

Loose reflections on Budo, Karatedo and Wado Ryu karate in particular (1)

Because I have always been of the opinion that a budo practitioner -in addition to his daily practice- should constantly reflect on that same practice and subject it to critical reflection, I am making you part of some of these reflections. The reader should take note of these in the full knowledge that these are subjective views on an occupation to which I have always devoted myself with heart and soul.

On the principle of Shu Ha Ri (守破離) and my personal adaptation to it:

In the Japanese culture of Do disciplines, this is a profound principle that cannot always be defined unambiguously. A satisfactory definition of it gives, as follows, the Aikido master Endo Sheishiro shihan:

"It is known that when we learn or train something, we go 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 body absorbs the forms created by our ancestors. We remain true to these forms without deviating from them. Then, in the stage of **ha**, when 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 depart completely from the forms, open the door to creative technique, and arrive at a place where we act in accordance with what our heart/mind desires, unhindered while not breaking the laws."

When I think about it, I am grateful that I was able to go through my personal **Shu** stage under the tutelage of the late Yoshikazu Kamigaito sensei.

It was he who, on a weekly and unrelenting basis, hammered into us the basics of kihon and more kihon. Here I am thinking in particular of fundamental techniques such as jun- and gyaku zuki and their kette variants. Connected to this are also the kihon kata and the slightly more advanced uke techniques as they are packaged in the Pin An katas. However, the focus of his training was always on correct movement from tanden (hara) and from the hips. Those who now reread his surviving writings will note that he himself has at times doubted his ability to convey that insight to his Western students. As far as I am concerned this was completely unjustified, as our master was for me the right person at the right place in my developmental journey.

Today, more than ever, I realise that the basics of karate -i.e. its fundamental punching and kicking techniques- can be well integrated into subconscious physical action and are very useful, basic tools in agonistic, stress-ridden situations like 'free combat' and competitive karate. Anyone with some years of training behind him or her will find that these basic techniques bubble up almost spontaneously without the intervention of disturbing thinking. I hope to come back to this subject later, but I will conclude it for now with the observation that it is **IMPERATIVE** in a budo system like ours....

Because, and here we come back to Shu Ha Ri, when we have gone through that 'Shu stage', it does not mean that we may forget the specific techniques associated with it. On the contrary, even after the original teacher's instruction is gone, we must continue to repeat and constantly deepen these elementary techniques so that their application gradually becomes faster, more powerful and more effortless. There is no end point on this.

OK, so when did I enter my 'Ha stage' as a practitioner? Before we tackle this question the following observation: every karate system -and certainly Wado Ryu as a martial system- has its own specific principles. In the Wado system, set up by successive Ohtsuka generations, these are the following maxims:

Muda-na-chikara: This is unnecessary force or tension when performing an attack or defence technique. (See muda-no-dosa.)

Muda-na-dosa: This is unnecessary movement added to a technical movement. It slows down the execution of the technique by disrupting it.

Muda-na-waza: This is a useless or unnecessary technique in a particular technical sequence.

When I became separated from Kamigaito sensei's teaching over time, I still trained at my own discretion for a few years using the materials taught to me by him, but at some point I felt the time had come to look around me elsewhere. (This was a logical consequence of my personal principle that a human being, like the world around him, is constantly changing. Nothing is fixed, everything flows and a human being is an evolving entity).

So sometime around the turn of the century, I was introduced to another Wado current. This was a real revelation when I joined it in the first 'seminars' or say 'internships', which were organised several times a year; these ran over a week with four hours of intensive immersion in Wado techniques each time, then under the supervision of three, four highly ranked Japanese sensei with sometimes Hironori 'Jiro' Ohtsuka as the head instructor.

Immediately it became clear to me that compared to other dangrades, I was severely lacking in Muda-na-chikara!!! I was consuming a lot of unnecessary energy, and there was too much tension in my movements making them unnecessarily slow...In short, the importance of this principle cannot be stressed enough.

In my opinion, it forms the core of Wado Ryu giving it its intrinsic qualities that make it different from that of other karate styles. All its quick tai-sabaki and evasion movements are based on it, while whole of its kihon is also permeated by it.

It took me five, six years until this was sufficiently integrated into my technical range according to my own standards.

Today, then, very modestly, I enter my 'Ha stage'. But realising that Wado's technical arsenal is always growing, I am one hundred per cent certain that I will never reach the 'Ri stage'.

But that is not a bad thing, since the Road AFTER a goal, is more important than the Road itself....

Author: Jan Houblon

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