

## BLOWING ZEN

Zen means meditation.

Za-zen means sitting meditation.

Sui-zen means blowing meditation.

This has been the purpose of my life for 41 years. It is to find the perfect sound to cause world peace - to play the sound that will cause enlightenment. If you find the perfect sound, you can create and spread beauty, serenity, enlightenment. Every time you play the shakuhachi, you are helping to engender world peace. This was my teacher's path - the path of a Bodhisattva.

The repertoire of Zen meditation music is called *honkyoku*. Until the early 19th century, the pieces in this repertoire were composed by mendicant Zen monks of the *Fuke* sect for use in their meditation practice. This was one of the only paths allowed for ronin, or "masterless-samurai". The music they played on their end-blown bamboo flutes was this "blowing meditation." *Honkyoku* date back to the 12th century; the oldest piece is known as *Kyorei*. They were composed and played in meditation to achieve stillness of mind, connection with nature, and for the higher purpose of achieving enlightenment for all sentient beings.

Fuke-Zenji was a Zen master who was the Dharma heir of Banzan Hoshaku and is credited as the Patriarch of the Shakuhachi. He did not actually play a flute; he played a bell. \* He would strike a follower on the head and exclaim, "Dark sound - dark head. Light sound - light head." And then, having offered this koan, he would run off into the woods.

One story of Fuke-Zenji tells of the time before his death:

Fuke had taken to carrying his coffin around with him. One day he spoke to his top disciple, "Please gather the townspeople around the North Gate of the temple tomorrow. When you open my coffin, I will have departed this world." The disciple did as he was told and most of the townspeople showed up. But when he opened the coffin, Fuke-Zenji was still quite alive. He said to the disciple and to the townspeople, "Please come tomorrow to the South Gate of the temple and I will be gone!" About half of the townspeople returned with the disciple, and once again when the coffin was opened, Fuke-Zenji was still quite alive. This time when he said to gather on the following day at the East Gate, only the few most devout came with the disciple. But once again, Fuke popped up when the coffin opened. He said, "I will absolutely die tomorrow at the West Gate." But this time, only his disciple returned. When the coffin was opened it was empty. The sound of Fuke's hand-bell came from the empty sky. This is the basis for one of the oldest of all shakuhachi pieces – *Koku*, or *Bell Ringing in the Empty Sky*.\*\*

For the next few centuries, the repertoire of the shakuhachi remained tied to Buddhism, specifically to Zen Buddhism. During the late 18th century and the 19th century, shakuhachi players became interested in playing the chamber music of the day with koto and shamisen players. But the

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honkyoku was still the most important repertoire. There were of course, many pieces for the safe passage of the spirit into its next incarnation, as well as other pieces used for healing and safe and easy childbirth, as well as nature-oriented themes such as *Crane Leaving the Nest*, and *Sound of Distant Deer*.

Jin Nyodo, who was my teacher's teacher, was a great archivist of the honkyoku. He travelled around Japan for ten years collecting the pieces that were still available. My teacher and I have followed the tradition of transmitting these pieces, and it is my fervent hope that my students will continue it as well. For even though there are many modern compositions being written for the shakuhachi, there is nothing like the peace one gets from playing or listening to one of the ancient honkyoku.

*Ronnie Nyogetsu Reishin Seldin has been honored with two Grand-Master Licenses and the accompanying professional names, the latest from Aoki Reibo II, the Living National Treasure of the shakuhachi. His compositions have been nominated for both Oscar and Grammy Awards. He has long been a friend of Dai Bosatsu Zendo, having played at the official opening in 1976 and at many other DBZ ceremonies and events. He is also a friend of Hoen-ji, the Zen Center of Syracuse, and performed at Hoen-ji's "100 years of Zen in America" gathering, as well as many important events at the temple and concerts in Syracuse.*

*He feels truly blessed to have found such a wonderful path for his life, and for the past 40 years has run the largest and most active shakuhachi dojo in the world outside of Japan. If you would like to know more about Nyogetsu, please look at his website [www.nyogetsu.com](http://www.nyogetsu.com), or contact him directly at [nyogetsu@gmail.com](mailto:nyogetsu@gmail.com).*

**Note by Shinge Roshi:**

*I will never forget Nyogetsu's participation in our "100 years of Zen in America" celebration in 1993, commemorating Soen Shaku's coming to the USA in 1893 to speak at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The event featured a month-long exhibition at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, with calligraphy by three renowned Zen masters; hanging banners of female bodhisattvas by Mayumi Oda; an exhibition of anti-war paintings by Kazuaki Tanahashi, and photographs by Daido John Looi Roshi. Nyogetsu played shakuhachi and Kaz taught a brush workshop in the museum's Sculpture Court. A three-day series of panels and talks at Syracuse University and Hoen-ji included such honored guests as Lex Hixon, Dai-En Bennage Roshi and Ohashi Sensei. The exhibitions were up for an entire month.*

*Editor's Notes:*

*\* Of Fuke it was said that nobody could discern whether he was a sage or a lunatic. When Rinzai became abbot of a temple on the banks of the Koda River, Fuke was already there, and supported Rinzai's teachings.*

*\*\* See Chapter 24 of "Kamben: Cross-Examinations" in The Book of Rinzai.*