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Silence and the Mystification of Waza by David M. Valadez

The practice of silence has always held a religious significance in the cultivation of the self. Whereas silence may be dangerous to the political sides of our existence, to the spiritual sides of our being, silence is more than golden - it is vital. The vitality of silence itself, however, is based upon the proper placement and usage of the practice. Silence must be reserved for those practices and/or issues that are truly beyond words. Otherwise, silence can become spiritually impotent as a technology for self-cultivation. An improperly placed silence may merely work to increase other sides of our being, such as the aforementioned political side. An improperly practiced silence may do nothing for us spiritually, or it may do something negative as it can easily lead to regression and/or disengagement in one's process of spiritual maturation. One can hide from oneself and from others a great many things that are still in need of reconciliation when silence is misused.

Traditionally, silence has been a type of bridge in Budo practice. To continue with this metaphor, silence is a spiritual tool with which one is able to span the apparent gap thought to exist between the omote and ura elements of any given art. There are of course other techniques that aid in this "bridging." As one such technique, a silence that is used to span the apparent differences between omote and ura aspects requires that it possess its own integrity and that there is actually some depth to penetrate and/or some gap to bridge. That is to say, there must be a clear practicality to one's silence (i.e. it must do something), and that practicality must orient itself toward a given end (i.e. it must do what one says it is doing). There was a time when such a description of silence's role in Budo self-cultivation would have been a mere truism. Such a description would have been a re-stating of the obvious. In relation to Aikido, that time was a time when there actually was an ura to Aikido's omote for the majority of aikidoka practicing. That time was a time when there was actually something beyond, behind, or deeper than Aikido's technical exercises. For many of us, that time is no more. For many of us, ura does not exist.

Today, for the most part, technical matters once clearly understood as omote aspects of the art dominate Aikido praxis. Teachers are unwilling and/or incapable of playing the role of spiritual mentor. For many of us, coaching seems to be enough. Students are unwilling and/or incapable of being spiritually mentored. For many of us, participation and/or attendance seem to be enough. Spiritual practices (which have always been free of religious and/or doctrinal preferences and/or monopolizations) that have traditionally played a role, in Budo training, such as zazen, ritual, purification, prayer, etc., have today been deemed threatening as they have ironically come to be considered irrelevant and/or without transformative power. Today, through the use of language games, through the use of metaphors, analogies, and similes, technical architectures have come to be not only worthy replacements of such aforementioned traditional

practices but evolutions of such things. Moreover, today, the choreographed repetition of technical exercises has for the most part superseded the capacity for spontaneous expression as the mark of one's skill and/or maturity in the art. Through these transitions, and many more like them, the omote aspects of the art have come to dominate both pedagogy and transmission. Aikido waza is at the center of seminars, tests, classes, camps, dojo membership, rank, title, federation alliance, etc. The only attempt to justify such partings with the past is the mantra-like repetition of the slogan, "Aikido is not just about techniques." Unfortunately, this chant may have little potency to justify anything when it is being for the most part uttered in training environments that consist of technical training and little else.

Through a series of events, Aikido's varied history shows a general trend toward a rejection of or ignorance toward its ura aspects. However, through that same series of events, Aikido in general has yet to lose its sense that it should have deeper aspects and thereby various means to reach them. As such, though its ura elements are nearly extinct today, silence, as a traditional bridge to such elements, still holds a prominent place in Aikido training. Now however, unlike in the past, silence is mostly attached to the practicing and transmitting of tactical architectures that are today stretched thin in an attempt to fulfill both the omote and the ura aspects of Modernity's current version of the art. Of course, this "stretching thin" is carried out in vain because though the human spirit can express itself in various forms of one type or another, no form in and of itself can cause that spirit to manifest, to mature, to refine, to heal, to be nurtured, and/or to be cultivated. Hence the position: If there is nothing more than techniques to one's training, there is nothing more to one's training.

The omote and ura elements of a tradition are supposed to be interdependent. Traditionally, they are symbiotic toward each other. They support each other as they give meaning to each other. When one element is dead, the other element dies as well. When one element is missing, one cannot use the remaining element to make up for both. When one element is missing, both are gone. Therefore, we must note, the tactical architectures (i.e. omote) that are grounded by an ura that remains viable (as in the past) do not make up the same type of omote as the tactical architectures that are in need of an ura that is now extinct (as today). This difference must have a profound affect concerning how silence must have once been practiced in comparison to how it is often practiced today. We cannot afford to not understand such subtle differences and/or the consequences of such differences. This seems particularly true when we are concerning ourselves with concrete performance levels and how practices like silence are affecting those levels.

As was said above, today, silence is attached to the transmission and learning of tactical architectures. Through such an attachment, it is not so much that silence comes to take on a practical role as it is that the forms come to take on a mystical role. Undoubtedly, this effect is related to the popular positions that practicing Aikido waza will make one non-violent, that Aikido waza will make a person one with the Universe, that Aikido waza is Moving Zen, that Aikido waza are purification rites, etc. Through such rhetoric, Aikido waza have become more talismanic than applicable. The mystification of waza has done a lot to hide the loss of a true ura and also to make more of Aikido's omote elements. What is problematic about such things is not that silence no longer points toward anything, but that through mystification, waza training no longer tends to establish sound physical skills.

The way that Aikido mystifies its waza is quite contrary to how the rest of the world addresses the issue of physical architectures as they are related to matters of biomechanical soundness. Whereas an Aikido instructor may use the practice of silence to redefine the neglect of technical correction into something more benevolent, an Olympic gymnastics coach, for example, will correct and instruct according to every means available. For the Aikido instructor of today, having invested in the current understanding of the

art's omote and ura aspects, architectural matters are raised to a near-sublime status – such that even the most simplistic applications of the physical sciences are re-understood (i.e. misunderstood) to be “beyond words.” The Olympic coach, on the other hand, though often dealing with movement that is more complex and/or more subtle, mystifies nothing and is thus able to take full advantage of the current advances in biomechanics, physiology, sports medicine, computer technology, etc. As a result, activity-based disciplines such as gymnastics continue to evolve, mature, refine, and overall better themselves as the performance envelopes of their members acquire these types of progression at a personal level. Aikido, on the other hand, it could be argued, does not so clearly demonstrate such progress. In fact, one could strongly suggest, Aikido overall is demonstrating a regression, not a progression, of individual performance levels.

The transmission gaps between teachers and students seem to be broadening. Such regressions become troubling in the face of prior and important generations now parting from this world. A wake-up call would seem fitting, as there does seem to be a relationship between said regression, the improper usage of silence, and the mystification of Aikido's tactical architectures. However, because there is too much current cultural capital sown up in the mystification of tactical architectures, a wake-up call seems doubtful. The demystification of Aikido exercises is too large a stake for too many of us, as we have come to find a benefit in seeing certain mundane elements as being beyond words. This is because seeing Aikido waza as “other worldly” allows some of us to posit that our own lack of technical embodiment, that our own shallowness of understanding, that our own incapacity to communicate, etc., also do not exist in this world. We are able to hide our incompetence from others and from ourselves in the silences we are misapplying. Thus, much is hidden in the silence that plagues and in the end inhibits the acquiring of concrete details in Aikido. When one is able to connect a lack of technical embodiment, a shallowness of understanding, and an incapacity to communicate, with something that is supposed to be beyond words, mystical, and benevolent, having things that can be said go unsaid will always be the desired-for option. Unfortunately, when such an option is taken, a regression in performance envelopes is the likely result.