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The Sound of Zen

Japan's traditional bamboo flute, an instrument of introspection and self-knowledge, is steeped in Zen tradition. Pravit Rojanaphruk talks to master shakuhachi player Christopher Yohmei Blasdel.

"I have some advice," Christopher Yohmei Blasdel said to me in a gentle voice, "about learning how to listen to music.

"Turn off the TV, turn off the radio and turn off the stereo. Sit in a quiet spot. Close your eyes and listen to the great fabric of music, of sounds that is around you. You'll be surprised at the richness of tone existing in everyday life."

Although advice is a dangerous gift, coming from someone of Blasdel's calibre, it seems churlish to question its authority. For this 47 year-old man is a rare breed, having followed his own inner voice that led him to become a master shakuhachi player, (Japanese traditional bamboo flute), an instrument of introspection and self-knowledge, and deeply steeped in Zen tradition. From experience comes insight.

Originally, Blasdel explained, music was for the soul and the spirit.

"Music was a direct connection with the spiritual. During the time of Confucius, the Chinese made a clear distinction between sacred and secular music -- saying that secular is not good for you. Over the last 30 years music has become so commercialised and materialistic, that people have forgotten that music is a way to revitalise the soul and the spirit."

The haunting yet soothing sounds from the shakuhachi are a prime example of how music can be used as a meditative conduit, an alchemy of tones that are at once both enriching and calming, yet profound and simple.

In *The Shakuhachi: A Manual For Learning*, Yoko Kamisango, writes about this unique instrument since its introduction to the imperial court nearly 1,500 years ago. But it was the Zen monks who first recognised its spiritual resonance.

"The komuso (wandering Zen monk) ardently played the shakuhachi as a way toward enlightenment -- in a style called suizen or "blowing" meditation -- instead of zazen (sitting) meditation, sutra chanting, or activities in which most Zen monks engaged. This was the reason why the shakuhachi was referred to as a religious "tool" rather than as an instrunment, and why the pieces they played weren't "music" but "meditations.".

Blasdel, who is the co-author of the book explained: "First of all, it's a very simple instrument. In Japanese culture, simplicity is a virtue and a way to experience things. But of course, it's a very refined simplicity. Second, in order to play shakuhachi you have to learn how to control the breath through the abdomen, which is the corner stone of all meditation.

"It's like one breath and that one breath leads to cosmic breath. So the shakuhachi is a minimum instrument with a maximum of effect."

However, one should not be fooled by this humble bamboo root which is rather light and measured only about 54 centimetres in length. Like the sitar, this is not an instrument that one can learn over night. With the shakuhachi, the lips must fashion the breath to make a sound as it passes over the flute's sharp edge (*utaguchi*).

Herein lies the most difficult aspect of learning the instrument; the initial production of sound. Even obtaining a noise remotely resembling a musical tone on the shakuhachi can take days or even weeks of frustration and hyperventilation.

Even among the Japanese, it is considered as an especially difficult and time-consuming instrument. *Kubifuri san nen*, or "three years just for the basics" is a popular proverb about this flute.

"You have to work hard," admits Blasdel, who began learning with Japan's "Living National Treasure", grand master Goro Yamaguchi in 1972, and earned a teaching licence and professional name of 'Yohmei' (literally, an alliance which reaches over distances) in 1984.

"You have to control your sound, memorise the pieces, do the exercises. In order to play shakuhachi you don't even have to think about Zen but that whole things become Zen although you don't have to use that word."

The shakuhachi is not restricted to a meditative or religious role. It has even breached Hollywood and can be heard in *Legends of the Fall*, and *The Mark of Zorro*. Jazz welcomed it -- along with pop -- and it was briefly heard during the opening of the recent Asian Games in Bangkok. The instrument even has a website.

Not many foreigners know that this simple piece of bamboo was once used as a weapon by some of the master-less samurai (ronin), who had been forbidden to carry swords after their own masters had fallen from power.

For example, the Fuke sect was outlawed during the Meiji restoration period which followed the end of Tokugawa era (1603-1867), where both its members and the government became corrupt.

What's more, these renegade monks, whom the people knew by their distinctive headgear, were actually employed as spies by the government and would listen to the shifts of local opinion while they played their shakuhachis in the towns and villages.

Blasdel, who holds an MA in Ethno Musicology from Japan's prestigious Tokyo University of the Arts, said the various reincarnations of the shakuhachi indicate that all instruments change and evolve to meet the needs of society.

"The shakuhachi has a special place in the in the heart of Japanese culture," he said. "It's important because the sound it produces is so similar to the sound of the [human] voice, as though the vocal cords have been transplanted onto the flute."

Music critic Harvey Sachs wrote that "because the human voice can communicate a virtually infinite range of emotions and meanings, it has always been the chief expressive medium in Christian religious music -- not only in the music created by anonymous monks in the Middle Ages -- but also in that of nearly all the great composers in more recent times."

The American-born Blasdel believes that it is for our own good to understand the mysteries and importance of both sound and music."Sound tells us the inner nature of material. For example, if I knock on a piece of wood, I can tell from the sound whether the wood is fine or not. Similarly, if we flick the top of a crystal glass, we can tell the quality of the crystal. Cars, dogs, and humans all reveal their inner thoughts through the sounds they produce."

Englishman Thomas Draxe wrote in 1616 that, "music is the eye of the ear".

Moreover, Blasdel noted that in English, to say that someone is in 'sound' health means that the person is in good health. In Japanese, the word *hon'ne* which means "real" is composed of two Chinese characters that signify "root" and "sound".

The same goes for another Chinese characters -- which have since been adopted in Japan -- Bodhitsattva Avalokitesavara, the Goddess of Mercy (Kannon in Japanese, Kuan Yin in Chinese, and Kuan Im in Thai). Of the two characters, Kuan stands for seeing, while Yin denotes hearing.

The result? The Bodhisattava is the one who sees and hears."It means a single sound has the ability to enlighten," Blasdel added.

Whether it leads to enlightenment or not, music itself is integral to life, argues Thomas Moore, the best-selling author on spirituality.

"Music is part of life, not separate from it, and life itself is musical, with its rhythms, variations on themes, episodes, fugues, counterpoints, cadences, silences, and tonalities. When we listen to music, we are contemplating the very structures and colours that make up our own lives."

It is also important to distinguish sound from noise, said Blasdel."We just don't listen (to sound) because most people insist on making a noise all the time," noted the musician, who admitted he needs an ear plug while in Bangkok. "One should learn to live with silence."

For many reasons, the shakuhachi will always be close to Blasdel's heart. When his six-month research fellowship at Chulalongkorn ends in two months time he will head back to Tokyo, where besides performing and recording, he will also teach adult students at the Asahi Cultural Centre in Tokyo's Shinjuku district once a week.

For Blasdel, the solitary sound that the shakuhachi creates is not just his love, but a reflection of his life.

"I am a solitary person," concludes Blasdel, who is married to a Japanese woman and has lived in Japan for nearly 27 years. "I like to look into the depth of things and like to make pretty music if I can. Essentially I play for anybody who wants to listen. It's also a lot of fun, because you get to spend a lifetime learn how to blow a piece of bamboo!"