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## **Forms are Alive** by **David M. Valadez**

Forms, waza, or kata, are not the antithesis to whatever is living. Saying that basic training is about experiencing a form is not at all the same thing as saying that one should train weakly, out of the moment, not be ready for anything, dead, not alive, casually, with one's mind wandering, etc. These are false assumptions some often make concerning the understanding of the word "form." They are based upon a misunderstanding of the overall Budo pedagogy.

Forms training in Japanese martial arts always necessitate that one's movements stay alive, that the practitioner stay in the moment, etc., but at the level of kihon waza, this is precisely done so that one experiences the form fully and little else. The "all else" that some would like to include in forms training comes through different means in our practice. In kihon waza, one is not training in scenario-based self-defense routines. Thus, if one rejects the modern trend toward scenario-based self-defense training, and if one operates fully within a Shu-Ha-Ri model (which is totally different from scenario-based self-defense training because the latter wrongly equates Shu training with Ri training), uke has every reason to continue with the form even if nage "messes up." In kihon waza training, nage does not "mess up" with defending him/herself – nage simply departs from the required form. Such departures warrant a returning to the form and not opportunities to reduce training to a sparring situation. An uke that reduces kihon waza training to sparring sessions does not make a form alive. On the contrary, such an uke kills the form, makes it dead right then and there.

If uke retreats from the invested partnership in the form every time nage departs from the form, which is a natural part of the learning process, nage will never be able to experience the form and thereby will never be able to commence the embodying processes necessary for the Shu-Ha-Ri model to be fully implemented. Contrary to this position, one would have nage somehow experiencing the form only after they were able to do it fully correct, with no opening for uke to depart from the partnership. There is just no way that such a process could ever prove to be productive in the real world. No nage will ever learn any waza through a process in which every uke departs through every suki (trans. opening) that is manifested along the learning process. It sounds nice to say that forms have to be "alive," "in the moment," and that if nage "messes up," "uke loses all reason for investment in the form," etc., but without the necessary reflection of what these things actually mean in Budo pedagogy they become merely clichés and make little sense in the end.

When things are left as cliché, it appears that forms have the same nature as spontaneous training. This would be incorrect. It may be the case that to the practitioner that has already reconciled the Shu-Ha-Ri

model, that is to say, to the practitioner that has already attained the full capacity to spontaneously express the art, that spontaneous training and forms training become very much akin to each other in terms of body, mind, and spirit. However, from the point of view of someone that has not achieved such a capacity, forms are nowhere near spontaneous training – in fact, the one does not even lead to the other. Doing forms over and over again will in no way bring one to a level of spontaneity. Doing forms to become spontaneous is like polishing a brick to make a mirror.

Forms training, at the basic level, was never meant to be seen as something that would hold the same level of spontaneity as Ri. In today's world, as Ha and Ri training are disappearing from the basic curriculum of most dojo, this is becoming quite unknown. As a result, as true spontaneous training is being negated from one's training curriculum, forms are being lifted up to a position they were never meant to be at and can indeed never reach. Forms are not the ultimate solution, and so Budo pedagogy does not leave it up to forms training to achieve every end of martial praxis. The living form is meant to be experienced fully as a tactical architecture and as a strategic perspective. They are not venues by which we should reduce training into inferior opportunities for spontaneous expressions. We keep forms alive by adapting ourselves to them, not by adapting them to our yet-to-be-trained selves.