

SHAKUHACHI

ORTHODOXY & HERESY



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ORTHODOX HISTORIES OF THE SHAKUHACHI generally dwell upon the evolution of this five-hole bamboo flute in its later manifestations, after reaching the shores of Japan near the end of the 7th C. A six-hole, end-blown instrument that originated during the Tang Dynasty in China is thought to be an early forerunner of the modern shakuhachi. Its reedy voice can be discerned in *gagaku*, the orchestral

music of the Imperial Japanese Court. Much later, during the Muromachi Period (13th-14th C.), a short, single-jointed flute called the *hitoyogiri* (also thought to have emerged through China or southwestern Asia) gained popularity amongst a class of beggar priests.

Some ethnomusicologists trace the evolution of the shakuhachi back much further, to the banks of the Nile in ancient Egypt, and follow its movement east across the Iranian plateau and India via the Mohammedan Empire before reaching China. A jump across the Sea of Japan, however, was most decisive to this end-blown bamboo flute, which in feudal Japan underwent a critical phase of development destined to define its character forever. During the Edo Period (mid 16th to 17th C.) the shakuhachi was favored by a group of disenfranchised samurai warriors known as *komuso*. These mendicant Buddhist priests wandered the streets and countryside with large baskets called *tengai* cover-

Graphic by Monty Levenson

ing their heads to symbolize spiritual detachment from the world. A group of komuso in Kyoto established the *Fukeshu* (Fuke Sect) at Meian Temple and began to use shakuhachi to solicit alms and as a tool for meditation. It was in the hands of these *ronin* turned "Priests of Emptiness and Nothingness" that the shakuhachi was redesigned from the heavy root of *madaké* bamboo - a form the modern instrument retains to the present day, and one closely associated with a traditional aesthetic considered to be uniquely Japanese.

With such a long evolution - so much of it linked to traditional Japan - it is interesting to observe the renaissance shakuhachi is currently experiencing here in the "New World." In a society barely in its infancy, by Japanese standards, one finds shakuhachi beginning to occupy a small but important niche on the American cultural landscape. And, as media headlines declare each day with mind-numbing redundancy, it is a place shared and contrasted with a host of phenomena that point to a spiraling moral anomie unprecedented in our modern history. Broken families, drive-by shootings, homelessness, extremes of violence and poverty in the face of unmitigated wealth and excess are just some of the social dislocations that indicate a growing alienation from the ethical underpinnings and institutions that have governed our moral lives for generations. People in America are increasingly turning both inward and outward toward older traditional cultures for a hint to the solution of some of the fundamental problems they face. In this regard, shakuhachi is neither special nor unique, but is part of a growing interest in ancient forms and practices that have gained the attention of many who are seeking old answers to some very new questions.

AS A MAKER OF SHAKUHACHI in a "bamboo desert" - a place where the resource is virtually nonexistent - and having my own craft evolve almost completely outside of the traditional context, I find that my mind often wanders to a mythical time and place where shakuhachi (in its broadest sense) encounters neither the constraints of a distinctive cultural form nor a set of fixed ideas defining what it must be. This imaginary time is, per-

haps, one where the primordial past meets a shrinking vision of our future in which the entire planet can be held like a ball in the palm of one's hand. Shakuhachi is often referred to as the "sound of nature." In Japan, its "original music" (*honkyoku*) is filled with echoes of forest and sky. Will this sound, I wonder, traverse a time before

history to convey our distinctly human, inner archetypal voice? A voice reflecting more than the natural world to encompass our very place in the universe? Cutting loose, going far back (or ahead) - in any direction away from orthodoxy - may just make it possible to intersect the evolutionary time line at a point that yields some illuminating insights relevant to our present condition as a species.

It is often after attending a concert of traditional music, hearing critical comments about a performance, piece or style of blowing or discussing the politics and organization of shakuhachi, that these musings come to mind. If "blowing shakuhachi" is indeed synonymous with *sui zen* ("blowing zen") - as one finds carved in stone at the entrance to Meianji, as well in the liner notes of so many shakuhachi CDs - can there be such a thing as "good" or "bad" blowing? Where do suspension of judgment and "beginner's mind" fit in? Why are there so many competing shakuhachi schools in Japan, each with a complete arsenal of sectarian views, secrets and fundamentalist approaches? If, indeed, form is emptiness and emptiness form, why has the *iemoto* system, with its rigid hierarchy of masters and grand-masters emerged as the predominate organizational paradigm for this traditional enterprise? Why is access to such valuable information so proscribed and expensive, not to mention licensed? I suspect that these questions are endemic to the human condition and have more to do with issues of ego, power, and organization than we might care to admit or delve into right now. What stands in sharp contrast to the haze generated by such



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inquiry is the tremendous vitality and enthusiasm one finds associated with shakuhachi, thriving outside of its traditional context amongst those who are culturally uninitiated and largely unfamiliar with its basic premises. This, I suspect, is no accident.

Let's regard shakuhachi, for the moment, strictly as a means of accessing

information. Going back to a time well before the *Fukeshu* wandered the narrow streets of Kyoto - back 20 to 40 thousand years ago to the prehistoric caves of Lascaux in France - we find artifacts that represent the earliest archeological evidence of human music. Ancient end-blown flutes with four to six holes, bearing an uncanny resemblance to the modern shakuhachi. Envision a mythical forebear, a tool maker, courting the impulse to etch a sound scape of his habitat. Call up that ancestor who first heard the wind as music and was impelled by some great force to recreate that sound with breath and bone or, indeed, with bamboo. In this we can see shakuhachi totally and purely as a tool for self knowledge. Dispense with form, ideology and, surely, with icon, and regard blowing through the emptiness of a hollow tube as a reflection pointing back to one's place in the cosmos. Breath transformed to sound goes out to the world, but also loops back to the player. It becomes a microcosm of the universe with the urge to blow as the catalyst. Here shakuhachi becomes an instrument in the strictest sense, a tool to access, *directly*, a sense of place. No form, no tradition, no hierarchy, no licensed masters required. (Not much has really changed in these millennia.) Just add breath!

Returning home from my frequent travels to Japan, I am often left with a sense of having visited some indefinite past, while simultaneously glimpsing an equally mystifying future. This uncertain feeling is immediately obscured as I am hit by the culturally diverse, in-your-face, shoot-from-the-hipness which charac-



Madake root



Sumie by Kay Stratman

terizes the America I inhabit. The jumble of impressions soon dissipates as I roll open the doors of my workshop, mount the bench and begin to carve and shape the bamboos once more. Home again. Then the phone begins to ring, letters arrive and the e-mail flashes across the screen. Mostly voices of those sharing new encounters with this remarkable tool. Seldom are these voices casual, but rather filled with excitement, wonder and enthusiasm, relating tales of some new-found wisdom or unanswered questions. Occupying the hub of the informational wheel that is shakuhachi, I am a privileged repository of these wonderful stories, soon to be shared in a volume entitled *Empty Fushi: Encounters with Shakuhachi*. These are tales of shakuhachi on the periphery of its evolution here in the West: a street musician blowing for over two decades at a San Francisco subway station, a worker with the homeless in New York City, a recovering alcoholic and cook in Minneapolis, a teenager defining his own right of passage as a flutemaker, a sculptor in rural Georgia and a political prisoner who has spent half his life in a maximum security prison are amongst the many folks who are rediscovering, redefining and revitalizing this time-honored form. *Take no michi*, the road of bamboo, is a path that follows no prescribed direction, but still can be traced from pre-historic caves in Europe through Asia to the American frontier.

ALL OF THIS BY WAY OF introducing Mr. Veronza Bowers, Jr. aka #35316-136, an inmate at the Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute, Indiana, U.S.A. I have known Veronza for close to ten years, since he first wrote to me requesting information about shakuhachi. I often receive such letters from convicts who have been filling the growing number of prisons cropping up throughout the American heartland, many of whom have begun to explore the practice of Buddhist meditation. I respond to all of these requests and usually follow up with a flute if the prison authorities allow the inmates to keep a musical instrument in their cells. At that time Veronza was incarcerated at the U.S. Federal Penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, where he had since 1970 been serving a life sentence for murder. (I hasten to add that Veronza was a

member of the Black Panther Party in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late Sixties, and has consistently proclaimed his innocence of the crime for which he was convicted - even at the expense of having his appeals for parole denied, for which an admission of guilt might have worked in his favor. The experience of the Black Panther Party, targeted by the FBI and Federal Government during this era of intense opposition to racial injustice and the War in Vietnam, is a chapter in American history that bears careful review.) Veronza is a musician, has been studying a variety of Asian healing arts - including *shiatsu*, acupuncture, *tsubo* and massage therapy - and has a strong interest in Buddhist meditation, as well as "hands-on" healing techniques he has practiced at the various facilities in which he has been incarcerated. Veronza is also an honorary elder of the Lompoc Tribe of Five Feathers, a native American spiritual and cultural group. Over the ten years or so that I have known him, I have made Veronza three flutes and am presently working on a fourth. (The bamboos keep splitting in the harsh prison environment.) Shakuhachi has become a strong focus in his life and healing work at the prison. Not only has he developed unique abilities on the instrument, he has composed new music for shakuhachi and organized a Rastafarian Meditation Group which centers its practice around the shakuhachi. The article that follows describes, in words and pictures, aspects of the spiritual practice developed by Veronza and this group.

Monty H. Levenson has been making shakuhachi flutes since 1970. He maintains a workshop at his home 10 miles northeast of Willits in the coastal foothills of Mendocino County, California, as well as in Japan at the village of Kitagawa (Tokushima Prefecture) on Shikoku Island.

MEDITATION HEALING WITH SHAKUHACHI



9

HAVE LIVED THE PAST TWENTY FOUR YEARS OF MY LIFE as a federal prisoner with the Bureau of Prisons' number 35316-136 appended to my name. For those of you who have never been inside a maximum security penitentiary, it might be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine it as a place where the plaintive sounds of shakuhachi can be heard. Ah! But it is true.

I am honored and happy to be able to share with you a story about a young man (whom doctors had told he would never walk again) and a piece of bamboo. This is a story of the human spirit and will at its finest, and a story of the healing power that is within shakuhachi. In 1987, this young man (let's call him Punchy) was shot in the back in Detroit, Michigan. The shot and subsequent operation left him completely paralyzed from the waist down. Call it coincidence, fate or simply the way things happen, but in that very same year I was introduced to shakuhachi by a man named Monty H. Levenson, shakuhachi maker and now dear friend.

Three years later, on the recreation yard of Terre Haute Federal Penitentiary in Indiana, I first saw Punchy - he, being pushed in his wheelchair around the quarter-mile track; me, sitting under the shade of a lone tree blowing my shakuhachi. I closed my eyes and continued to blow. The song in my heart reflected what I had just seen and my shakuhachi began to cry.

Graphic by Monty Levenson

After about two weeks of watching Punchy go for his daily ride, I made arrangements through one of his "drivers" to meet him. I explained to Punchy that I practiced an ancient art called "Hands-on Healing." I explained about Touch for Health, Acupressure, Tsubo Therapy, Shiatsu Therapy, Jin Shin Do, Massage Therapy and Meditation Healing using sounds and colors. We talked about Ch'i and the circulation of energy, chakras, stretching as well as other kinds of physical therapy and exercise. I looked into his eyes and told him I'd like to try to help him. Although he had never heard of such things and was unable to hide his skepticism, he agreed.

Where? How to begin? That was the burning question in my mind as we made arrangements to meet the following afternoon. I knew that I would have to examine his entire body from head to toes and would have to work with him daily for quite a long time. We would both have to be committed - to each other and to ourselves. This would involve much work, way beyond physical therapy.

As agreed, we began the following day. After a solid month (6 days a week, 2 1/2 hours a day) of breathing exercises, acupressure treatments, stretching, etc., we were basically where we were when we started. Punchy was locked up inside of himself where I could not touch. I knew that unless he would allow me to come in, unless he could open up and share with me his deepest pain, no amount of massage and manipulation of muscles, no amount of stimulation of nerves, no amount of stretching, no amount of anything would result in an improvement of his condition.

Were the doctors with their professional diagnosis correct in their approach? Or was Punchy - a young man, who had so much energy inside himself - being sentenced to a wheel chair for the rest of his life? Is it true that the solution (if there is a solution) to any problem lies within the problem itself?

A breakthrough was needed.

I had recently started conducting meditation sessions with members of our Rastafarian Community in the chapel during which I blow shakuhachi. I asked Punchy to attend. For this special session I gathered together seven men, all physically strong and emotionally and spiritually well-balanced. The seven men would represent the Sun, the Moon, Mother

Earth and the Four Directions (North, East, South and West). I explained to them Punchy's condition and what was needed of each man as well as all of them as a collective body. The following is part of a "Self-Monitoring Cross-Consciousness" account of our first meditation healing session written immediately following the session by Darrell, one of the participants.

"A wounded Brother was placed on his back in the center of the room. We were instructed to form a circle around him, lying on our backs with our heads nearest to him and focus upon channeling positive energy so that he might be healed.

"We were instructed to breathe in a rhythmic and harmonious flow, inhaling deeply to the count of five and exhaling deeply to the count of five until we were in perfect unison. A flute began to play.... With my eyes closed, I can hear the melody uttering words of transient delight, making it hard to resist complete relaxation. I gave myself totally to the Wounded One.

"There was a light. I used it to focus on as I attempted to channel my energy towards the Wounded One. I concentrated on the lower half of his body, for he was unable to walk. the light was drawing near and growing dim, the musical sounds freeing me from anxiety.... The light now, ever so near and dimmer still, as the sounds of winds from the flute hovered over my body. I am conscious as my body releases the tension from the controlled breathing and begins to act upon its own to recover its natural pace.... The hollow sounds of beauty making me ever so comfortable as the dimness of the light slowly turns red.

"The flute player is standing over me. I am aware of his presence, but why am I moaning?... Why can I not respond to acknowledge him? Where am I?... Can I help my wounded Brother, and who and where are the drummers? My body won't respond, but I am conscious.... I can hear everything and the breaths of everyone; we are all breathing out of time.... Everyone has lost the rhythm except the flutist. He has acted as a tour guide down the pathway of total redness., almost leading me towards serenity, if it weren't for the pain. What pain?... Whose pain?... So much pain, but why am I still moaning? Where am I?





"It appears that I have allowed the flutist, the tour guide, to take me beyond the realms of my control. I can sense serenity, but the pain... Oh! The pain! And why do I feel as if I'm not alone? The corridor, or pathway, which has turned blue some time ago is now glowing and has a strange aura.

"The silence broke. 'Rub your hands together.' It was the familiar voice of the tour guide, and I made motions with my hands, which was all I could do to make him aware that the command had been heard. I didn't quite know how to function, for I was distant, incoherent and a slight bit delirious; but I could sense that he knew, for I was still trapped in space. 'Rub your hands together so that they generate energy, and then rub the warmth over your face...wash your face with energy.' I was able to comprehend the fact that this was, no doubt, a command, and I found myself obedient, my body began to respond, my eyes opened... it was over."

After the session had ended and everyone else had "returned" to this plane, PUNCHY was still out. When he finally "awoke," he blurted out, "What happened? Where I been?" Everyone laughed.

I was terribly excited and anxious to talk with the Brother who had been moaning and groaning and rolling his head back and forth. I needed to know what he had "seen," what he had "experienced." He and I got together immediately after everyone had left the chapel. As I blew shakuhachi at the top of the stairwell, he recorded what you have just read.

Ah! The breakthrough! On so many levels. A small piece of bamboo, 1.8 feet long had opened doorways which had previously been welded shut. Shakuhachi had done in 1 1/2 hours what no human being had done in three years. Shakuhachi had made it possible, via Darrell's psychic bonding with PUNCHY, to connect with and to deeply understand PUNCHY's psychological and spiritual pain. During our next working session, PUNCHY and I discussed all that we had both learned, and for the first time he opened up completely.

From then on, we began each working session with shakuhachi. A healthy diet with vitamins; a combination of disciplines mentioned earlier; meditation and circulation of Ch'i; weightlifting for upper body strength; stretching, stretching and more stretching for leg strength (The strength of the Tiger lies in his flexibility); and a determined will, all com-

bined so that by the end of the summer (10 months after our first meditation healing session - December 10, 1990), PUNCHY could do 100 full squats non-stop, walk five steps on his own, walk behind his wheelchair with me sitting in it and push me one full lap around the quarter-mile track on the yard.

I wish I had more space to share with you the details of this inspiring struggle of a young man determined to walk again and the never-ending mystery that is shakuhachi.

I am deeply thankful to my dear friend Monty for introducing me to shakuhachi, and I am eternally grateful to shakuhachi for so graciously accepting my breath and for allowing me to be an extension through which healing can pass.

In addition to studying and practicing meditation and the ancient healing arts of China and Japan, Veronza Bowers, Jr. is an accomplished musician and composer of original pieces for the shakuhachi.

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