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Shu-Ha-Ri and Emulation

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There is a difference between Shu training and Kihon Waza. Shu training is a type of epistemology (a type of knowing) and Kihon Waza is a type of pedagogy (a type of teaching model). In an analogy, Shu can be compared to reading; Kihon can be compared to a textbook. Sometimes the two overlap and interact, and sometimes they are completely at odds with each other. Folks doing Kihon Waza, therefore, are not automatically participating in Shu-level training.

There are other differences between Kihon Waza and Shu training. Kihon Waza is something that is greatly determined by history, by tradition, and by lineage. Shu training is very personal. It is highly influenced by both the instructor and by the student participating in the practice. Shu training is temporal. That is to say that it can look one way one moment and then a totally different way the next. This is true whether the claim is made, or acknowledged, or not.

In Kihon Waza, though practicality may remain relevant, because Kihon Waza as pedagogy contains its own legitimacy in and of itself (i.e. something is basic because it is of value, something is of value because it is basic), form can come to hold a higher status to that of function. At an extreme level, this type of practice lends itself to a reification of idealized form – most often seen in a strict adherence to the belief in the superiority of one's own forms. Shu, on the other hand, gains its legitimacy solely through its interaction between itself and Ha training and Ri training. Shu does not exist in and of itself. Hence, it cannot be its own justification.

Because Kihon Waza justifies its own make-up via a self-serving and circular argument, a reification of form can take on many other formats, such as: a belief in the equality of all forms, a belief in an innate spontaneity thought to be present in the architecture itself, and the belief that all combative issues can be addressed by technical means. All of these things go on to feed the self-serving justification for Kihon Waza, and thus all of these things go on to inhibit a practitioner's capacity to move beyond this type of practice. This is why it is no mere coincidence that one sees an almost undying loyalty to the forms from one's tradition whenever one sees a total lack of spontaneous training in that tradition.

Though Kihon Waza justifies itself via a circular argument, which is merely an argument of preference, this is not to say that this type of training does not hold its proper and/or needed place in Budo praxis overall. It does have its place. What is at issue here, what is at fault here, is its disjointedness and its ensuing privileging from and over the entirety of Budo training. Traditionally, a reification of form, or a misplaced privileging of Kihon Waza over the entirety of Budo training, was prevented by firmly fitting basic training within the epistemological practice of Shu-Ha-Ri. However, today that is seldom done. As a

result, the gap between Kihon Waza and Shu training is widening. For some it is now too broad to bridge. Because we are dealing with a great and growing difference it is not without merit to cite some of the various points of departure between the two types of training that can exist within a given technique. I will use Katate-dori Ikkyo.

Today, and generally speaking, in Kihon Waza, Ikkyo is made up of a series of movements. These movements tend to be gross movements. They consist of foot positions, transitions, hand and arm gestures, postural states, etc. As the movements remain gross in description and in execution, strategic and tactical understandings, if at all made relevant, also remain gross. On the other hand, in Shu training, Ikkyo is made up rather of fine details that are at every moment under pressure to remain strategically valid and tactically sound. In Shu training, Ikkyo exist only as a blanket term for these details. As such, in Shu training, Ikkyo exists almost as much as it does not exist. Ikkyo is a type of working definition – which is the antithesis of a traditionalistic understanding, which is Kihon Waza as it is most commonly practiced today.

As a traditionalistic understanding, a given example of Ikkyo is reified, along with its particular usage (e.g. against wrist grabs) and with its scenario (e.g. a person coming up to you and grabbing your wrist). A practitioner's mark of skill then becomes proportionate to how well one can simulate and/or emulate tradition, or in this case, how well one can perform the given technique against a person who walks up to you and grabs your wrist. We see this to clearly be the case as we look to the manner in which rank and title, markers of skill, are determined today. In Shu training, Ikkyo, the wrist grab, and the scenario are understood to be things that exist somewhere between the incidental and the irrelevant. What is at issue are things such as Angles of Cancellation, Angles of Deviation, Timing, Angles of Disturbance, Economy of Motion, Duration of Motion, Control Maintenance, Domination of Spirit, Yin/Yang Considerations, etc. In the former case, a practitioner comes to emulate their instructor simply because that is the manner by which he or she will be judged skilled or not. In the latter, a practitioner comes to resemble his or her teacher simply because both are executing and applying particular types of Angle of Cancellation, Angles of Deviation, Timing, Angles of Disturbance, Economy of Motion, Duration of Motion, Control Maintenance, Domination of Spirit, Yin/Yang Considerations, etc.

One may come to think that the arbitrariness of a Kihon Waza that is separated fully from a Shu-Ha-Ri training model may turn a practitioner into an exact copy of his or her teacher. However, this is not necessarily so. In fact, closer resemblances exist between sensei and deshi that are cultivated through Shu training. This is because Shu training answers to a martial science. While this martial science is traditional (i.e. passed along a tradition), it is not traditionalistic (i.e. traditional for tradition's sake). As scientific principles, whatever the field, warrant consistency and thus lend themselves to duplication, closer emulation of technique between practitioners is more present in training that is Shu driven than in Kihon Waza driven training. Today, because Kihon Waza is so often treated as its own end, and because of the arbitrariness that is present in the traditionalistic positions that support that standpoint, different versions of Ikkyo from within the same scenario are often present not only within one dojo but also within one practitioner. Sometimes these versions are even antithetical to each other - as in the case of addressing shomenuchi on the way down and the way up in Shomenuchi Ikkyo Omote.

These differences between Kihon Waza and Shu training are part of a modern trend. Things do not have to be understood in this manner, nor were they understood in this manner before the modern period. Today, Kihon Waza is a self-contained entity. It is something that can be practiced in and of itself. Shu training on the other hand must always be practiced, to one degree or another, simultaneously with Ha and Ri. For example, we can note that all of Shu's fine details, and the science that is used to support them as

strategically sound and tactically valid, come from an ever-present “What if?” This “what if” is what marks the grey area through which Shu and Ha and Ri bleed into each other.

This difference between being self-contained and being part of an interdependent grey area is an important distinction. It comes to play a large role in how one moves when faced with varying degrees of unknown. Thus, it comes to play a role in how much one moves like one’s teacher at a spontaneous level. In practitioners that train in Shu, the consistent application of the martial sciences is applied at spontaneous levels of performance. Hence, even at spontaneous levels of performance, resemblance is present between a teacher and a student. As was said before, this is so not because a student is trying to copy his or her teacher, but because a student is trying to apply the same given martial science within the same ideal environment.

On the other hand, practitioners of a self-contained Kihon Waza can show no emulation of or resemblance to their teacher. This is because true spontaneous expression is not possible. True spontaneous expression is not possible because a reification of form posits, incorrectly, that when faced with the “failure” of one technique (e.g. Ikkyo), one simply goes on to another (e.g. Nikyo). With no viable outlet for an application of martial science within a spontaneous situation, what comes to the surface is nothing more than various types of physical eruptions that are thoroughly grounded in the personal history of the practitioner in question. That is to say, such a practitioner just does “whatever” when faced with the unknown. “Whatever” comes from the deepest recesses of his or her subjective body/mind. The chances of one “whatever” from one person resembling the “whatever” from other person are next to none.

In light of these things, in a self-contained, traditionalistic, self-justifying, arbitrarily based Kihon Waza, emulation of an instructor’s “style” does take on a primary importance, or can take on a primary importance. However, we should understand this “importance” with a grain of salt, since we can also find within such training a legitimate disregard toward emulating a teacher’s style. Either way, because the Kihon Waza is arbitrarily based, self-justifying, self-contained, etc., the reasons for emulation and/or for rejecting emulation are equally arbitrary, self-justifying, self-contained, etc. In such cases of emulation, the ensuring resemblance between a teacher and a student tends to be a result of approaching one’s training in a very passive manner. That is to say, such emulation tends to occur because a practitioner disengages his or her subjective self from the entire training process. On the other hand, in Shu training, such emulation is frowned upon, even though one expects to see a higher degree of resemblance between a teacher and a student. A Shu-trained practitioner comes to resemble his or her instructor because he or she is applying the same martial science. In order to apply that martial science properly one has to be able to understand that science. In order to understand that science one has to bring all of his or her subjective body/mind to the process. In this way, we can say that a student should resemble his or her teacher, but if he or she is simply copying his or her teacher, or if he or she seeks to justify his or her own movement by the movement of his or her own teacher, then such a student would be wrong.