



(*Shu Ha Ri* written by the Author, 2014)

When dealing with foreign concepts, we often begin the learning process by relating the new and unknown to that which we have already experienced. We take steps to understand the laws and the rules that govern that which we are learning and try to make sense of them so that we can incorporate them comfortably into our lives. We do this under the assumption that doing so will, in some way, improve the quality of our lives. But when dealing with foreign philosophies we are often at a disadvantage because there is nothing that we can readily compare them to. That is to say, there is nothing that we have experienced that can provide us with a point of reference by which to navigate through the learning process of this foreign concept. However, when dealing with Japanese philosophical concepts within the martial arts, *kanji* can offer us a window through which to see an overview of the story that describes the complexities of the concept itself.

By deconstructing each of the *kanji*, one can further contemplate the building blocks that, when put together, make up the whole of the concept. This is why developing Japanese language proficiency is essential for this type of research. We must keep in mind, when conducting any ethnographic research that a multitude of cultural influences have shaped the traditions which have contributed to the forming of the concept as a whole and to each individual piece of it. Therefore, in order to make accurate assessments of the pieces and of the whole, development of an in-depth awareness of the cultural conditions is also extremely important, perhaps even more important than language proficiency.

This essay aims to describe the stages in the process of growth and development known as “*Shu Ha Ri*.” I will draw upon insider knowledge developed during my more than 20 years living and learning in Japan as well as referencing some of the available literature on child development and *Shu ha ri* specifically. In this essay, I relate the often-misunderstood concept to a well-known developmental theory that is commonly applied in the West to both child

development and teacher development research. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), is unique because it illustrates the importance of moving outward past one's comfort zone to develop potential proficiency of skills in the form of proximal development through meditate language and the aid of what Vygotsky called "more knowledgeable others" (MKO).

I recommend those who are interested in learning more about this and other concepts within and related to Japanese martial arts to conduct their own research. It is through the process of finding, decoding, synthesizing, and presenting information that we deepen and broaden our understanding.

Outline

This essay begins with a brief description of each of the individual *kanji* included in this concept and alternate readings for each are also provided. The discussion then moves onto the process of development that *Shu ha ri* describes. Each of the three parts which make up the whole of this concept of growth are then addressed individually before offering a comparison of the concept of *shu ha ri* to the family unit and growth of children into adult-hood. Pointing out that it is through recognizing the similarities to this natural developmental cycle of life that we can attain a deeper understanding of this concept. It then becomes evident that *shu ha ri* is not limited to *karate-do* or even the martial arts but rather encompasses the entirety of human development. It is here that connections to Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory are referenced for their substantive attributes to the line of reasoning in the discussion. Finally, the three parts of *Shu ha ri* are addressed once again in a *karate-do* specific context to close the paper.

Deconstructing the Individual Kanji Including Alternate Readings and Interpretations

守 *Shu* (守る *Mamoru*) refers to 'protecting' something as it has been passed down through generations. We do this by following the rules to the letter, i.e., by doing what we are told regardless of whether we are able to recognize the correctness of what we are being told to do. This is the lowest stage of development. At this stage, we must simply follow orders without question. This type of "blind" following of the way as it has always been done can also be referred to as maintaining the status quo.

破 *Ha* (破る *Yaburu*) refers to the friction that must occur in order for change to happen. The process of breaking down that which you have followed, without question, for so long.

This development brings with it much confusion and frustration. It is possible, at this stage, to begin to develop personal interpretations and in so doing “break away from” the tradition and begin developing one's own way of doing things. By developing original customs, one begins to challenge the status quo while at the same time continuing to preserve the core elements that they deem most important within the traditional approach.

離 *Ri* (離れる *Hanareru*) refers to the physical and metaphorical “distance” from where the individual started to where they have come. On their journey of growth and development through experience, practice, and contemplation, they have changed. At this stage, one has both developed the knowledge and attained the experience to deeply reflect on the basic principles they were taught and even, in some cases, manipulate the rules to suit their own needs. At this stage, the experienced practitioner begins to do things their “own way.” But their own way is still deeply rooted in the traditions they learned when they were still novice. However, now they may begin to create their own customs to preserve the fundamental traditions. One may consider such actions adaptive or changing with the times rather than creating something new from scratch.

Human Development is Never Linear

Although these stages are often presented in a seemingly linear fashion, it is important to recognize whenever discussing the process of human development that stages do not always progress from start to finish in a straight line as they are often presented (Guskey, 1995, 2002; King & Brooks, 2017). In reality, human development is much messier with many ups and downs and twists and turns. A more realistic image of human development is that of a circular progression that may shift back and forth as the individuals experience new challenges and develop new skills. Therefore, one may argue that there is potential to shift back and forth between any of these three stages of *shu ha ri* throughout one's development and that the process is never ending in that completing a cycle is to come full-circle and begin the process again resembling the famous saying, “such is the circle of life.”

Developmental Theory in Martial Arts

This concept of development was first presented within the martial arts context by Fuhaku Kawakami *Sensei* and later became an important concept in the philosophy of *Aikido* and *Shorinji Kempo*. The following is a definition of the process given by Endo Seishiro, *Aikido* master. Endō Seishirō *shihan* stated:

SHU HA RI the Process of Human Development

It is known that, when we learn or train in something, we pass through the stages of *shu*, *ha*, and *ri*. These stages are explained as follows. In *shu*, we repeat the forms and discipline ourselves so that our bodies absorb the forms that our forebears created. We remain faithful to these forms with no deviation. Next, in the stage of *ha*, once we have disciplined ourselves to acquire the forms and movements, we make innovations. In this process the forms may be broken and discarded. Finally, in *ri*, we completely depart from the forms, open the door to creative technique, and arrive in a place where we act in accordance with what our heart/mind desires, unhindered while not overstepping laws. (Aiki News, 2005/2011)

The concept of heart/mind is a uniquely Asian concept. Heart and mind are often dealt with separately in the West. However, the commonly used translation for 心 *kokoro* (*shin*) is heart/mind in many Chinese classic texts. This *kanji* can be used to represent both the intrinsic spirit of an individual, i.e., their soul or the relationship between the mind and the body. Therefore, when Endō posits that the practitioner can act in accordance with what their heart/mind desires, he is most certainly implying this mind and body connection resonating within the technique.

***Shu Ha Ri* as a Healthy Process of Growth**

I strongly believe the most easily understood illustration of this process of growth can be seen in the family unit. Although it can also be found in many other facets of our lives, from learning a new skill, to on-the-job training, and various other forms of developmental programming. Numerous parallels can be drawn to the concept of *shu ha ri* because it is a natural process of human development.

Some researchers have started applying the principles of *shu ha ri* to organizational change and development for success in such areas as sport and business. At the core of the message is the suggestion that the same set of practices does not work for everyone or in every case. Organizations have to figure out which practices will be most effective at reaching their specific goals (see Elssamadisy, 2008).

This process, when related to the family unit, outlines the major components of growing from childhood to adulthood. It is common knowledge that a new born baby is totally dependant on their parents or care givers. Every child begins their life dependent on the care and guidance of those responsible for them. At this stage in the infant's existence, the attention

given to the rules and laws that govern our lives are of the utmost importance. As the infant grows both mentally and physically, they begin to develop their own ideas and beliefs about themselves and their environment. Cognition is developed through interacting with their environment using their senses which in turn further stimulates cognitive function, contributing to further growth and development (see Piaget, 1936).

While Piaget's focus was on the biological influences on the cognitive development of children, Vygotsky looked at the influence of the social environment on cognitive development through such mediators as language and learning tools. Both the contributions of Piaget and Vygotsky have provided us with a detailed blueprint of cognitive and social development among children. We can now clearly see the stages of human development and that there is a definite stage where the child is egocentric and another when some rebel, challenge authority, and disagree with rules which they perceive to be based on values different from their own.

The critical stage of a child's social development is between the ages of 1 and 4 years old. This is when the child is exposed to the social rules that dictate the way relationships are formed and preserved within the family unit. The values, ideals, philosophies, and actions of their parents and other family members in this early stage of their lives deeply affects and helps to form their core beliefs. Later, through further expanding social interactions, the child's proximal development may be fostered through such relationships as found in school and the *karate-do dojo*, i.e., Teacher-student, classmates, *Senpai-Kohai*, and *Sensei-Deshi*.

Bronfenbrenner (1992) describes the importance of these relationships in his *Eco systemic Approaches to Child Development*. Wherein the "closest level to the child, socialisation within the micro-system is influenced by those who are emotionally and practically closest to the individual." This resembles Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development in that the child is guided through the stages of development by MKOs which may include: parents, care givers, and immediate family members. The title of MKO may also be extended to any person in a mentor-type position including: teachers, coaches, trainers, and supervisors. It is within this category *Sensei* and *Snepai* fall.

Eventually the child, growing to adulthood, moves away from the MKOs and begins to live their lives according to the beliefs and values which have formed over many years as they grew and developed within the family unit and society. In short, there is a stage in a child's development when they reject the beliefs of their parents only to find that the core beliefs have

held steadfast even after they have distanced themselves from their parents in their adulthood. Adapting to make the beliefs and values their own, they create their original system, the principles of which are based the values that were passed onto them and that they will pass onto their children. All of which they have learned from the influential family members when they were young.

Example of Manipulating the Rule to Maintain the Tradition

As outlined above, the ‘breaking’ aspect of *ha* (*yaburu*) should not be misinterpreted as destroying completely. Rather it implies, breaking down the components of the whole to better understanding its parts. Next, a practical example of how I was able to apply the principles of *shu ha ri* in my everyday life is given.

Both of my children were born in Japan. In Canada there is the tradition of giving children a middle name. The rules are simple, if a boy is born, they receive the name of their father as their middle name. If a girl, the name of their mother is given. In Japan there is no such tradition. So, I had to find a way to manipulate the current rules to preserve this tradition. My first born was a girl and I thought long and hard about her name. There were many things to consider. The *kanji*, the pronunciation, the meaning, and all of the other things that would influence her character according to Japanese name-giving customs and traditions.

I considered her name to be the most important present I would ever give her and I wanted to preserve the middle name tradition of my home country in it. I decided to do this by using one of the two *kanji* in my wife’s name, essentially giving her a piece of her mother’s name and inserting it directly into her first name. This is an example of actions taken by someone who was familiar enough with the rules to bend them to suit their needs. A defining factor of progression through *shu ha ri*. A novice would have simply forfeited and followed the rules, win or lose or insisted on giving the child a middle name creating confusion and stress. The point I wish to make here is that Someone who is more advanced in their development has the ability to manipulate the rules to produce a favorable win/win outcome.

***Shu Ha Ri* in the *karate-do* context**

As mentioned in the introduction, to deepen our understanding of such complex concepts as this, we must develop both language proficiency and cultural awareness. This next section makes use of both to describe *shu ha ri* more specifically within the context of *karate-do*.



(High school students practicing *Kata* at Shuri Castle, Okinawa)

守る *Mamoru*

The process begins when we first begin our training; 入門 *Nyumon* the first *kanji* 入 *Nyu* or *Hairu* represents to enter and the second, 門 *Mon* or *Kado* represents a Gateway. Together these characters imply the action of entering the gates of the temple or Hall of learning. In the case of *karate-do* this hall of learning is the *dojo*. Therefore (道場入門), represents entering or joining a *Dojo*. This implies the initial action of embarking on the lengthy process of learning, 学習 *Gaku-shu*. Through joining a private institution such as 私立塾 *Shiritsu Juku*, Private Cram School or upon agreement to begin service at a temple or shrine. There is an unwritten agreement that the student will obey the rules, without question.

When a student of *karate-do* first embarks on this learning process, they are almost entirely dependant on their teacher; 先生 *Sensei*, which literally means “born before,” and the lessons they teach will provide the student with their most basic understanding of both the techniques of the art and its core values. The student must trust in their *Sensei* the way infants trust their parents; believing that they are acting in their best interest and that the points delivered through their sometimes-unorthodox lessons (e.g., Mr. Miyagi's “Wax on Wax Off” lesson in the Karate kid) will have a positive impact on their future. It should also be noted that

this is not limited to technical skills. The philosophies and ethics behind their *Sensei's* actions are also translated, although usually unnoticed, at this time as well. This is also the stage when respect must be formed. With this trust and respect for their teacher, the students do as they are told and grow according to the quality of the style's techniques and principles.

As the student grows, they inevitably begin to think of ways that they can perform specific tasks with less effort. And in doing so, they begin to adapt techniques to better suite their physical attributes or their environment. When this occurs, they begin to approach the next stage of growth.

破る *Yaburu*

Often translated as tear, but misunderstandings sometimes arise when we try to interpret the use of the word "tear" further because it is also sometimes represented by the *kanji* 裂く *Saku*, this also means to tear, but is more commonly used in the context to describe severing ties. I don't believe that this is the intended meaning of 破る *Yaburu* within the context of human development and especially in the pursuit of *karate-do*.

Humans are social creatures and the Asian social structure is based, more than anything else, on the strong ties developed within the community which is an extension of the family. Therefore, all moral codes of conduct reflect values instilled while growing up in the family. Even though *saku* will often come up when you search *yaburu*, the two should never be used interchangeably. Misunderstandings such as this substantiate the statement made earlier in this paper stressing the importance of developing language proficiency. Although one of the readings for different *kanji* may sound the same, they do not mean the same thing. It requires effort and commitment to learn another language, especially one as complex as Japanese. However, doing so will save the researcher/practitioner from making such detrimental mistakes with their interpretations.

How can this fit in the context of growth and development when *Yaburu* means to bend, break, or even tear? I suggest the image of tearing a piece of paper to make it a specific size or shape as needed to fit into a piece of something larger that is being created. In his 2009 USC Commencement Address, Arnold Schwarzenegger spoke of his six rules for success. In it he suggested, in order to succeed we must "break some of the rules, not the law, but the rules". His message, as I interpreted it, is to find ways to make the laws work for us by manipulating the rules in our favour. This ability to manipulate the rules, especially the rules of something

SHU HA RI the Process of Human Development

as old and complex as *karate-do* to make them work in our favour requires an in-depth knowledge and ability that most of us will never be able to attain on any large scale. But if we look for examples within our training and in competition, we can see that this is indeed done and often. In fact, every practitioner does this when they try to make various technique 技 *Waza*, work in their favour, compensating for such differences as height, weight, reach, and flexibility. I am sure we have all adapted a technique based on such parameters and continue to do so whenever we practice with someone else or compete against another opponent. This is the stage when the *karate-do waza* that we have practiced as a basic 基本 *Kihon*, begin to become our own and this is a very important stage in our development as *karate-ka*.

When a *karate-ka* reaches this stage in their development, rapid growth and development can occur. However, there is also a lot of turmoil and frustration in this stage of growth. When things do not go as we had planned, as we struggle between the gap of knowledge and proficiency, much like the teenage years of our lives when we either rebelled or quit trying to figure out something we didn't understand, or didn't think we needed in our lives. The danger is, if we stop learning at this stage or discard important *kihon* (implying both the physical basics and the core principles that make up *karate-do*) in an attempt to advance quicker, we may end up severing those ties to the traditional ways. If this occurs, the results can be very detrimental.

Just as our parents put up with some of the acting out while trying to guide us from a far, so too do our *Sensei* let us explore, get confused, and frustrated at this stage of our development. These are the important challenges that we need to face individually and overcome in order to continue to mature. Guiding us in subtle ways from a far ensures that the ties to the core beliefs are never completely severed. As we begin to surmount these difficulties and adapt to the new conditions, we begin to recognize the distance that we have come and although it is not comfortable, we realize that we must continue to train in this manner; learning and developing through adaptation while simultaneously honoring the traditional approach. By respecting our teachers, we honour the traditions that preceded us. By adapting to our unique situation as the distance increases, we continue to grow and deepen our understanding of *karate-do*. Still under the watchful eye of our *Sensei*, whose lessons have moulded and shaped us, we continue. This foundation of principle and respect must never weaken.

離す *Hanasu*

Just as we cannot live with our parents forever; the natural progression of growth from infant to adulthood leads to one day moving out and starting our own family, as mentioned above. The natural progression in *karate-do* development is similar in that there will also be a time when we must move further away from the watchful eye of our *Sensei* and begin training on our own or begin building our own *dojo*. This is the final stage in the process of *Shu Ha Ri*. However, it is not the end of the cycle.

When we distance ourselves from our *Sensei*, we take with us the teachings, philosophies, and techniques that we have practiced, developed, and adapted with us. When we begin teaching our own students, there will inevitably be a time when we catch ourselves saying the same thing that was told to us when we were at that stage in our training. No matter the conflict that occurred during that time of confusion and rebellion, the core values hold strong because they are our foundation.

Conclusion

The developmental process is a long and challenging one. The more advanced a practitioner of *karate-do* becomes the greater the need to “humble ourselves to our training” (Delaney, personal communication) becomes. The distance of the final stage of development is both an inward and outward marker, as it also represents how far one has come from the time they first commenced their training, to the time they begin to build their own training programs.

Embarking on this new journey away from the *dojo* one began their training in does not mean one must split off from the 連盟 *Renmei*, Organization or 流派 *Ryuha*, 会派 *Kaiha* Style. Especially immediately after or during the struggle of the second phase, *yaburu*. Distancing one’s self from the organization because they feel they have outgrown their teacher or the style is a fool’s endeavour. I would liken this to the difference between an adolescent who runs away from home and the young adult moving out of the home they grew up in to start their own life. The later doesn't require severing all ties with their family. This is just another part of the process. Unfortunately, in *karate-do* this is something that has often been misinterpreted. *Shu ha ri* has been quoted as the reason for some splits and justification for mid-to-high-level practitioners creating their own style of Karate. I do not believe that this process was designed for the pure purpose of creating new Styles, as shown above. It is rather, a natural progression based on healthy growth that is based in honoring the ways of the old by adapting them to

work in any given modern circumstance, i.e., preserving the ways of the old by adapting them to fit the new. As we continue to learn and grow, we show our respect to the traditions. As we contemplate the necessary adaptations to coincide with modern conditions, we deepen our understanding of the techniques and their principles. Such a posture honors our predecessors.

There are many examples about how this applies to the Martial Arts and this concept often comes up in discussions regarding splits in various *ryuha*, *kaiha*, or *renmei*. But I like the example of the family, provided above, because it expresses how natural this process of learning and development really is. *Shu ha ri*, when considered in the terms laid out in this essay, ceases to be a foreign esoteric concept. It becomes the natural progression from child to adulthood, inexperienced to experienced, and novice to expert, a process that we can all become invested in because it is genuine.

References

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues* (p. 187–249). Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Elssamadisy, A. (2008). *Agile adoption patterns: A roadmap to organizational success*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Guskey, T. R. (2002). Professional development and teacher change. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*.
- Guskey, T. (1995). Professional development in education: In search of the optimal mix. In T. Guskey & M. Huberman (Eds.), *Professional development in education: New paradigms and practices* (pp. 114–131). Teachers College Press.
- King, N. & Brooks, J.M. (2017). *Template analysis for business and management students*. SAGE Publications.
- Nishinaiki News, Japan. (2011). *An interview with Endô Seishirô Shihan. Dou, 144*. (Nishina, D., & Hideo, A. Trans) *Cosmos Online*. (Original work published 2005)
- Piaget, J. (1936). *Origins of intelligence in the child*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. *Readings on the development of children, 23*(3), 34-41.