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DOLCE FAR NIENTE

НА СВЕТЕ СЧАСТЬЯ НЕТ, НО ЕСТЬ ПОКОЙ И ВОЛЯ

А.С. ПУШКИН

THERE IS NO HAPPINESS, BUT THERE ARE PEACE AND WILL

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DELFT, MAY 2016

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DELFT, MAY 2016

Essay (Scripties) for the national aikido shodan exam, July 2016

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Special thanks to Jamila Fatkhi for the illustrations and to Dean Wilding for proof-reading the text.

16 May 2016

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Preface

THE FOLLOWING ESSAY was written as a part of my National shodan exam. It gave me a good opportunity to look back at my development at aikido. Funnily enough, aikido appeared to be quite difficult to separate from the rest of my life. In attempt to make things clearer,¹ I needed to go as far back as to my childhood, which had no relation to aikido or any other martial art. So how did it happen that I entered a dojo and managed to stay there up to this point of the shodan exam? This is the question that I have tried to answer in the following pages.

Looking back after any milestone², I always feel very thankful to all the people I've met along the way. My dear sensei's and aikidoka's of all the clubs that I have had the pleasure to train with, I'm very grateful to all of you. Without all your help and involvement in my life, without your friendship, compassion, encouragement, and without your laughter, it would be not worth doing. To name some of you would mean to forget others. In the same way as we make one bow at the end of the training session to thank everyone present, I want to say one huge *doumo arigatou gozaimashita* to all of you.

¹ for myself, at least

² and shodan *is* a milestone, I should say without any hypocrisy

I

Do nothing

JANUARY 1982, a small city 50 km from Moscow. It's 5 pm, people are hurrying home from their work on a dark and frosty winter's night. The foot-walks have become narrower after a strong midday blizzard. People are busy with their thoughts and making their crisp way between the snowdrifts they don't pay attention to a little boy sitting next to an oblong snowdrift, capless at -10° C. I also don't see them. I'm lying under 10 centimetres of snow with a fur-cap of my friend on my face doing nothing.



It's unbelievably calm and peaceful under the snow. It seems to be also a little bit warmer than outside. The pleasant heaviness of the snow, silence and darkness are going on in contrast with my growing fear and anxiety—is my friend still there? Will I be able to dig myself out without his help? How long am I here? Am I going to run out of oxygen soon and fall in deadly frozen sleep like a Siberian coachmen in the middle of winter steppes? My body seems not to like the forced immobility, it cries to do something and this adds to the total anxiety. I'm giving up and with a sudden spurt sit up out of my snow grave with a loud howl, pretending I wanted to scare the passerbys.

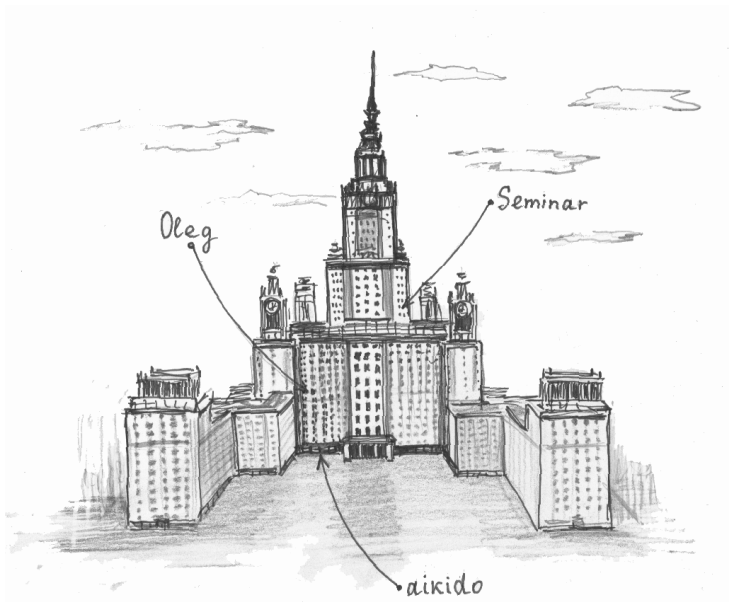
“Ninety-two”, says Sashka, the best friend of my childhood. He is half a year younger, but much braver than me. He went under the snow first and succeeded in doing three minutes. Maybe he could do it for even longer, but I was scared to wait for him so

long so I dug him out, saying my head is getting really cold and that my mother didn't allow me to be capless after a ear infection. Of course I didn't want to show any fear before him, so I immediately agreed to beat his time, but didn't feel myself at ease putting his *ushanka* on my face and hearing the first handfuls of snow falling on my coat. I must somehow have let him feel my uneasiness because the last sounds from the outside world I've heard were Sashka's words: "Don't panic. You just lie there and do nothing." This sounded very soothing and easy. Ninety-two seconds later I would realise how difficult it was.

2

In search for the experience

SEPTEMBER 1995. I'm a second-year postgraduate at Number Theory Chair of the Faculty of Mechanics and Mathematics of the Moscow State University. It's 5 pm; the Speciality Seminar of the Number Theory Chair, attendance is obligatory for its all 8 postgraduates, has started 40 minutes ago on the thirteen floor of the central part "A" of the grandiose "Main building" of the MSU, built during Stalin's era to prove the triumph of the socialist system. I'm lying on a bed in my 8m² room on the 8th floor in the "B" side wing of the Main Building, and I'm doing nothing. I just don't see any sense in doing anything, I have a sort of values crisis. But in two hours I'll start my way out of this crisis — I'm going to have my first aikido lesson.



A lot of freedom was given to the postgraduates and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed to have played a bad joke on me. Most of my peers had chosen for a financial career, but keeping their almost free hostel rooms at the University as a much cheaper alternative to the room prices of a wild (and getting wilder by the day) free market. I didn't like my short experience in a bank

and had chosen for an almost moneyless mathematical path. The current problem was that I had lost any interest in “my” branch of mathematics. Moreover, I had a feeling that there were other much more important things that were worthy of my time and attention. Without realising it very precisely, I just thought that I wanted to be in full control of everything what happens to me (and maybe to some few others too).

Prohibited during Soviet Union: occult, religious, and mystic practices and doctrines together with the Western sociological and philosophical schools were flourishing in early 90’s in Russia. Feeling a dim urge, I had tried a number of them and read a lot of books. Transcendental meditation, wholesome food and miracle of fasting, Rosicrucianism and Sri Chinmoy. I had tried everything that promised—I emphasise it—promised *a fuller everyday life experience*. A true experience of normal everyday existence, not related to the extremal situations like secretly climbing the roof of MSU building or rafting down the mountain river, nor to the opposite extreme—referred by the modern politically correct language as “substance abuse”. I believed the kind of experience I was looking for could be obtained by looking inside myself, by being more attentive to what happens within than without me. Here was the paradox: I was looking for an experience, at the same time doing everything to lock myself out of it.

Finally, my head was a mishmash of several things: zen¹—for the everyday life spirit, hatha yoga²—for the everyday body, and non-ordinary reality of Don Juan of Carlos Castaneda³ (also referred as *the way of the man of knowledge* and as *nagualism*)—for a transcendental part of life. I have also followed courses in Collège Universitaire Français de Moscou, where I’ve made love with French poetry and French philosophy. With all these, I escaped the world and enjoyed my “escape things”.

Zen, and especially its koans, gave me the feeling I liked most in English novels: that people are saying less than they are meaning. The underlying depth was breathtaking. Yoga gave me a relief from some health problems and provide an opportunity to train at the limited space of 8m² of my room. Nagualism provided the necessary foundation for the inexplicable. All three of them served the only goal of me—to be in the total control of my life and to live the most full life I could.

Maybe the previous sentence is not completely true. What I liked in all my crazy things was their internal beauty. Short, paradoxical essence of zen. Creativity and unexpectedness of yoga asanas. A mathematically correct explanation of the world in Don Juan’s model.

The last one maybe deserves some explanation. It was the world as convention—just as mathematics is according to some theories—of the humankind. The world itself was inconceivable, imperceptible in its immenseness. Babies see it as it is, but later learn to focus on several implementations of the world by attach-

¹ N. Senzaki and R. McCandless (2011). *The Iron Flute*.

² B. Iyengar (1968). *Light on Yoga: Yoga Dipika*.

³ C. Castaneda (1972). *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan*.

crazy things, as they were characterised by my friends

ing names to the phenomena. This world is sustained by means of the perpetual inner dialogue with ourselves. By stopping the dialogue, we can “stop the world” and see it as it is again. This is the ultimate goal⁴ of a “man of knowledge”, corresponding to samadhi, satori, *etc* in other mystic practices.

A very important practice in approaching of the “stopping the world” was that of “*not-doing*”. The internal dialogue was an example of “*doing*”, thinking about stopping the internal dialogue was also *doing*, trying not to think about stopping it was also *doing*. *Not-doing* loses its meaning after being verbalised. You can only practice *not-doing*. For example, by looking at the gaps in the tree crown, on these tiny pieces of shining blue or downcast grey instead of the green mass. Or by observing the shades of the objects and persons instead of observing them directly. By breaking the habitual way of doing things, of a stable daily routine as well. By closing your fly with your left hand. By being grateful to the people you cannot stand. By doing something you don’t believe in anymore (like math study). *Not-doing* provided a necessary step aside from a vicious circle of doing the same things over and over again.

Lying on my bed in September 1995, I felt that I was in need for a powerful *not-doing*. Any crisis is *doing*. To stop the crisis, I needed to have a good practice of *not-doing*. According to Don Juan, any good *not-doing* practice should be deeply personal and should be chosen by the life itself. It should not be something you enjoy to do or something you hate to do. At that moment I have decided to try aikido as *not-doing*. There were several good reasons for that—aikido is a Japanese contact sport related to martial arts, so:

1. it was a phenomenon from an absolutely not culturally interesting for me part of world: except zen, a couple of tankas and tea, I have nothing in common with Japan and its life. The world of samurais, ninjas, emperors, and geishas was so far away from the poetic moods of *Alcools*⁵ or *Romances sans paroles*,⁶ and cold semiotics of *Mythologies*;⁷
2. I was supposed to do something I haven’t done often and even more—something I didn’t like—to approach and to be approached, and even worse, to touch and to be touched by the other people. I was saying “You”⁸ to everyone whom I haven’t known for at least 3 years, and my privacy zone seemed be not affected by frequent journeys in the Moscow subway and was as large as that of a Eskimo;
3. I treated with indifference any physical exercises or any sport *per se* (doing some exclusion for yoga and badminton) and I’ve never been considered as anyone who could do something sporty;
4. I had no interest in martial arts either, Bruce Lee/Steven Sea-

⁴ and not only did the goal seemed to be interesting to me, but the very way to it, the way of a controlled and self-disciplined life, the “way of warrior”

⁵ G. Apollinaire (1920). *Alcools: Suivi de Le Bestiaire*.

⁶ P. Verlaine (2011). *Romances sans paroles suivi de Cellulairement*.

⁷ R. Barthes and K. Jongenburger (2002). *Mythologieen*.

⁸ in Russian, as in many other languages, there is a strong discrimination between formal and informal second person pronouns, like *je* and *u* in Dutch

gal/any other swish-woot-woot-cha-hiyah! films or books.

Of course, there should have been some aspects I liked (otherwise why not to chose boxing, dancing or crocheting)—first, I wanted to have some dynamic alternative to yoga, and second, I liked the idea of not using force (which I missed enorme compared with my peers).

Thus aikido became my *not-doing*.

3

Dolce far niente or practice of not-doing

THE VERY FIRST AIKIDO LESSON confirmed the correctness of the chosen path—everything seemed strange and quite perpendicular to my usual world. Well built people warming up on the tatami 10 minutes before the training time didn't evoke in me any longing to join them. Sitting on my knees and meditation was not unfamiliar for me, but doing it in a line with 30 people dressed in pyjamas in front of a portrait of an old man, as well greeting the portrait afterwards was absolutely new. Somehow I had got the same feeling of going under the snow with growing uneasiness and anxiety. A small demo with the purpose of inspiring the novices had scared me to death. And after all this, the first exercise, *tenkan*. A small and pretty, but absolutely unknown to me girl sitting next to me, touched my shoulder, made a bow saying strangely sounding words and invited me to join her. She had explained me what I need to do, but when I tried to repeat the movement after her—damn, how was it difficult! She must have possessed muscles of steel, and whatever I tried, I could not turn my arm as easy as she just deed it. I felt me blushing with the shame I cannot do it. And suddenly I had heard her voice: "Forget about the arm, don't try to turn it. Just do nothing with it."

This was something I haven't expected. The *not-doing* concept met me from the other side. Just at the very moment when I was engaged to perform well (in front of a girl, I should add) I was reminded that I should not do it. It appeared that I should exercise the *not-doing* by concentrating not on the arm, but on the position of my body, on the movement of the rest of my body, on feeling the contact point with the partner. In some miracle way, it worked. I mostly need to do nothing. But I had already a feeling that it would not be easy.

THE SAME EVENING LATER, my body felt quite strange. I felt some warmth inside, some new type of energy; my body sensed pleasant agitation or even buoyancy. Maybe it was the result of *not-doing*—during my whole life I must have touched less people that during the very first aikido lesson—, maybe it was the effect of breakind down the glass isolation I have created around

myself to protect myself—aikido had just shown me that I'm quite vulnerable and weak, but the isolation had not removed these shortcomings. By accepting our own vulnerability and weakness, we can perform in a more effective, more controlled way, and we can *be* more free. But all this I did not understand the same evening, of course; that would only come later. That evening I knew only one thing, that I was definitely going to try a couple more times this *not-doing* through aikido.

4

(Not) the last jigsaw puzzle piece

THE WAYS WE'VE CHOSEN CHANGE US. It's quite natural that after practising aikido for some time I've developed an interest in Japanese culture in general and to the "way of samurai" in particular, and that my physical condition had improved. But already the first year of *not-doing* brought its own fruits in the very unexpected way from the beginning—I became more open and accepting to the situations I am involved with (farewell, the crisis!) and to other people, I didn't need my ivory tower of isolation any more. A powerful torrent of people, many of which were absolutely not related to aikido, poured through my life, and I let it go. Some people I liked, some not. The people I liked seemed to stay and accumulate, the people I didn't went away. I met a girl that I found the most beautiful and full of inner light, and she agreed to stay with me for my whole life. Several years later she would recall that she had met me once after my aikido training and felt a calm power filling me. At that time her words reminded me that maybe I should return to dojo, as I had already stopped with aikido after only three year practising it, only to return to it after a long 13 years.

SEPTEMBER 2011. I had abandoned long ago all my crazy things, all these zen, yoga, and *not-doing* practices—being a father in a foreign country busy with doing a PhD research in a new for me field didn't left enough time for them. My aikido suit, which I brought from Russia as I knew there was an aikido club in Delft, was shoved deep into wardrobe. I sat too much, I ate too much, I drank too much, I smoked too much; I had 15 kilos more than in 1995, so I didn't even consider a return to aikido. I have however sublimated my love to it in bringing my son to the dojo, just to help him to get out of his ivory tower, in case he would need it some time, and to make him to exercise some sport. He had been just allowed to join the adult group, and to support him, I decided to join the same group. But now I'm sure that my "magic part"¹ had simply fooled me, this was only an excuse to return to *not-doing*. Although I had no crisis at that time: I had got my PhD degree, I had a good job, an excellent family; making use of the

my Moscow sensei said once to me:
don't fight, use your charm

¹ according to Don Juan, we (our conscience or our body, which is the same, though) consist of the normal part, called "tonal" and the magic part, called "nagual". Not-doing trains the nagual the same way as physical exercises train the tonal.

obtained stability in life I enjoyed my hobbies. But subconsciously I already felt the first signs of a crisis coupled with the isolation inside the pleasant world of my family and hobbies approaching me: after 6 years, my job became more and more routine, new friends I had acquired during the years of my PhD studies gradually moved to different places and countries, and phone or Skype communications could never replace the pleasure of regular live meetings, whether random on street or in a company of a good table and wine. I needed change without sacrificing the stable world I've built around me. There came the time to return to my abandoned and forgotten *not-doing*.

nothing is stabler than the mortgage debt

MY SECOND FIRST LESSON OF AIKIDO appeared to be even more fantastic than the first first one. During the lesson, every cell of my body seemed to jubilate. I did not realise my body missed it so much. With a great enthusiasm and sudden energy I trained wholeheartedly, and 75 minutes of the lesson flew by too soon for me. The next day I could hardly move.

A break of thirteen years is long enough to make a return to feel as new as the very first lesson. But in the same way as the body recognised the familiar movements, my mind recalled the familiar feelings of nervousness and anxiety, only the concerns were new now: in addition to my bad physical shape, I felt the strong contrast between how I remember I was able to perform a certain technique and the actual level of performance, and finally I haven't understood all instructions of the sensei—my Dutch, not very agile in normal conditions, suddenly was paralysed, as if the corresponding brain part was switched off by the amount of the physical activity. But this time I knew already that the practice of aikido would handle my anxiety in the very best way, and according to the advice of the best friend of my childhood I just kept training and did nothing about the anxiety.

AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF TRAINING, the forgotten concept of practising *not-doing* technique has popped up. We were exercising *irimi-nage* that time, and my *uke* was more experienced and also stronger and heavier than me. I did my best but the technique failed time after time. "You do too much", I heard his feedback, "you need only wait for me". Suddenly I've got a feeling that I'm trying to play a musical piece, a duet, together with him, but instead of going steadily in the culmination part, under the pressure of emotions I begin to play faster, breaking the harmony. I tried to concentrate only on the timing, on the moments between the most dramatic action of the arms, letting them perform their anyway erroneous job almost without my attention. There was something similar in it to looking between the leaves of the tree. The perspective has changed, I haven't tried to throw my *uke* on the floor any more, but I turned instead in his tempo around my axis, and I only let him fall on tatami, following him with my

relaxed arm. For the first time in my life I have performed the technique without force.

“Nou Oleg,—I hear the reader asking,—waneer ga je het doen de tweede keer?”

THIS TIME, I WAS NOT SURPRISED that my life situation started to change soon. Practising aikido I recalled the feeling, or the mind state, of “letting go”, accepting the world and myself within it. Accepting not in the passive way of dropped hands and paralysed will power, but in the active way of small, non-confronting and timely changes that harmonize the situation. After 5 years of returning to dojo, I felt me again relaxed about what happens in my life, I felt myself among good and interesting people, and I enjoyed it.

Moreover, it happened that aikido also matched other sides of my life, the things I care the most in my life: my family, my friends, my leisure time. When I hear from my sensei “Aikido is for lazy people”, I feel at home. When I hear from my sensei “It should be not fast, but controlled and accurate”, I feel as if at a music lesson. When I hear from my sensei “Don’t think, do what the body feels right to do”, it helps me to stop the inner dialogue, to stop looking inside and to accept the external world as it is, to accept myself as I am at the moment—tired, sweaty, doing the technique incorrectly,—but only in accepting this will I be able to be attentive to my *uke*, to feel *uke*’s intention, to care about *uke*’s and mine safety and to release the inner beauty of the technique. When I hear from my sensei “Aikido is the best way to make new friends”, I can only agree². Aikido appears to be the missing piece of the jigsaw puzzle of my life.

² see the cover picture

IN MY BEDROOM, I HAVE A REPRODUCTION of “Flaming June”, also known as “*Dolce far niente*”, a favourite subject by the Pre-Raphaelites. I always liked the sound of these three words, as the way out of our achievement-oriented society. I was never afraid to say I like my leisure time, I’m lazy and very often prefer to do nothing (at least it might look so for an external observer). During the last years, these words acquired a second meaning for me, because it so enjoyable, so sweet not to block a hitting hand, not to use the force, not pull, not push, not to confront. “Aikido is doing”, says my sensei. And I dare to add here “Aikido is also *not-doing*”. Powerful and sweet *not-doing*”.

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