

In martial arts there are three primary levels of training and one higher level that student will go through. In this entry I will explain their importance, traits and how they effect the outcome of martial arts as a way of life. These are referred to as the Shu, the Ha, the Ri and the Ku in traditional training.

Shu - means the protecting stage of training. It means the first stage of training is hard and requires much effort to learn. The form, or shape of techniques must be protected and mastered by the Sensei and transmitted properly to his/her students. It also represents the beginning stages of development in martial arts. Typically this stage begins to phase out in to the Ha stage around 5th kyu, or green belt.

Ha - means the breaking stage of training. At this stage the training techniques are broken down into their infinite applications. The student will know the basic techniques and will now begin to learn the application, or meaning behind each one. It means the fundamentals are now mastered and application is taught. This stage is began at 5th kyu green belt and the student begins to understand the reasons why they perform their stances, strikes and kicks in a certain manner. The Ha stage can last until 1st kyu brown belt for most students and take many hours of training to perfect.

Ri - means the releasing form. The student now is to forget (clear mind) their old techniques and allow them to flow through them with out thought or thinking of the action. This represents that the student has truly mastered the techniques. Most students begin to touch on this principle around 1st degree black belt time. The Ri stage can take many years to master and typically is prevalent in the higher ranking black belts from 3rd degree to 5th degree. After a student masters the Ri stage they move on into the Ku, or secret transmission phase of their training.

Ku - means stage of emptiness. This is the fourth step only transmitted orally from master to student at the appropriate time. It basically states that everything is gone and there is no trace left behind. This stage means that the student has attained the highest level in their martial arts training and no one can trace his movements or catch his techniques. According to tradition, this level is only attained through a true master of martial arts and is more of a transmission of their concepts, thoughts and applications of a particular system into students under them. These are typically what is referred to when someone states the "secrets" of martial arts, or secret teachings. Only the highest ranked student of a particular art is given the Ku, or transmission through several years of close training with their Master.

There is a story of a great swordsman in martial arts who had trained for many years to attain enlightenment in order to become of master and instruct others. The student asked his master "How can I understand this art?" The master replied "When you can swallow the entire west river in one gulp." Swallowing an entire river in one big gulp does not make sense at all. In the martial arts, however it has great meaning. The west river represents the universe or nature. When a student can accept nature, or all that nature holds in one moment, he has achieved the level of Ku, or transmission in knowledge.

There is also another story of a student who had reached this great level of Ku. One day he traveled to his master's home and during training was given the certificate of mastery of the system meaning the Ku level had been reached. Excited to see this wonderful document, of which he was certain contained many great masters signatures and knowledge sayings he quickly opened the seal and unrolled the scroll. To his surprise the certificate was nothing more than a blank piece of paper. The student was immediately enlightened by this piece of paper. The moral of this story is that the best stage to reach in your training (Ku stage) means that everything is blank, requires little thought and your martial arts simply comes through you in your every action, thought and deed in life.