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Habitual and Actual Spontaneity

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Shu-Ha-Ri is a process. Its elements are co-dependent with each other. Thus, it can be said, the elements of Shu-Ha-Ri define each other as they define themselves. Shu-Ha-Ri is a process through which, by which, and with which, a practitioner of a given art is “transported” from a state of being that carries already within it both an attachment to form and a type of spontaneity to another type of relationship to form and to another type of spontaneity. Suggesting, before training we are all already attached to certain types of responses and reactions – just as we are already attached to the means by which we have developed those responses and reactions. These responses and reactions are more habitual than not and they are derived from our personal histories. In a way, they are learned. This is why these responses are often so contradictory to Budo, since Budo is itself a different type of education. These pre-training reactions are fueled by our inability to reconcile the presence of Fear, Pride, and Ignorance in our lives. By the time we are adults, we have “practiced” these reactions to such a degree, and thus lived out non-reconciliation with Fear, Pride, and Ignorance to a similar degree, that we can in many cases appear quite spontaneous with these reactions while we nevertheless remain slave to them. There will be times, when stressors have reached high enough a level, for example, when we will react in a usual way but will do so without realizing it. “It just came out of the blue!,” but was 100% in agreement with everything else we have ever done under more calculated circumstances.

In a way then, we already have the mechanisms for Shu-Ha-Ri within ourselves. This would make sense. We as human beings have the capacity to find spontaneity within a given set of responses, reactions, and/or within the underlying context of those responses and reactions. This all has to be there at some natural level outside of contrived educations for Shu-Ha-Ri to work and to function. Buddhism does hold that such a process is a natural function of human existence. However, we should never say that the shaping of a pre-training habitual way of being is the Shu-Ha-Ri process at work. The two modes of being are different even though they may be related somewhat at a mechanical level. As I said above, Shu-Ha-Ri is a process by which these other types of habitual ways of being are “displaced” with another type of being – one supported by the tenets, principles, and philosophies of the art in question. Shu-Ha-Ri is then best understood as a process of displacement AND replacement. Shu-Ha-Ri is a displacement of types of habitual spontaneity that are based upon an attachment to form and grounded in our lack of reconciliation with Fear, Pride, and Ignorance. It is a process carried forth for the purposes of replacing habitual spontaneity with another type of spontaneity that is based upon a non-attachment to form (which is different from a negation of form) and a reconciliation with Fear, Pride, and Ignorance.

In this way, Shu is initially an introduction of other/new principles, concepts, reactions, responses, etc., to given situations. We train in or experience these new things via forms, etiquette, dojo culture, sensei/deshi

relationships, senpai/kohai relationships, etc. Shu training must involve as many elements as needed to expose and/or to bring to the surface our actual habitual reactions. It does this primarily via contrast. Shu training must also commence bringing to the surface the non-reconciliation with Fear, Pride, and Ignorance that has fully been supporting such reactions up until training has commenced. Through training in the dojo, one's habitual ways of being are put next to alternate ways of being – ways of being that the art feels are in accordance with itself. Thus, Shu is a positing of sorts. Shu is an adding of sorts. Shu is a construction of sorts. From the student's point of view, Shu is very non-invasive; the teacher shows and you do. As such, Shu takes full advantage of the human being's natural capacity to adopt new habits. Shu training therefore is a precarious matter. If training is left to itself, left to start and stop here, which is the place where most of us are forced to leave our training, one remains stuck in a land of form and thus left with little or no capacity for true spontaneous expression. One will simply produce another version of the habitual spontaneity that was mentioned above. Training will thus serve to only reinforce our incapacity to reconcile Fear, Pride, and Ignorance in our lives.

If you place an aikidoka with this level of training, which is the level for most of us, in a spontaneous situation, what will you see? What type of spontaneity is this habitual spontaneity? It is a spontaneity that is inconsistent in its expression. As it manifests itself, it will fluctuate between seemingly adaptation and inaccurate prediction. It will tend to rely upon and be restricted to common patterns of action and thought. It will show stylistic preferences and it will demonstrate a tendency toward either a single rhythm or a total lack of rhythm. Depending upon the number of years which said practitioner has been undertaking Shu level training, one's spontaneous expression will be peppered to a relative degree with reactions and responses that are clearly from the habitual way of being that they first walked in the dojo with. Physically, these things are often exhibited by forcing techniques to fit where they should not or cannot fit; by holding one's breath; by deviating when one should have entered; by entering when one should have deviated; by panic expressions on the face; by choppy movements; by being too late; by being too early; by hesitating, by premature exhaustion; etc. This all occurs because one's training is still bogged down by form, by habit, and thus by the mechanisms through which we become attached to habit and form. We can say, the heart/mind, is "fettered" – fettered by a sea of choices, all of which are functioning within us at different levels of consciousness and of body-consciousness.

Flooded by choices, it is as if the practitioner becomes "stuck" in a swamp of mud. However, sometimes it will look like he/she is "getting it." Occasionally, it will appear as if the practitioner is truly capable of actual spontaneous expression. Rather, what we are seeing, and what is clearly visible to a person that has "fulfilled" the process of Shu-Ha-Ri, is merely a product of chance. Chance will occasionally dictate, even within spontaneous training conditions, that a coincidence should occur between habitual action and proper response. This is due to things like stylistic preferences being supported by an attacker and/or by predictions stumbling upon accuracy, etc. Outside of these rare events, which are made all the rarer by sophisticated attackers, one simply sees a type of spontaneity that is plagued by an abiding mind – a heart/mind that is "stuck" and only understands "form as form." Takuan Soho in his treatise writes on this topic. He says:

"The term 'ignorance' means the absence of enlightenment. Which is to say 'delusion.' 'Abiding place' means the place where the mind stops. In the practice of Buddhism, there are said to be fifty-two stages, and within these fifty-two, the place where the mind stops at one thing is called the 'abiding place.' Abiding signifies stopping, and 'stopping' means the mind is being detained by some matter, which may be any matter at all. To speak in terms of your martial art, when you first notice the sword that is moving to strike you, if you think of meeting that sword just as it is, your mind will stop at the sword in just that position, your own movements will be undone, and you will be cut down by your opponent. This is what 'stopping' means... Whether by the strike of the enemy or your own thrust, whether by the man

who strikes or the sword that strikes, whether by position or rhythm, if your mind is diverted in any way, your actions will falter, and this can mean that you will be cut down. If you place yourself before you opponent, your mind will be taken by him. You should not place your mind within yourself. Bracing the mind in the body is something done only at the inception of training, when one is a beginner. The mind can be taken by the sword. If you put your mind in the rhythm of the contest, your mind can be taken by that as well. If you place your mind in your own sword, your mind can be taken by your own sword. Your mind stopping at any of these places, you become an empty shell. You surely recall such situations yourself. They can be said to apply to Buddhism. In Buddhism, we call this stopping of the mind ‘delusion.’ Thus we say, ‘The affliction of abiding in ignorance.’”

On this point, the Heart Sutra implies that such “stopping” is a product of only realizing that “form is form.” Plagued by a sea of options and by an attachment to the mechanisms that support that perspective, one has not yet reconciled the truth that “form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form.” Hence, “the affliction of abiding in ignorance.”

Ha is that co-dependent aspect of the overall Shu-Ha-Ri process that commences the displacement/replacement mechanism that is at the core of ceasing the affliction of abiding. Ha is a negating of sorts. Ha is a reduction of sorts. Ha is a deconstruction of sorts. From the student’s point of view, Ha is very invasive; the student does, the teacher penetrates to the doer through the doing. While Shu takes full advantage of the human being’s capacity to adopt new habits, Ha training addresses our attachment to that process. If we want to speak of Ha in positive terms, we can say, Ha training involves the cultivation of non-attachment. This is why we can say that Ha training is not necessarily about one more variation on a form, one more technique, one more principle or concept, etc. Ha training is about reconciling our attachment to such things. Thus, Ha training is often about uncovering the ways in which we have taken our Shu training and fed it into our habitual way of not reconciling Fear, Pride, and Ignorance in our lives. Toward this end, Ha training must of course also make full use of the things Shu training does. However, it should also make use of the following: zazen or some other type of praxis involving moments of silence and isolated “confrontations” of self (e.g. purification, prayer, etc.); training with high levels of intensity; training regularly under spontaneous conditions; and the guidance of a teacher capable of noting and reflecting the subtle forms of attachment that experts of Shu can unknowingly demonstrate, a teacher capable of ensuring that a spontaneity that is in accordance with the art in question is being produced and not another.

If Shu is the blood of Budo training, Ha is the heart of Budo training. Without Ha our training is reduced at the physical level to mere matters of choreography; at the spiritual level, our training is a reinforcement of the status quo that has us without a reconciliation toward the Fear, Pride, and Ignorance - we are only left with that which plagues our life and the lives of those around us. Without Ha, without the cultivation of non-attachment, our spontaneous expressions have to be considered more habitual than not. Habitual spontaneity, which is not really a spontaneity at all, is a poor substitute for Ri. It is as poor a substitution as is substituting the maintenance of one’s emotional and psychological status quo for actual spiritual transformation.