

Netherlands Ki Society

Question & Answer Session – C. Curtis

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I know that it's always slightly more difficult, or sometimes very much more difficult, for you to understand some aspects of the teaching, particularly the verbal parts, because we have a different language. I'm sorry that I don't speak German or Dutch, but you are sort of stuck with me, so we have to somehow accommodate this. And this is one reason why I want to make these podcasts and transcripts, because you can not only listen to it again, if there is something that you don't understand, but there is also the transcript, so you can read this in English. If you don't speak the best of English, then reading can sometimes help. So I hope you do take advantage of this.

I started out talking yesterday about two different kinds of teaching that is always offered. There is the utility kind of practice that aims at making you a better person. It is designed to make you calmer, more confident, more graceful, and more effective in business and social situations. And there is nothing wrong with that. That is sort of the beginning or basic level of what draws most people to practice, which is to improve them selves in some way. We find ourselves lacking, and feel unsatisfied, so we come to Aikido to fulfill this dream, this hope, this requirement, this need to fill the void. We want to get rid of suffering and be happy.

That is a very low level of motivation for human beings, but it is common with all of us. Unfortunately, the very desire to eliminate the negative and accentuate the positive is the problem itself. In other words, we were all born complete. Even though we look different to each other, have different shapes and sizes, born in different countries, different races, different genders, we are all born complete. Every single human being, even if they are born without their toes or and arm or leg, are complete. There is nothing missing. So why, then, aren't we satisfied?

Unfortunately we do find ourselves wanting, and we find ourselves wanting because we compare ourselves with other people. We live through other people. We live in a world in which everything we do is motivated by how other people see us. Of course that is materialism. You might think, "Well, I'm not materialistic. I'm spiritual," or "I am a martial artist." But what we do is we leave the sort of crassly material behind, just chasing money or boys or girls or whatever, and then we come into Aikido and we proceed to chase the *waza*. And then when we have the *waza* down, we start chasing enlightenment, chasing waking up. We start chasing the deeper understanding. This is the same thing, folks! It is the mistake itself. Everything is already complete just the way it is.

That must be what we discover when we practice. If we truly engage in practice, what we discover is that everything is complete already. Nothing needs to be attained. There is, in fact, nothing to attain, because it's all here already. But we might not experience that. Or maybe we don't notice that, because we are too busy being distracted by our thoughts, our emotions, and the sense data that is constantly bombarding us, and choosing between what we like and what we don't like. So we learn to practice. Practice means just being here, now, and not being distracted by the preference for one kind of sensation, thought, or emotion.

You might think that sounds like Zen, or something like that. And it probably does, but it is still quite necessary. If you are not able to understand this, not able to be this, then you can't really do Aikido. You can't possibly be relaxed in a situation where you are being challenged without awareness, noticing, and acceptance, non-preference. And that's all Aikido is, accepting this for exactly the way it is already.

I mentioned the other night the four aspects of this practice.

- 1) Show up, which means be present.
- 2) Open your mind and heart (heart/mind same thing – in Japanese the word is “*kokoro*”) to everything, no matter what it looks like, sounds like, tastes like, whatever it is you open to it.
- 3) Serve the moment without editing. You don't try to make it the way you want it. Just be present for it. Be an ongoing response to what may be the suffering of other people, or the needs of other people.
- 4) Just accept whatever develops out of this.

So that's our practice. I started by saying how that some people have expressed to me that they don't understand what I am saying due to the language difficulty. Of course there are native English speakers who also say they don't know what I am talking about! So this question and answer session is a time I always want to make for you because I want to give you a chance to ask about what you don't understand. Some of you come up and ask me privately. But I really like it best if you ask me in front of other people. Because it changes the nature of attention in you, and also because any question you have is a question everybody has. They just may not know it at the time. So when they hear the question and answer then they grow too. When only one person asks, ten thousand people hear because it goes on the Internet. So it is a very valuable and powerful tool that I want to encourage you to use.

Sensei: So you just said that level one is utility. Could you describe level two?

Sorry about that if it wasn't clear. Actually I did describe level two. I just didn't identify it as

that. Everything I was talking about towards the end was level two. I mean, following the four aspects of training, being in the present and not requiring anything, is level two. No hopes, no dreams, no pre-conditions, no demands. Can you imagine beginning training with a teacher with no expectations, no hopes, no dreams? A good teacher will tell you at a certain point, (maybe not right away, because these hopes, dreams, fears, concerns, needs are going to be, to some degree, addressed and handled through Aikido practice), sooner or later a good teacher will tell you, "Oh by the way, you don't get any of that. That's all just a projection. So let it go." That's why the first book I wrote was a training manual, how to improve yourself. And the second book I wrote was called "Letting Go."

Student: Thank you.

Student: Sensei, there is a change I noticed in the reading of Norito after Sokushin no Gyo, how you did it a few years ago, and now. I experienced, in the beginning, it was like it was done for the whole group, and now I have the feeling it is like a prayer for you personally and we should do it together with you.

I don't know what you are talking about. No, I know what you are talking about, but what I mean is ... I mean the answer to your question about "does it change" is yes. Of course it has changed. However, whether it was at one time something I was doing for other people and now I am doing this for myself, I have no idea. I just read it. Maybe you are right. I don't know. I just read it.

But I did notice, and in fact I thought of this today, since Toby Voogels has been working with it. He has a copy of the recording that I made and learned from that and from listening to me. As I did it today, I was listening as well, and I thought, "Oh, this is going to really screw Toby up." Because it's so different than the way it is on that recording. And please do it this way. You can use the DVD as a Frisbee if you like. I mean, the recording is OK. It serves its purpose. It helped Toby a lot in the beginning, right? But we don't want to be tied into something there, a certain way of doing it. It changes and develops constantly. Suzuki Sensei used to tell me again and again that reading *Norito* for him was just constantly different. And it was. It completely changed all the time. Not only depending upon his current state of mind, but the overall way that he experienced life, which is what this *Norito* is an expression of. I think it is maybe more intimate now than it was before. But I don't know what that would mean in terms of reading it for other people or for myself. I wouldn't know the difference between those or what that would mean. I'm not reading it for you guys, I am not reading it for me, I'm just reading it. That's all that's happening. Just the reading of the *Norito*.

But I do know and agree that it has changed a lot over the years and probably will continue to change.

Student: Maybe until we get back to the way you did it in the beginning?

Yeah, maybe. I don't know. And I don't worry about that. I am just grateful that it is here and that my teacher taught me to read it, and that I have the opportunity to experience it on a regular basis. Because it is transformational to experience it, just to read it. Everyone should practice it. Everyone should read *Norito*. Not just me and Toby. Toby is doing it well now, better than most any one. Of course there are only two or three other people who do this. He is certainly the very best in Holland!

OK, ask me a question I can answer.

Student: I also have a question regarding the Norito. I suppose that Norito came into existence a long time ago, and that people who read it or listened to it understood the content. And so what is the purpose of reading the Norito for a group like we are, because we don't understand anything, I think. Could you explain this please?

Yes, good question. What do you mean by "understand?"

Student: By "understand" I mean having a clue what words that are there mean.

Oh, but if I did it for you in English or even your own native language I think still you wouldn't understand in the way that I mean for you to. This kind of thing is not designed to feed that part of our self that looks for the kind of understanding you are referring to.

The word for "wisdom" in Sanskrit is "prajna." "Pra" means "pre" or "before" and "jna" means "knowledge." We use the word knowledge a lot and sometimes we are careless in the way we use it. Conventionally, knowledge is the gathering of information and the mixing and blending of it to find a proper definition and general philosophy about how things are. It has nothing to do with actually experiencing how things are. It's simply a description of how things are. It is useful for what it is, but it is not the wisdom kind of knowing. What we experience in the moment, when we are listening to *Norito* for instance, is a direct understanding, which has nothing to do with word identification.

The part of us that wants to understand intellectually is completely befuddled and frustrated by that kind of remark that I just made. We say, "Wait a minute. If I don't understand the language, the words, how can I possibly know what it's about." That's like saying you couldn't fall in love with a girl that spoke Swahili. The language isn't the point. It's her, see? I know you can understand that.

Some of you don't speak English at all, so I usually don't know what you are talking about. But I understand what I need to understand. Utilitarian-wise it's not so useful, because someone asks me to pass the salt and I pass the pepper. So in that functional sense, language is

important. Of course, you can go on line if you choose, and get a literal translation of *Norito*, if you really want to know what it says. What it says is basically “*to ho kami emi tame*” over and over again. You know that *to ho kami emi tame*, which we chant in *Sokushin no Gyo*, means “With the sharp sword of our will, we penetrate the mirror universe, polishing our soul like a beautiful crystal ball.” The whole rest of *Norito*, which also uses the words *to ho kami emi tame*, is really just repeating that in different words, over and over. Suzuki Sensei always said, “When you listen to *Norito*, just let it wash through you.” Presumably, if you have been doing *Sokushin no Gyo* correctly or fully, by the time you are through you are wide open. Because that is what it does. Just like after an hour of meditation, when you come out of it you are completely present, very sensitive, very aware. So in that state, when you hear “*Takama no harani, kamu tsumari masu...*” just let it wash through you, with no attempt to understand it literally. Please don’t make any attempt to understand it that way, because if you do then you are going to close down. That’s what happens. To understand something intellectually, to conceptualize it, you have to close off a little bit. Not that conceptualization is bad. It’s just a compartment of mind. And so you collapse down to that compartment when you do that. And the whole point of this kind of training, is to open completely and learn to be in this process all the time. And then how to function in the world then takes care of itself.

You know, one friend of mine who is a Tibetan Buddhist teacher says, the only reason people come to the dojo is to learn to function in the world better. Doesn’t that sound about right? I mean that’s what I am doing here. And I told you the story the other night about the article written by the Korean Zen teacher on this subject for Tricycle magazine. He said, “You lay people, you have to leave enlightenment to the professionals. That’s for the monks and the nuns. They are the pros. They gave up their life just to do that. So leave enlightenment to them. For you, you people just need to function in daily life.” And then he continues in a long article about how each of us does this kind of practice, and then right at the end, in the last sentence, he says, “Mind you, you cannot learn to function in life without being enlightened.” He is talking about someone truly functioning well, of course. Being an on-going and clear response to the suffering of others, so life is no longer about you, and getting something, making something, changing something, avoiding something, doing something, achieving something. This is all about you. This is all your own personal stuff. So this is not what is actually happening. It’s just what we do with what’s happening. And none of this can be called “functioning well in life.”

It can be very disappointing to hear me say that. And various people do various things when they hear something like that. Some just say, “Pshaw, never mind then, because I am busy achieving a bunch of really important things.”

None of this means that nothing happens, that you don’t work or get married. You know,

businessmen come to see me all the time with issues they want to discuss, and I don't tell them not to do business. They have to make a living. I have a landscape company. I do business. The householder life, married and working, is the most difficult and most valuable today. Please don't become a monk or nun. Because there is some avoidance involved in that. This is very important, in this day and age, that you fully live in this everyday life, and wake up here. It is possible, believe me.

When someone comes to see me with a problem, the problem is never because they are doing business. The problem is because they can't accept change, can't leave the past behind. Which is always some kind of structure carried over from when we were younger. Someone said, "If you are going to invest in an entrepreneur, the question you ask them is, "What kind of relationship do you have with your father?" Do you know why? Because if he hates his father, then you give him the money, because he is driven to prove something to his father, and he will succeed. But if he says, "My dad and I get along very well" then don't give him any money. Do you see?

Being driven to succeed and making a lot of money is not necessarily succeeding in life in any really important way. It may just make you crazy. We are talking about how to be in any situation without demanding that it stay the same or that it be different than it is. We just accept how it is.

Did I say that before?

You asked me about *Norito*, and understanding it. Did that answer satisfy you?

Student: No. So are you saying that reading Norito is in any way similar to what some practices follow, like doing mantras or reading sutras?

Well, usually if it is a mantra or sutra spoken in a foreign language, then people don't necessarily know what it means, literally.

Student: So you are saying this is similar.

Yes, this is similar. This is also like listening to Bach. Do you know how that music was created? Do you know what the real meaning of that is? No. But it moves your soul anyway. It moves you. Looking at a beautiful painting, if you are not a painter, if you are not an artist of that kind, then you do not really understand what's going on there. I have a student who is a painter and she will take me and show me and talk to me about what she is seeing. I am astounded, because I don't speak that language. I don't understand that language, but it moves me and has deep value to me.

That's why I mentioned about the girl that speaks Swahili. It doesn't mean that you cannot

enjoy her presence.

Student: But I feel that enjoying Bach or any other music is a little bit different than listening to Norito, at least for me. As you said, music moves you, it touches you. But isn't that condition when you are touched by an art a little bit away from seeing reality as it is?

How so?

Student: I am not trying to say that artists are not trying to see reality as it is, but from my experience with art, emotions which they are trying to express through their art are emotions which are not used as a tool but are emotions that are simply used to guide them. And as far as I understand this concept, it should be the other way around. When an emotion arises, you are not attached to it, but you try to go into it to understand it. If you get an emotion you let it guide you.

This is difficult because you are trying to figure something out here, to find the real meaning. You know, looking at a painting, being with a painting, listening to great music, being in nature, there's no point to it. There's no point. We don't have to make a point. That is the intellect, trying to make some meaning. That's a judgment. What is, is exactly what is happening. It's not good or bad. It's what is. You accept it completely, without judgment, self-judgment or judgment of the other.

That's very difficult if you are an idealist. You know, there never was a philosopher that could stand a toothache.

Student: OK.

For now, more sitting please. It's challenging. You are a bright guy, you're very ambitious, you have a lot of experience, and even though you don't think so, you're still pretty young.

Student: Yes.

So be patient, and let it have its way with you. You are going to be really surprised. It's not going to come out the way you are planning it, I promise you. It will be great, whatever it is, but it won't come out the way you plan it. Our lives just don't work like that.

I heard someone say that the desire for purity is really anger. You are just trying really hard to get rid of all the bad stuff, and be the perfect pure one. You can't do that. That's not how life is.

Our time is up, so thank you very much.