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Shu

Ha

Ri

Shu Ha Ri

The Japanese way to Improve Excellence

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To master an art, and to become excellent in this art, one has to go through a learning curve. I noticed in our Western society only a few communities have a structured and purposive approach to lead a pupil from Novice to Master. In Germany there is still a vivid learning system for artisans originating from medieval times. One starts as a "Pupil", becomes "Journeyman" and finally the "Master"-stage can be reached, where every stage has strict criteria for the level of knowledge and craftsmanship to be achieved. This is a well proven system, dating form back in the medieval ages, to preserve the knowledge of the artisans as a group.

When reading through this article you might be tempted to quickly skip the parts that seem 'fuzzy' or 'complex'. However if you take your time to digest what the Japanese tell us, there is an enormous learning potential hidden behind it. This is one of the practical pillars behind becoming excellent, as demonstrated not only in Martial Arts and Zen Buddhism, but also in the modern Toyota Production System

In Japan the common route to master an art goes through 3 stages: Shu-Ha-Ri

In the **Shu** stage, the student does exactly as the Sensei (the teacher) says. The pupil endlessly practices to copy the Sensei's examples. Without questioning why, without doubt. When the teacher decides the pupil is ready, he can move to the Ha stage.

In the **Ha** stage the student can question the skills he has learned. Why is it we do it as we do?

Finally when a good pupil understands all the reasons for why we do as we do, he can follow his own path, and try to improve what was the best practice so far. This then becomes the **Ri** stage.

This sounds obvious, but there is a fundamental difference between the European Medieval based system of "Pupil- Journeyman-Master" and the Japanese Shu-Ha-Ri. Let us look more into detail how this system works and what the implications are...



Shu - To learn from tradition

Shu can be translated as *to keep, protect, keep- stick to or maintain* learning fundamentals, techniques, heuristics, proverbs etc.

From these definitions, the characteristics of this particular stage can be said to be: protection (by teaching), being defended (by teaching), obeying the order (of teaching), observations (of the teaching), and keeping one's eyes open (on the teaching).

In **Shu**, the student works hard to copy the techniques as taught without modification and without yet attempting to make any effort to understand the rationale of the techniques of the teacher. In this way,

a lasting technical foundation is built on which the deeper understanding of the art can be based.

The point of **Shu** is that a sound technical foundation can be built most efficiently by following only a single route to that goal. Mixing in other schools, prior to an understanding of what you're really up to is an invitation to go down a wrong path. A path where the techniques developed will not have sound theoretical or practical value. In the traditional interpretation of the Shu stage, it is the instructor that decides when the student moves on from **Shu** to **Ha**, not the student. It's up to the student to follow the instructor's teaching as 'an empty vessel to be filled up'.

The knowledge and skills are fully internalized; they become 'muscle memory'; you do not need to think about it anymore; the student automatically does as been taught.

The learning strategy in this stage offers defence against external negative influences, and from falling into danger and making mistakes.

Chiba-Sensei (8th Dan Shihan Chief Instructor San Diego Aikikai) explains:

Technically, what is characteristic of this stage is the learning and embodiment of the fundamentals through the repetition of Kata ("the form"), exactly as they are presented, without the imposition of will, opinion, or judgement, but with a total openness and modesty. It is an important basic conditioning period both physically and mentally, where in all the necessary conditions are carefully prepared for the next stage. Physically, this is the time when various parts of the body are trained: joints, muscles, bones, overall posture, how to set the lower part of the body centred by the waist, the use of gravity and its control, the balanced use of hands and footwork, etc.

Mentally, one learns how to focus and concentrate attention on any particular part of the body at any given time, how to generate internal energy and its natural flow through the use of the power of imagination. Furthermore, one learns faith, trust, respect, endurance, modesty, sacrifice, and courage, all of which are considered, to be the virtues of Budo. There is no set time or period as to how long it takes to go through this stage. It all depends on the strength, quality, ability, and capability on the parts of both teacher and student. Generally speaking, however, it does not have to be too long, say from three to five years. Needless, to say, this is said on the assumption that one trains earnestly, trains every day, and makes that training the first priority of that time of life.

破 Ha - To break the chains of tradition

Ha can be translated as *to tear up, finding the exceptions etc., reflecting on the truth of everything, finding new ways, techniques, proverbs ...*

As these definitions indicate, this is a rather dynamic stage in character and strongly leans towards negativity and denial. However, paradoxically, this negativity leads progressively to self-affirmation.

Ha, is to break from, to detach from tradition. This means that the student **breaks free from the chains of tradition** of his 'school' to some extent. In **Ha**, the student must reflect on the meaning and purpose of everything that one has learned and thus, come to a deeper understanding of the art than pure repetitive practice can allow. At this stage, since each technique is thoroughly learned and absorbed into the muscle memory, the student is prepared to reason about the background behind these techniques. In academic learning, the **Ha** stage can be likened to the stage where enough basic information is available to the student that research papers of a survey nature could be expected.

Chiba-Sensei (8th Dan Shihan Chief Instructor San Diego Aikikai) explains:

Technically, this is the stage wherein it is required to rearrange or reconstruct what the teacher has taught. This includes the elimination of what is undesirable, unnecessary or unsuitable and allows new elements to be brought into the study as food for growth. These changes are based on the true recognition of self together with surrounding conditions, such as temperament, personality, style, age, sex, weight, height, and body strength.

This is the stage, spiritually or mentally, when it is necessary to have a high mind of inquiry and self-

reflection. More than anything else, it is required to attain a true and unshakable understanding of oneself as an individual. In other words, it is necessary to have a clear vision of one's own potential and the best possible way to stimulate it. This might require that one abandons or denies what is already an asset or strength in one's art. In this stage, in particular, gaining does not necessarily mean being creative but often means losing or abandoning, and this plays an important part in the process. It is indeed a difficult task to carry out and one often does not see its necessity due to lack of true insight and courage.

As part of human nature, it is indeed difficult to deny what one already has, especially when it is considered to be a good part of one's possession. This is where most people get stuck and cease to grow. It is a matter of insight and perception in relation to the true recognition of self. In relation to human growth, this stage is still the period of the infant and youth and therefore still comes under the wing of the teaching. Another, very significant part of this stage is moving from the complete passivity of the previous stage to active responsibility for one's own training.

What happens in this stage is that the one who gives (on the part of teaching -- an external effect) and the one who receives (on the part of the student -- internal effort) simultaneously contribute towards the birth of individualism. It is exactly like the moment when the bird, within the egg begins to break the shell from the inside as the parent bird helps to break through from the outside. If the time is not mature, the death of the bird results. Again, there is no set time or period as to how long this stage takes. However, this is an important transitional period. Growth from infant-youth to a complete, fully grown individual appears only after this stage.

離 Ri - To go beyond all knowledge (The pupil exceeds its master)

Ri can be translated as *separation, leave, depart (from), release, set free, detach*; there are no more techniques, proverbs etc.

Ri, is to transcend. This is to go beyond traditional learning and all available knowledge. In this stage, the student is no longer a student, in the *normal* sense, but rather a "pioneering practitioner." One must now think originally and develop from one's own background knowledge, using original thoughts about the art and test them against the reality of his or her knowledge of everyday life. In **Ri**, the art truly becomes the practitioner's own and to some extent, his or her own creation. This stage is the completion of one's study, though it is not the end of study. The "student" is now given recognition as a "Master of the art", independent in the art. One has acquired every required technical skill, knowledge and experience. Spiritually or mentally one no longer depends or relies upon external help or guidance.

Shu Ha Ri is not a linear progression. It is more akin to concentric circles, so that there is Shu within Ha and both Shu and Ha within Ri. Thus, the fundamentals remain constant; only the application of them and the subtleties of their execution change as the student progresses and his, or her, own personality begins to flavour the techniques performed.

Chiba-Sensei's vision on the value of ShuHaRi:

Whether the above-mentioned system is still practiced in today's Aikido in Japan, or whether it is workable here in the United States where culture, life-style, and way of thinking are so different, is not my present interest. I am convinced, however, that this system still carries profound value for today's society, as it presents deep insight into the growth of humankind. Furthermore, it clarifies the responsibilities of the teacher and student, thus contributing to the establishment of an ideal relationship between the two.

The Implications

Where it is in the nature of the Shu Ha Ri learning system to challenge the student to exceed its master, it seems to me that in our society it is more a matter of sheer luck when a student exceeds his master.

First of all there is no clear 'master' or even a 'school' to identify with, or better to measure up, although some universities do a wonderful job to become excellent in their field. And even so, it

is very rare to see a clear unique vision, a master level that the student can level up to.

In our highly competitive environment where we all have our personal targets, I have rarely seen that sharing knowledge, being a good master to a (group of) student(s) would be rewarded or highly appreciated. In best case it is "*a necessary evil that would be tolerated*". Where in the Japanese (or should I say the Buddhist-Asian) culture being a Sensei (a Master that Teaches) is a highly respected status, here (not only in Holland) it is something for people we pity; it is like a self fulfilling prophesy: If we do not respect and reward our real sensei's, how can we expect the real masters to become a good sensei?

It is not usual to internalize basic skills and knowledge as in the **Shu** phase. Even artisans develop most of their skills after school, when they are lucky enough to meet a good master that has and the skills and the ability and patience to teach the youngster. In modern education that might even be wishful thinking, however I miss even internalization of the most basic skills and values. "We show you once, we ask you if you know it and if you can give a satisfying answer we forget about it" is what I remember most...

Albert Einstein about our learning-factories:

(in a message to the students at the State University of New York in Albany on 15 October 1936)

„To me the worst thing seems to be a school that principally works with methods of fear, force and artificial authority. Such treatment destroys the sound sentiments, the sincerity and the self-confidence of pupils and produces a subservient subject. It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge. One should guard against preaching to young people success in the customary form as the main aim in life. The most important motive for study at school, at the university and in life is the pleasure of working and thereby obtaining results which will serve the community. The most important task for our educators is to awaken and encourage these psychological forces in a young man or woman. Such a basis alone can lead to the joy of possessing one of the most precious assets in the world - knowledge or artistic skill."

Maybe the lack of good sensei is the reason we so easily assume that knowledge and skills come 'automatically'. Just look how a new operator enters a factory and starts operating a multi thousand dollar piece of equipment.... In Japan I visited factories where more than 80% of the operators had a national qualification as Maintenance Engineer. Not because they needed the maintenance skills, but this was the key to fully understand the equipment they operated.

Going through the Shu Ha Ri system not only creates good discipline, but will be most certainly a serious test to the motivation and the ambition of the student. In my daily practice I meet too many people that went through an education without a trace of the 'fire, enthusiasm, ambition and pride' that I would expect from some-one who just spent 6 or more years in a 'learning factory'. The result: week students with poor motivation can survive. And even worse: talented students become drop-outs because the system does not challenge them enough. Learning too often has been reduced to 'get your paper' in stead of 'Mastering the Art'

Dr. W. Edwards Deming's vision on the basis of his improvement (learning!) strategy:

Deming referred often to the Bible. His favourite statement was that of King Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3, Verse 22 (New International Version, NIV):

"So I (Solomon) saw that there is nothing better for a man than to enjoy his work, because that is his lot. For who can bring him to see what will happen after him?"

Understanding the value of the Shu phrase creates another perspective for our contemptuous attitude towards the Japanese being 'just copiers'. To copy something from someone you consider to be a master is an act of respect to that master and a natural thing to do if you want to learn something. How do we learn to play piano? For years we try to play someone else's music; to copy as a learning strategy. When we master the technique fully, we will start to give our own interpretation to the play, put our own emotion and emphasis in it. Only than and not before we

might grow to the level where we would create and play our own music and just maybe that might be better than the music we copied from. And yet we despise the Japanese for learning that way, we think we are brilliant enough to skip the Shu and Ha phase and start in Ri....

In the Shu Ha Ri system there is no resistance to copy from the master, to learn from the master what one can learn, without doubt and questioning. Why should you? He is years ahead of you and has proven to be a master. How different in our society. Even the most brilliant concepts and skills taught by the best teachers to a random group of brilliant or retarded students always gets a variation on the same theme as response: a declaration why we can not accept what the speaker just said. The first response is always one to justify why we should not just accept and use what was told. This is perfectly legitimate if we do not know the level of master ship of the speaker but that is not the issue. In our culture it is simply not done to learn from someone by copying - thus using- proven quality. We have to invent ourselves. Even if we have no basic knowledge at all. Why else do we suffer from the Not-Invented-Here-Syndrome? Do you now understand why it is so difficult to implement standardized work-procedures and beautiful tools like 5S workplace organization? We get the shivers just by the idea to adopt something from someone else.

There are regional differences in 'the West'. For example in countries like Brazil and Argentina, the implementation of World Class techniques like Lean and TPM are surprisingly successful. Why? There is less resistance to proven quality as a 'not invented here thing'. My careful conclusion is that this is a result of a perceived underdog position. If you look up to someone else it is more easy to accept what happens there as an example. Japan and the US could be a role model to the Brazilians so why should you not copy their strategies like Lean and TPM?

The same happened in Japan after WW II. Juran and Deming where fully accepted. The books from Henri Ford (even in 1950 already forgotten in the West) where 'law' to every industrial engineer. Why? Because for the first time in the modern Japanese history there had been a nation that was powerful enough to strike the 'Great Empire'. This was a Master! Those people had power and knowledge that one could achieve.... by copying! No hard feelings, no false pride, just learn and become better... Shu Ha Ri, and the rest is history.....

Arno Koch

(I did not carefully stipulate every individual source in this text, but my gratitude is immense to all the sources mentioned below that offered the right definitions, kanji and explanations of ShuHaRi.)

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5. The Swiss Deming Institute ([Read more about Dr. Deming](#))