

Shakuhachi: Lessons of the flute.
Fiction by Kimo Williams

Today is the day.

The light snow having passed, I could see the blowing trees from my window yet there was still no sound. Perhaps I should remind my mother to dress warmly for our journey out, I thought.

As a young boy growing up on a farm, I often heard the distant sound of Shakuhachi. It would pierce through the thick northern grove of pines nearly every morning as the old hermit "Kozan" would play. I don't recall ever getting a good look at him but it almost didn't matter. The sound of his flute traced the contour of his face as well as any shadow. He was very old and very wise. There was no fear in his music.

I live in Edo now, the days on the farm long past. Much of that time is just fading memory, but the sound of the hermit's flute is as clear in my head today as it was then. With great anticipation, I have arranged to begin lessons in music and my mother has given me a Shakuhachi of my own. She said it was my grandfather's first bamboo flute.

"Hurry now, the headmaster warned not to be late," my mother said as we made our way out of our house and down the cobblestone road. The school was less than a mile away yet it seemed to take an eternity. When we arrived my mother spoke to the teacher alone. She bowed slowly and stepped away backwards returning to give me a final goodbye. "They are beginning shortly and you must take your place. Do not ask any

questions." She admonished. She hugged me briefly and scurried out the door. I clutched my flute.

"Isogi," barked the teacher as he turned his back and headed down the hall. I hurried to follow quickly. The hall we entered was "Sabi", sparse in furnishings but eloquent none the less. Tanaka Sensei pointed to my position at the end of the row and I took my place among the deshi. What would be the first song to learn? I asked myself. Would it be one of the haunting melodies that swirl in my mind to this day? How long before I master my Shakuhachi? How long must I study? How long before I could play with out fear? I wondered.

My daydream ended as Tanaka Sensei clapped his hands twice. "Today...most important day in your training," He said. "Today, you must quiet your mind. Today you must learn to hear to the spirit of the Shakuhachi. The flute knows what to play. The flute and the music are one." He whispered. "Listen." ...I heard nothing. I tried harder and still heard only the sounds of my own thoughts as they brazenly called the old teacher's bluff. What spirit? What does he mean? I wondered. Outside, the snow began to fall.

By the end of the first week, I had learned nothing. I could play my flute no better than the day I arrived. Each day the same...sit and listen to the lifeless bamboo as it collects dust. What is wrong with this school? I thought. I'm never going to be able to pierce the pine trees with my song at this rate. I wondered if maybe I should have listened to my friends when they told me of another instructor that had his own style of playing. His was much faster to

learn they said. Why did I let my mother talk me into this? Sensei is too old. He's too out of touch with the modern times. I closed my eyes and thought, I should quit. Then, from somewhere in the room, I heard a tone.

I kept my eyes closed for another second or two and heard it again. Expecting to see Sensei playing his flute I opened my eyes and turned around. The room was quiet and still. "You heard it?" whispered Sensei from across the isle. "I don't know" I whispered back. He nodded and closed his eyes. "Yoku Yatta, Good", he said.

Beginning the very next morning, Sensei began to demonstrate the methods of holding the Shakuhachi. He was very specific on the balance and the grip. This he said, was "most important" in learning to "let the flute be a flute". I tried my best to listen and practice the form. It was more difficult for me than some of the other students because I would grip so tight. I was afraid the flute might slip and fall to the ground. If my Grandfather's first bamboo flute was to break under my care, I would be shamed for ever.

As the weeks went by, we were taught the notes and their qualities. Sensei would demonstrate the subtle differences between a single note played with two different intentions. Then, two different notes played with the same intention. We were made to play the pentatonic scales over and over again until the notes began to play in our heads at the same time it came out the flute. Still, I could not play a single song. I was...to say the least, concerned.

On my way home one day, I ran into a friend from years past. She asked where I had been and I told her of my training at the music school. She said one of her brother's had learned Shakuhachi from another Sensei and that he was already playing for money near the Temple. I asked how many songs he knew and she replied he had mastered nearly ten. Ten songs?, I thought. I have yet to learn even one! And I am supposed to be at the finest school? I decided then that I would go to the Temple and ask this man where he had trained.

Today is the day.

Upon arriving at the Temple grounds, I marveled at the detail of the Tori'i--wood gates... The splendor of the Bonsai trees, the craftsmanship of the stone walls ... all so perfect. How expert these workers must have been to have been able to craft such magnificent monuments so many years ago, I thought. I waited in the courtyard for nearly an hour. Finally, from around the corner I heard the familiar sound of a Shakuhachi.

I rushed towards the whistling tones and readied my question. As I approached I noticed that the quality of the pitch was different than Sensei. It sounded weak and slurred. I stopped for a second and listened closer. There was something wrong. "You know the Shakuhachi?" he said. "A little," I responded. "I've been studying with Tanaka Sensei but...He interrupted, "you don't know any songs?"... "How did you know?" I asked. "Tanaka's way is old. It was good in its day but no longer. People need to learn quicker now, more modern techniques. We need to learn the songs people want to hear so we can make money. Itchi Suru?" you agree, yes? I

looked around at the temple and could not answer.

Everything here approaches perfection, I thought. The Temple itself is made from the perfection of its creators. And yet it too was done the old way. What difference would it make how long it took to build when it would be appreciated centuries into the future?

Finally, I answered... "yes, its true, modern times do require new techniques. But I think the old way is still good. I may not be able to play a song yet, but I can hear the spirit of the flute. And I think that is the true way." I said.

"Spirit of the flute?", he laughed. "Here is the spirit of the flute." He reached down and showed me the coins he had earned that day. "True, you have earned money with your flute but yet here you sit, playing to the favor of those who are desperate. How much better will you be next year? I asked. With that, I decided to head back towards the school.

As the years past, I grew to understand much of what my Sensei had tried to explain. I mastered the fundamentals of form and balance and eventually thought of them no more. My Grandfather's Shakuhachi grew to fit my hands and my breath grew to fit its length. I practiced my scales and

patterns until my fingers learned to move on their own. I helped with the new deshi when needed and gave them the benefit of my struggle—somehow knowing that it was the struggle itself that was the real teacher.

Today is the day.

After graduating, my mother asked if I would accompany her back to her village. She said she needed to see some old friends and thought how wonderful it would be if I would play for them. The thought of seeing the old farm was scary. I knew it wouldn't be as I left it. All the same, I thought it would be good.

We arrived in early evening. The sun, already set, had left an orange glow on the pines. How cold it felt. How alive I became. We knocked on the door of one of our old neighbors, Yamamoto-San and were welcomed into the cottage. My mother and the old man conversed for

hours remembering days past. I listened and joined-in here and there but really didn't remember much. I really just wanted to go outside and play my flute.

As I stepped out onto the porch, I felt the breeze against my face. The wind made the tops of the trees sway against the dull red background of the sky. I felt as if I, the wind and the



trees were all a single intention. I began to play. No thought, no mind, no expectations. The notes flew from the bamboo as if carried on the wind itself. It was all I could do to stay balanced as the music lifted us both above the trees. As the night set, the wind calmed and my song grew soft. I had no recollection of what I had played. But I felt as if I had meditated for a week. My soul was impoverished yet complete. This I knew was the first true union of my spirit and the spirit of the flute... A Satori.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of an old man's voice. I rose to see Yamamoto-San talking to a man outside. I went to the window to see who it was and noticed it had snowed lightly during the night. As the two men walked I caught a glimpse of the stranger. He had long grey hair and chiseled features. I knew this face, I thought. As Yamamoto came back into the cottage I asked with whom he had spoken? He smiled and told me, "Kozan-San the old man." "He heard you play last night at dusk and stopped by to ask about you. "What", I yelled... "he didn't want to meet me? How could he not at least say hello?", I fumed. Yamamoto replied, "he said he didn't need to see you because your tone traced your face like a drawing in India Ink." He just wanted to make sure it was the boy he used to see in the meadow each morning," He said. "He wanted to make sure it was indeed his grandson."

Today will always be the day.
