

The Meaning of Shu Ha Ri

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At the University of Connecticut the concept of Shu Ha Ri is often mentioned in the literature as it pertains to traditional methods of teaching the martial arts. Could you explain the concept and elaborate on its meaning and significance? "Shu Ha Ri" is "Imitate, Diverge, Separate." In the "hard-core" traditional dojo, students below dan grade are not even permitted to ask questions. They are expected to perfectly imitate the movements as presented by sensei. On the ancient battlefield everyone knew the basics about how to punch, kick and grapple, but it was the structure that one superimposed on this ability that decided whether they survived or died. Kyu grades teach these common basics, so they may be viewed as a form of remedial training. There is no room for discussion or debate at this level. After shodan or nidan, the students are considered "oku-iri", or "(allowed) entry to mysteries," after which they are presented with more material special to the school; special techniques, tactics, strategy, etc. Still, if they do not make every humanly possible attempt to imitate the sensei, they are asked to leave. As knowledge deepens, questions are increasingly more accepted. Now "we" have something to talk about, and sensei has someone to talk to who, at least has a clue, as to what he is talking about. Critical to the survival of the ryu is that the art be passed on in true form. If students attempt to re-invent the art as they practice, at this early phase, with so little knowledge of the significance of each element, or how it fits into the greater whole (that the student has not even seen yet), it is seen as showing very little respect for the art, the sensei, and the lineage of all the soke before him. Not only is it an insult, but it suggests that the lineage will be bastardized and the wisdom of the past will be lost. At around yodan or godan, but sometimes a little before or after (remember the dan system is kind of superimposed on this), students are allowed to see the full catalog (moku-roku) of shoden and chuden techniques and strategies. This allows them to see the length and breadth of the art and start to respect how it all fits together. The students then begin learning the secrets and significance of what is going on, including hidden movements in kata, and the like. At this stage they may also be awarded some sort of license, like "Menkyo," suggesting that they have earned the right to do this, and teach the basics. Along with this, the students are allowed and encouraged to experiment. This is "divergence."

The students eventually begin to find their own way. With sensei's guidance, they learn how to tell if a given addition to the art would be inconsistent with the foundations of the art, or disturb its internal consistency, coherence, and therefore its effectiveness. They learn why certain things cannot be removed. They learn what each element in the existing art contributes to the whole. All of this is critical for the students to be able to advance the art without destroying what is already there; preserving and advancing the art are the principal objectives.

As the full art is transmitted, and the students increasingly embody the art naturally, they begin to respond to attacks without having to think of specific techniques, strategies, or principles. The students ARE the art so anything the students DO is also the art. The students are now capable of creating a new art within the discipline of the controlling elements of the ryu. The students may create freely, and separate from their teacher's specific instruction, and are guided by the principles that are now part of them. This is "separation." The students are now free, constrained only by a knowledge, or better yet "a feel," for what is right and wrong, and what is good and bad art.

This is Shu Ha Ri, which is a guiding principle for the transmission of knowledge and the preservation and advancement of the ryu.