncomfortable. In terms of spiritual training, there is a point where being comfortable may not at all be what you want to be experiencing. That is true, I agree. It has been said, when training the spirit, if you are faced with two doors, one door leads to a comfortable place, and the other door leads to an uncomfortable place, you must choose the latter. I think we can say that and understand that we are not out to be masochistic and/or self-abusive, etc. When we experience pain in our zazen, or when we experience moments of being uncomfortable in our training - from being physically uncomfortable, to being emotionally uncomfortable, or intellectually uncomfortable - we often think that such things are departures from training, when in fact, the opposite is true. Often, it is only when that doorway presents itself that we begin the training - only then can we choose its course and what lies beyond that doorway, which is reconciliation. However, before that, before we realize any of that, we spend most of our time and energy trying to avoid, deny, or distract ourselves from what it is that is making us uncomfortable. With such time and energy, we place ourselves along a spectrum where reconciliation is not possible. Our only options along that spectrum are defeat - where we succumb to the pain or to being uncomfortable - or what we wrongly believe to be domination. In that latter state, we often come to practice self-righteousness, acts of incivility, hostility, aggression, vengeance, anger, violence, etc. In the former state, we come to various levels of denial, alienation, and of depression. When the monk was alerting you to the fact that the experience of pain is common and also irrelevant to the training at hand, he is through upaya attempting to free you from the various attachments that most folks commonly have to fear, pride, and ignorance - as these themselves come to support the spectrum of

defeat/domination in our training. However, is he saying that pain is what we want to generate? Is he saying, "Pain is the goal of zazen."? No, of course not, why should he advise folks to find what is already theirs. Experiencing what is already present, not disengaging from what cannot be disengaged from, is not the same thing as manufacturing something that we impulsively would reject. If you were not attached to your pain during zazen, the monk's words would have been meaningless. They make sense because we should not be attached to our pain and because we are attached to our pain for habitual reasons of fear, pride, and ignorance. In that sense, if we are attached to our pain, going to seek after pain or seeking to generate pain, may be simply another attachment toward our pain - or by extension just another example our habitual way of reacting toward fear, pride, and ignorance. How does this all relate to my notion of the two doors?

The monk's words, and our discussion on Friday, have already reconciled your previous notion of pain. You know already that it is part of your practice and not antithetical to it. Therefore, you should move on. That door may no longer be the door of true un-comfortableness. Where that door may actually lie now may be in the sense you may have that suggests that there is something to accomplish in zazen practice - that the practice itself leads to something - that it is a matter of "first 'x,' then 'y'." After all, isn't this why pain was such a poor experience in the first place? Isn't this why things like pain and being uncomfortable "force" us to believe that we are not training during such times?

We believe that the training leads somewhere, and we believe that moments of "no growth," and/or "moments of slow growth," of pain, of injury, of being bored, of feeling uncomfortable, etc., interrupt that process and are thus antithetical to that process. We do not see that these things are themselves created by us, by our own perspective that holds that the training is about traveling from point A to point B, as if moving down the road a bit. When Dogen stressed that zazen - the practice - is Awakening, he was saying something contrary to this position of traveling from point A to point B, as if moving down the road a bit. It is really this notion of having zazen lead to Awakening that we must practice non-attachment toward, and it is this non-attachment, or this working toward this non-attachment that may be your true door of being uncomfortable.

From this point of view, experiencing pain as an interruption of zazen is equal to seeking pain in order to hone one's zazen. Thus, I would rather have you remain on the cushion and work more to see the training as the Awakening itself. Work to discover what that may mean to you. You may find that you may be more "uncomfortable" by remaining physically "comfortable" in this specific instance - and that might do a lot more for you than you can currently guess. Please stay on the cushion/mat when at zazen. Please feel free to experiment with such things differently when at home however.

Deshi: But it must be true that zazen leads to something. It must be true that zazen benefits us in some way, or we would not be doing it. Right? Instead, we could do forty minutes of jumping jacks or just stand still with our hands behind our back. Sitting is beneficial. Right? If not, why do it if it is not leading us somewhere? Though our intention may be not to have a goal, good things may nevertheless come if one sits. Isn't this correct?

Sensei: Well that is the issue, is it not? There seems to be a paradox, if not an outright incorrect assumption in what I am suggesting. And that stands in contrast to your position. The position you offer appears to make a great deal of sense - but that is why we are comfortable in holding it. We want there to be some reason for our training, we want there to be something to what we are doing, we want our practice to stand if not above then at least differently from what others are doing or from what else we can be doing. In that route, we find a place for our anger, our self-righteousness, our hostility, our self-alienation,

our depression, etc. In that understanding, we are merely working through our fear, our pride, and our ignorance as we usually do. Therein is our lack of faith, our fear that we are wasting our time. In there is our lust for power, our pride that we are standing above others because we seek the humble and mature spirit. In there is our delusion, our ignorance by which we forever keep the practice external to ourselves. Tradition says, that if you believe that your zazen can gain you something, then it will be exactly as if you are doing jumping jacks or as if you are standing still with your hands behind your back. As for "good things" - good things come and bad things come. They come, and they go, whether we sit or not. The zazen that "brings" us things is the practice that is not a matter of being - it is the practice that we have yet to reconcile with the totality of our person. The zazen that "benefits us" is the practice that is grounded in the falseness of the subject/object dichotomy. Such a zazen is like the breath we must will ourselves into taking. Though we inhale such a breath, the sense of suffocating is not lost. To see zazen as delivering us something is like to relate to God as if we are relating to some sort of genie. It is like wishing when we could be praying. In the very wish, we have in fact demonstrated and reified our separation from God. When we see zazen as a practice we participate in for reasons of benefit, we only demonstrate our separation from that practice, the superficiality of that practice in our lives. It is like this with all of Budo, with all of our Aikido training. When it is something we do, it is not something we are.

Deshi: Is having "non-attachment" not caring or not seeking benefit while we are sitting?

Sensei: "Not Caring" is apathy; it is a loss of intimacy, a disengagement from what is occurring. This is not non-attachment. Non-attachment is reconciliation with fear, pride, and ignorance. Thus, non-attachment is the opposite of "not caring," because it increases our chance for intimacy, and for engaging ourselves with what is occurring. This happens because our ego no longer acts as a "filter" between reality and ourselves.

If I may say, you can for now just keep this all in mind. When your zazen practice - as it does for everyone - runs out of places where it can benefit you, or when it curses you more than it is blessing you, when it costs you more than you are receiving in return, these ideas of suffocation, of wishing, and of separation may be a light by which you can go further or deeper in your experience of the practice. Sometimes it is good just to let things settle for a while. The seeds have been planted and you have tended to them nicely thus far by raising these issues.