

# Shu Ha Ri

An exploration of growth through Aikido

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# Introduction

## Beginnings

My interests in the martial arts started at a very early age and parallels my interest and passion in music. When I was 5 or 6 my grandfather took me to my first Karate tournament at the Cow Palace in San Francisco. This was the late 60s and Asian martial arts were still steeped in mystery. I remember as a child I would put my bathrobe on, and tie the belt of my bathrobe around me as an obi. I would run around the house, with my hands in the Hai Karate cologne pose and throw karate chops slicing through the air or throw crazy and awkward kicks.

I begged my mom to take Karate lessons. She thought that it was too violent but she did learn of a Judo class at St Paul's church in San Francisco, California. This was a summer course, and my mom told me that if I wanted to take a martial arts class, I needed to take "some kind of art class". She chose folk guitar for me and bought me a small Sears Silvertone guitar. As I learned how to roll, and fall in my Judo class, I also learned Simon and Garfunkel's "Feeling Groovy" and Randy Sparks "Today".

I did not pick up the guitar or wear a keikogi for a few years after this, but was reintroduced back to the martial arts when my father took me to see the movie "Return of the Dragon" starring Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris. Around this time, one set of friends started playing guitar and listening to Kiss and Led Zeppelin, while another set of my friends started to practice martial arts in their garage. The latter set of friends, all

immigrants from Hong Kong or Vietnam, had some rudimentary knowledge of Kung Fu, and we would practice in the garage. Me being the youngest, I was usually there to “spar” (read, be their punching bag) with them. Hanging out with my musical friends inspired me to beg my mom to purchase an electric guitar and an amplifier. Thus, this cemented a life long relationship with martial arts and music.

My introduction to any kind of organized martial arts was through a Danzan Ryu JuJitsu class that some of my friends were enrolled in. They brought me along and I started with them. Our sensei, Professor James Musselman was a student of Bud Estes, a direct student of the founder of Danzan Ryu Jujitsu, Seishiro (Henry) Okazaki. The teaching method of Danzan ryu was referred to as KodenKan (senior teaching junior). I practiced for a few years as a teenager, and as most kids my age, found other things to do.

## First glimpses of Aikido

It wasn't until the late 80s that I started to gain interest in this art that seemed very new and very enticing. I rented the Steven Seagal movie, “Above the Law” and watched it with a buddy of mine. We didn't quite understand what he was doing with one move... It looked like he close lined someone, but we couldn't quite tell what it was. We would rewind, watch, rewind, watch and still couldn't figure it out. I wanted to find out more and find a school and start practicing this art. I couldn't remember “Aikido” was spelled,

and there was no internet back then, so looking up “ikido”, or “akido” in the phonebook didn’t help.

Finally, I found that this art was spelled “Aikido” and there was a big school in Redwood City, just a few miles south of San Mateo. Aikido West was my first experience with Aikido. Frank Doran had a markedly different way of carrying himself on the mat than the Steven Seagal character. There was no lanky ponytailed blackbelt on the mat that spoke perfect Japanese. Just Doran Sensei and his teaching staff. Still, the way he moved, and the way his staff was so helpful when they taught showed me that this was an interesting and worthwhile pursuit. I enjoyed my classes very much. I also enrolled in an introduction to Aikido class at San Francisco State university taught by Cress Forester, a shodan that practiced out of the Turk Street Dojo in San Francisco. After I graduated from SF State, I moved to San Francisco and changed dojos to Aikido of Noe Valley headed by Steve Gengo sensei. I practiced there till I moved up to the North Bay. Once there, a fairly large gap in my training happened. My training was on hiatus until I found Aikido of Petaluma under my current Sensei, Bob Noha.

Even still, there were gaps. Some of which was caused by medical issues with my neck, some of which was due to my own lack of interest or motivation. The last decade has found a bit more consistent practice however. It is interesting to look back on what was and it can be tempting to ask the question, “What could have happened if”... With the “if” being a more dedicated practice and less excuses, but this is a slippery slope. A sign of growth is an understanding that I have control over today, right now, and I can make decisions and commit to a fulfilling practice now.

## Shu Ha Ri

The term Shu Ha Ri has its roots in Japanese Martial arts, but weirdly, I first learned of this term in our technical development methodology at my work. Our methodology, called “Agile”, is simply a principle of development through iterative and incremental development. One of the principles of agile is the concept of Shu Ha Ri.

Shu Ha Ri can be thought of as:

- Shu - Obey the rules
- Ha - Bend the rules
- Ri - Transcend the rules

I’ve seen some definitions with Ri being defined as “Break the rules”, but I like the concept of transcending the rules, which seems more fitting as an integrative and holistic force in my life.

Put in the context of my Aikido training, this serves as an interesting reflection of my path, and how I have explored and am still exploring the art. My aikido, much like my music, offers me a much needed outlet to, as O sensei has said, “Foster and polish the

warrior spirit while serving in the world; illuminate the path according to your inner light.”

Further, Shu Ha Ri describes the process of learning, adapting and finally integrating what you’ve learned and adapted as your own.

# Shu - Obey the rules

*“At first I saw mountains as mountains, and rivers are rivers” - Zen proverb*

When we first come to any art or discipline we should come with a certain amount of humility and open mindedness. As a technical art, there are many nuances to Aikido that can prove to be difficult to gain an understanding of when you first step on the mat. There are strange words, strange formalities that start even as we bow in. We sit in seiza as sensei starts the class with “Seiza, Rei”, or “Shomeni rei”, or a silent bow with two or four claps, depending on the dojo and their tradition..

Then starts the class. We struggle to understand the warm up exercises, stretches, and ukemi practice. We may feel hesitant to throw ourselves over our own body. We start from a low position, usually on all fours, and with much trepidation, we tumble over our shoulder and end up on our side, or on our back. After sensei demonstrates a technique we partner up with another student and attempt to perform what sensei and the senior students seem to do effortlessly. We look at our partner, look at our feet and hands. “Right foot in front?”, “Hand moves up?”, “Left hand or right hand?”, “move back...wait, move off the line?” “WHAT LINE?!” All of these thoughts come to mind as we begin our Aikido Journey. Luckily for me, my Jiu Jitsu training helped me with the ukemi. But Aikido waza, with a whole new set of principles around extending ki, moving off the line, and working harmoniously to perform technique seemed foreign to me. I wanted to learn everything, but my ability did not match my desire.

When we start our practice, we should always start with the intent of crawling first, then walking, and then finally, after years of practice, running freely and unbridled. But first we crawl. We learn, sometimes begrudgingly, the act of playing the role of uke, being thrown, fearing, then familiarizing, then welcoming the ground as it comes to meet you. We learn to practice with our dojo mates with proper stance, one foot in front of the other in hamni. We slowly learn awareness of ourselves, how we carry ourselves in the dojo,

As we begin our practice, we enter into a relationship of trust with Sensei and the student body. We trust that if we obey the rules, then we will progress in the art. This trust allows the beginning student to learn the art according to Sensei's methodology and with the help of his or her fellow students. Trust is an interesting thing. We must remember that we may be new to Aikido but we have lived our lives, and we have our experiences to fall back on. When entering into the student teacher with relationship, we should trust, but we should also be aware that the trust we create with our teachers assumes that sensei and the student body act in the spirit of learning, exhibit care for each other, and are even tempered. We should use our current tools to observe: How does Sensei treat new students? How does he treat more experienced members? How do the students treat each other? Is sensei competent when he answers questions or does he answer in mystic and indecipherable ways? When sensei corrects a technique, does he do it in a way that helps further your understanding, or perplex you more?

“Obey the rules” is not a blind act. It is an act of faith and an act of courage and takes place when you can say to yourself, “sensei and the students have exhibited willingness to help me, competence in what they are teaching, and empathy for me being a beginner”. This is a hard thing to do, but is one of the first and one of the biggest steps to make as we begin our journey on the Aikido mat.

## Ha - Bend the rules

*“Then, I saw that mountains were not mountains, and rivers were not rivers” - Zen*

Proverb

When we start showing proficiency in the art, usually around the 2nd or 1st kyu mark, we then begin to start connecting dots. By now we should start to be able to have a good thorough understanding of techniques, we have trained enough that Aiki has seeped into our muscle memory and we have started the shift into unconscious competence. We have started to gain an understanding of Japanese martial arts culture, and we are on our way to becoming a competent practitioner of the art.

At this stage, we start seeing the connection to diverse techniques. How does kote gaeshi relate to shiho nage? We start to see the commonality in the osae techniques of ikkyo, nikyo, sankyo, yonkyo, gokyo and rokyo. We start gaining an understanding of proper ma'ai and position ourselves accordingly. We start to become more effective in our techniques and start to understand the more esoteric and ethereal principles of Aikido.

We also start to understand the legacy of O Sensei, how his contribution in the cultivation of his Aikido has not only benefited ourselves, but the world at large. Hopefully by now, as Aikido practitioners we learn that Aikido is not just a series of fighting techniques but that truly “Aikido is medicine for a sick world”.

At this point in our training we start to see that there are multiple interpretations of the same concepts, some that would initially seem contradictory. We can now see that irimi can mean to enter towards your partner to close up space, or we can enter to the rear to preserve ma'ai. We start to understand that ultimately, uke is going to determine where they will be placed on the mat when you perform a technique on them. We start to let go of the notion that, "if I'm doing shiho nage ura, uke 'MUST' fall back from where they came", and simply guide them where their body is needing to go.

One thing that can come up and usually does in most artistic/spiritual endeavors is the ego. Ironic as it is, even as we try to learn empathy through the art and O Sensei's philosophies, even as we start gaining an inkling that true Aikido is about the relinquishing of ego, our egos crop up. Why wouldn't it? We are human and the ego wants us to show that we are smart and proficient. I've seen this in myself. I've seen it in others.

This phenomenon can be either a hindrance or a blessing.

It is a hindrance if we've put all of our efforts into learning technique and progressing in the art, but have lost sight of the core tenet of Aikido. Aikido is a vehicle that we can integrate within us to prevent entanglement within ourselves, and with those around us.

One of my favorite biblical quotes is *"1 If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can*

*move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,<sup>[b]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.* (1st Corinthians 13 1-4 NIV). Here, Paul maps out exactly what can happen. We get mired in the realm of “see what I can do”, and “see how much I know about (insert technique here)”. We lose sight of the true benefits of Aikido if we take the focus off of our training and start to put the focus on us.

However, this can also be a blessing. Aikido as a mindfulness practice can grow awareness in a student so that when the ego crops up, they can start recognizing this. Hopefully by now, the student can start to just notice when the ego flares up. The resolution of any issue starts with acknowledgment. This is the principle of “[conscious incompetence](#)”. However, hopefully by now, the student has gained the sufficient amount of tools that allow one to understand when the ego is present. If he or she hasn’t yet, then the start of understanding and correction is acknowledgement.

## Ri - Transcend the rules

*“Finally, I saw mountains again as mountains, and rivers again as rivers” - Zen Proverb*

Bruce Lee once said, “Research your own experience. Absorb what is useful, reject what is useless, add what is essentially your own.” Making something your own does not mean that you have stopped learning or stopped growing. When you listen to master musicians play pieces from Bach or Beethoven, They are doing two things at the same time. They are playing true to the intention of the piece, but they are also making the piece uniquely their own. This is true in the martial arts as well. Sensei Noha once told the class that a few years after O Sensei passed, you could look out on the mat at Hombo Dojo and see so much diversity in style. O Sensei encouraged this and all teachers worth learning from since O Sensei would encourage finding your own path.

Aikido has been a journey for me not only of developing talent and technique but learning about myself. Humility, gratitude, empathy, sympathy, and joy all go into the mix. These are essential ingredients for growth. Sometimes these attributes come easy for me, other times it is hard to find the space. The thing I can rely on through my Aikido training is having a space to process. Circle, center, unit, I. I am not perfect. I have made mistakes and fairly certain that i will make more of them. Aikido provides a space for me to open my heart and view it safely and in a safe environment.

Where things were difficult before, I have joy and ease in movement now. This is because I can always go back to my basic practice, break things down into small pieces, and then put those small pieces together.  $2 * 2$  is 4.  $4 * 4$  is 16.  $16 * 16$  is 256. If I get stuck, i can go back to basics again.  $2 * 2$  is 4. With any good and worthwhile art, art teaches us about life, and our life experience adds to the artistry. It is a wonderful combination that is self sustaining, and builds up both the technique and the spirit. One can learn from the other in a cyclical and hegelian fashion.

I prefer the interpretation of Ri as “transcend the rules”. Breaking the rules seems harsh. It seems to me like a discount of previous knowledge that was transmitted to me by a long lineage of caring and loving teachers. Transcending the rules, allows me to take what I’ve learned, make my art my own and still honor my lineage. As I grow into my own as an Aikidoka, I know that the skills that I’ve acquired were as a result of not only my work, but everyone I train with, every teacher I’ve had the honor of training under, and everyone of their dojo mates and teachers back to O Sensei. We are all connected through an invisible twine. What makes me excel can be traced back and back to O Sensei and all that came before him. Simply put, Aikido, and the pursuit of mastery through the art, is a recognition of the connectedness to all who came before, and all who will come after. And, as it stands, that same twine connects all we encounter.

## And so...

I have found that the elements of shu ha ri are not linear. Visiting another Aikido or other martial art school, we should always approach this with a beginner's mind. It would be a wasted effort to miss a learning opportunity because we say "In my school we do it this way." Closing the mind to new approaches, new ways of doing things, stunts growth and stops the learning process. So, as we grow, as we start to find our own path and our own way, we always have and always should rely on basic fundamental practice of form. This practice keeps us humble, keeps us disciplined and not so surprisingly, allows us to find new ways of expression in our art.

I wrote the following few sentences ten years ago. These words still ring true. This was titled "Shomen uchi" from my blog.

In Aikido, a basic sword strike is called Shomen uchi. It is performed by raising the sword directly up above the head, and then striking down directly in front of you. There are many other arts that have a similar strike, kendo being one of them.

Our Sensei relays a story about a friend of his going to a seminar where visiting 9th dan kendo master was teaching. His friend was eager to find out what secret techniques he could glean and snuck in early to watch the kendo

teacher warm up before the seminar started. He was surprised to see the teacher warming up by performing Shomen Uchi over and over again.

It's important to remember the basics and keep them in our practice always.

Some of the basics in life:

- I love you
- I'm sorry
- You can depend on me
- I need help
- Thank you
- You're welcome

He ended class today with a zen quote that I really liked:

At first, I saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. Then, I saw mountains were not mountains and rivers were not rivers. Finally, I see mountains again as mountains, and rivers again as rivers.

Everything comes back to our own versions of Shomen Uchi.