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Relating Ha to Shu by David M. Valadez

I imagine that one must allow for stylistic preferences when it comes to the manner in which various schools and/or teachers lead others to Ri (trans. spontaneity). This is the same thing in Ch'an and Zen history -- each temple and/or master had his particular way of "bringing" or "guiding" students toward Awakening. That said, I hope we can realize that there are many ways of translating what some have called "a human concept that has grown out of a need to attach a label or definition to a natural progression that CAN occur through the various stages of training over the years." In the end, like great Ch'an masters of old, the proof is in the number of students that have had this level of transmission take place. Everything else, we have to agree, will have to allow for a number of ways of saying the same thing, as well as a number of ways that may be completely different from each other -- even contradictory -- while nevertheless equally remaining valid. In addition, however, there will be things said that cannot be considered valid under any model. One will have to decide for oneself -- as always.

Our way, what we do in our dojo, is simply one of many, I imagine. (Though I would completely agree with the position that there are relatively very few dojo that truly work with Shu, Ha, and Ri as a central aspect of training.) We have made choices in what it is we have done and what it is we will not do and of course then also in terms of what we are currently doing. Some things often mentioned we have turned away from (e.g. "Ha is taught after Shu;" "Ha training is only for black belts," "Shu is about form and Ha is about variations on given forms," etc.). Others, we practice diligently. We have our reasons for both. For example, I have found no benefit to practicing or to thinking of Shu, Ha, and/or Ri in linear terms. Nor do I find any benefit in practicing and/or thinking upon such things in relation to institutional hierarchies -- which are in themselves antithetical to what Ri is all about anyway. In most cases, rank is more coincidental than it is relative when it comes to Ri.

I do not equate Shu, for example, with Ikkyo (Kihon Waza). Thus, I do not equate Ha, for example, with variations of Ikkyo (Kihon Waza). Shu, Ha, Ri has its origins in Buddhist thought. One can with ease trace it back to the formation of the Mahayana stance, and thus to the Indian thinker Nagarjuna. Its most readily accessible testament is at the core of Zen training and thus of Budo history. This testament is the Heart Sutra. In this text the apparent dichotomy of form and non-form are addressed. In reading this text, we should not necessarily understand form and non-form to be a matter of objective reality. I think some folks take this position -- either knowingly or unknowingly. In the text, form and non-form are more our experience of reality than anything else -- so to speak. In like sense, Shu and Ha are better understood as our experience of Ikkyo and non-Ikkyo and not as pertaining to Kihon Waza abstractly.

In other words, one has not left the realm of form, or the realm of Shu, simply because one has adopted to train in yet one more version of Ikkyo. Both the Kihon Waza version and the new variation are for the most part still of Shu and still of form. By the reasoning of the Heart Sutra, one can have 10,000 versions of Ikkyo and still will not necessarily leave the realm of Shu and enter into Ha.

For me, Shu (particularly from the viewpoint of Ha) is not so much Ikkyo as much as it is our natural inclination to attach to form -- to attach to Ikkyo. Ha then is not a breaking of form -- a departure from Ikkyo - that is thought to take place by simply introducing more forms. Ha is a "breaking" with our attachment to form. Yes, both of these things we may do through an introduction of form, however, the process of introducing form must be done in such a way that form is not reified. This latter thing does not happen simply by having variations on a theme. Rather, the introduction of form must be done in such a way that our natural inclination to be attached to a form is not supported by our training. This is why I feel that Shu and Ha must be practiced concurrently. After all, Ha is not the introduction of poor form, nor is it the absence of addressing good form. A student's progress in technique is not subverted or hindered by addressing their attachment to form. On the contrary, tradition holds that true understanding, which includes understanding technical matters, does not occur until a reconciliation of form and non-form has passed. In this sense, the forms we use as Ha are forms that amplify, address, enlarge, shed light upon, etc., our attachment to form (form in general -- not just Ikkyo).

This is why a teacher's role is so important when it comes to Shu-Ha-Ri training. A teacher, through upaya (trans. Skillful Means), determines both the level of attachment and the tool necessary to bring that level of attachment to the attention of the student. This process goes on and on until a level of reconciliation between form and non-form is reached in the student (by the student).