

# A Spiritual Journey in Music in Japan

Bruno Deschênes, shakuhachi player



**Figure 1. The group of the 2015 Shakuhachi Roots Pilgrimage. In the back, from left to right : Ryan Sullivan (US), Michel Dubeau and Bruno Deschênes (Montréal), Jerry Lopez (US). In front, Alcvin Ryūzen Ramos (Vancouver), Stefan Lenz (Germany) and Bob Harris (Vancouver). Photograph of our group taken by another visitor with my camera.**

The Japanese *shakuhachi* is a vertical end-blown bamboo flute that has been played by the monks of the Fuke sect, affiliated to the Rinzaï branch of Zen Buddhism, during the Edo Era (1603-1868). These mendicant monks were using the shakuhachi as a spiritual tool, not as a musical instrument. They were covering their heads with a straw basket while playing it. However, a large number of them were *rōnin* (masterless samurai), many of whom were crooks and gangsters, while the others did follow a true religious path. The Fuke sect had a special accommodation with the Tokugawa government. The *shogun* decreed that only people of samurai status could join its ranks, while allowing them to travel freely all

around the country; some even served as spies. Following the collapse of the shogunate, the Fuke sect was banished by the Meiji government (1868-1912) in the fall of 1871. Some at the government even wanted to get rid of the shakuhachi as well. Fortunately, two monks were able to convince them not to, thus allowing these former monks to survive by teaching and giving concerts. Few had been teaching before the collapse, but none had given concerts.<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of the 1960s, a growing number of non-Japanese have been learning to play the shakuhachi, many of them getting their master title (*shihan*).<sup>2</sup> A large number of these musicians are linking this flute and its solo repertoire to Zen, con-

sidering that playing this flute is a spiritual practice.<sup>3</sup> There is even a trend among shakuhachi players from around the world to travel to Japan to uncover the spiritual roots of that flute, its music, and its history. From 1980 to 2016, American shakuhachi master Ronnie Nyōgetsu Reishin Seldin (1947-2017) from New York has organized a yearly tour for that purpose. In 2003, Canadian shakuhachi master Alvin Ryūzen Ramos, from Vancouver, began orchestrating a similar tour, occurring every two years.<sup>4</sup> Ramos' tour is geared towards the spiritual discovery of the shakuhachi, including harvesting bamboo so that the participants could eventually make their own. I participated in Ramos' tour of November of 2015. Being a shakuhachi player myself, as well as an ethnomusicologist, it was an opportunity for me to both learn more about the shakuhachi, and better understand the deep interest that non-Japanese shakuhachi students have about that flute and its music. Here, I present a short synopsis of the tour, as well as some historical background. I conclude with some personal comments.

Alvin Ryūzen Ramos calls his tour the Shakuhachi Roots Pilgrimage, a musical pilgrimage into the spirituality of Japan through the shakuhachi. The 2015 tour lasted four weeks, arriving in Kyoto on Friday, October 30, 2015, and leaving Tokyo on Thursday, November 26. During these four weeks, the group travelled nearly the full length of Japan, from Hirosaki in Aomori prefecture in the north of the island of Honshu down to Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu. Of the six participants to the tour, three were from Canada (one from Vancouver and two from Montréal), two from the US, and one from Germany, Ramos being the guide as well as the translator. Two among us were advanced students, two were intermediate and two were beginners. The places we visited were not necessarily linked to the shakuhachi, one of the aims being to experience Japanese spirituality and culture.

We spent the first three days in Kyoto visiting known temples, in particular the Ryōanji, where the most famous Japanese rock garden is located (Figure 1). Two of the main events of our stay in Kyoto were a lesson with Japanese shakuhachi master Kurahashi Yōdō II, as well as meeting shakuhachi historian and master Shimura Satoshi in Osaka. The most significant event though was our attending the Shakuhachi Honkyoku Gathering at the Meianji Temple in Kyōto, on 1 November 2015. The Meianji temple was the Western headquarter of the *komusō* (monk of nothingness) of the Fuke sect (as these monks were called) during the Edo Era; the Eastern part of Japan had two headquarters near Tokyo. Beginning in 1952, this gathering has been organized on a Sunday twice a year, in May and November, during which

shakuhachi players play in a ceremony to honor all shakuhachi players, past and present. Unfortunately, no one in our group could perform at the event, since there were already a large number of participants. We did manage, however, to perform in front of the gravestone of some great shakuhachi masters that are laid to rest in the cemetery of the Meianji, one of which is Kurahashi Yōdō II's father, who was also a known shakuhachi player.

Afterward, we travelled to the Kōkokuji temple in the small town of Kii Yura in the prefecture of Wakayama, north of Osaka. In the 13th century, a monk named Kakushin, upon his return from China, resided in that temple.<sup>5</sup> He was accompanied by four Chinese monks, who apparently played flutes. The story is that Kakushin met in China a mendicant monk named Puhua (the Chinese characters of his name are read Fuke in Japanese) from which the tradition of Japanese wandering monks of the Fuke sect playing flute while begging started upon his return, though it has not been clearly ascertained if Kakushin did play the shakuhachi or not. A repertoire of solo pieces for shakuhachi that is unique to that temple has been perpetuated up until today by some shakuhachi players. Our group of happy shakuhachi backpackers had the chance to take a master class with two of these musicians.

Our next destination was the sacred mountain of Koyasan, the birth place of the Japanese Shingon sect of esoteric Buddhism, which was established by the monk Kukai (also known as Kōbo Daishi) at the beginning of the 8th century. We stayed in a temple among Japanese pilgrims, eating the unique Japanese Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, called *shojin ryori*. Interestingly, more and more non-Japanese are doing pilgrimages in Japan. We also visited in Koyasan the historic Okuno-in, a 1,200-year-old cemetery, where the group played to the enjoyment of visitors.

The next place we visited was the city of Yokkaichi, in Mie prefecture, where we met a shakuhachi maker, musician, poet and *kyūdō* (Japanese archery) master, Miura Tarō. Two members of the group bought shakuhachi from him. Afterward, we visited the Tsubaki Jinja Shinto shrine near Yokkaichi. One aspect of our visit that interested everyone in the group was that we could do a ritual called *misogi*, during which the participants, almost naked, go under a cold waterfall for 20 to 30 seconds. Five among us did it. It was quite a unique experience. Three of us, including myself, did it a second time the next evening. We also played in the shrine and attended a service during which a *miko*, a Shinto priestess, performed a sacred *Kagura* dance.<sup>6</sup>

Our next destination was Hirosaki in Aomori prefecture, in the north of the island of Honshu. Besides attending a performance by an 85-year-old woman

who is an amazing *tsugaru shamisen*<sup>7</sup> player, we took a lesson with a master of a style of shakuhachi called *nezasa-ha*, which uses a pulsating breath technique called *komibuki*, that is unique to that style. Though this technique was developed by monks of the Fuke sect on the island of Kyushu, it ended up being played solely by samurais of the Hirosaki domain in the north of Japan. When the Fuke sect was banished in 1871 and the samurai tradition was dismantled, these players could keep playing that flute as before, since they were not affiliated to the Fuke sect. We also met with another shakuhachi maker living in the prefecture of Akita, Miura Ryuhō, who applies modern acoustic techniques in the making of his shakuhachi. Instead of making them by trial and error, as is still being done today, he developed a scientifically grounded construction of the bore to make a shakuhachi sound as pure as possible.



**Figure 2: Buddha playing a shakuhachi. Photograph by Bruno Deschênes.**

From there, we travelled by train all the way down to Kumamoto on the island of Kyushu, a 16-hour journey, five *shinkansen*, the Japanese super express trains; that trip would have taken more than two days otherwise. The main event of our stay was to perform in a cave at the Reigandō temple, a small temple outside of Kumamoto, on the site of which we found more than 500 small statues of Buddha made

by a devout family some 200 years ago. One of these statues shows a Buddha playing the shakuhachi (Figure 2). The particularity of this cave is that the most legendary Japanese samurai in the history of Japan, Miyamoto Musashi, spent the last five or six years of his life in that cave. The group performed two pieces there. They were recorded by Jeff Cairn, a Canadian shakuhachi player living in Kumamoto ([available at this link: https://vimeo.com/156936970](https://vimeo.com/156936970)). After Kumamoto, we visited the Iccho-ken temple in Hakata, one of the founding temples of the classical Zen pieces of the komusō. Some of us had the chance to perform at that temple (see Figure 3: Alvin Ryūzen Ramos is playing).



**Figure 3: Alvin Ryūzen Ramos.**

We then travelled to Nara, the ancient capital, visiting the great Buddha of the Tōdaiji temple, outside of which we performed under the rain. We also met with another well-known shakuhachi maker, Yamaguchi Shugetsu. Some of us had the great opportunity to play a few pieces with his wife, a well-known *koto* and *shamisen* player. This one-day visit was followed by another one-day visit to Hiroshima, as well as to the nearby Miyajima sacred island. Afterward, we travelled to Matsumoto to visit the famous Matsumoto castle. There, we met a *taiko* (Japanese percussion) master of the Osuwa daiko percussion group, the first official taiko ensemble in Japan. The tradition of the great Japanese taiko ensemble as we know them today originated in a temple near Lake Suwa.

The next leg of our trip was for me the highlight. We went to the town of Okusa in Nagano prefecture to harvest bamboo, so that each participant could eventually make their own shakuhachi in a workshop later on (bamboo must dry a minimum of six months, preferably two to three years, before it can be made into a shakuhachi). The two-day harvesting gathering was organized by shakuhachi master Okuda Atsuya. Our pack of happy wanderers joined a group of about

20 Japanese musicians and students, who also came to harvest bamboo. We found out that uprooting bamboo is not an easy task, especially when one does not know how to do it. The next morning, we gathered again to remove the oil from the bamboo over fire. The best time of the year to harvest bamboo is November and December, because it is cleared of bugs. I harvested three bamboos. They were left in Japan to dry for few months, and then sent to Alvin Ramos's house.

The last leg of our trip was a five-day stay in Tokyo. We took master classes with well-known shakuhachi masters: Tokuyama Takashi, Okuda Atsuya, Kakizakai Kaoru, and Nakamura Akikazu. In line with the aims of our trip, a one-day gathering similar to the one we attended at the Meianji in Kyoto on November 1 was organized at the Hosshin-ji temple in Tokyo. That time our group could play.

And finally, at the end of August 2015, I had the chance with my Montreal shakuhachi colleague, Michel Dubeau, to visit Alvin Ryūzen Ramos in Vancouver for a two-day shakuhachi-making workshop. Our bamboos were ready to be made into shakuhachi. We learned how to prepare the bamboo, cut it to the proper length, make the embouchure at the proper angle with the proper opening, make the five holes, and especially how to tune it. Of the three bamboos each one of us harvested and brought back to Canada, I could make two flutes, while Michel was able to make three. At the end, they were covered with lacquer both inside and outside so they do not grow mould. We made the traditional type of shakuhachi, called *jinashi*. The modern type is called *jiari*. The difference is that for the *jiari*, plaster is inserted inside to make a smooth bore, which can produce better quality and loud sounds. As well, it is easier to make them more in tune with Western instruments, though new techniques have been developed lately to also make the *jinashi* more in tune. Originally, during the Edo era, tuning of the *jinashi* shakuhachi was of a secondary concern. Some people today even call these former shakuhachi bamboo tubes.

For Alvin Ryūzen Ramos, this tour is about sharing spiritual experiences through the shakuhachi. Yet, it is an imagined spirituality that is grasped from the viewpoint of the West.<sup>8</sup> An outcome of the Orientalist discourse in Europe and North America is a myth alleging that Japan's way of thinking is Zen, and that it is the source of Japan's spirituality. Though Zen had a strong influence when it came to Japan in the 13th century, in particular in the arts and among the samurais, today's way of thinking of the Japanese is a mixture of Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, to which can be added Christianity, following Japan's modernization. For example, over the

centuries, some Shinto shrines have been converted into Buddhist temples, as well as the other way around. On the ground of many Buddhist temples today, Shinto shrines are found, and the other way around is also true. During the Edo period, there was even a movement to create a religion that would bring Buddhism and Shintoism into a unique Japanese religion. Besides, most Japanese do not understand why we view their culture as being Zen. This myth is due to a large extent to the monk D.T. Suzuki, who travelled in Europe and the US in the first half of the 20th century to present Zen to the West. Although Suzuki had a deep and thorough knowledge of Zen, he asserted that Japan's way of thinking is basically Zen.<sup>9</sup> Yet, in his lectures, he used the dualistic Christian and Orientalist discourse found in Europe. He even alleged that Zen is a religion of peace, while having a contrary discourse in Japan. In his Japanese writing, he agreed with the conquest of Asia by Japan (as was the case with both the Sōto and Rinzai Zen sects).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 4: Michel Dubeau drilling into the root-end of a bamboo to clear the bore of the shakuhachi he is making. Photograph by Bruno Deschênes.**

According to Kiku Day, Ramos' pilgrimage is giving new meanings to what is perceived as an old tradition, but meanings that are created from the point of view of the West, in the hopes of helping the shakuhachi players and students to somehow become insiders of a tradition of which they are not native. An outcome of the interest that the shakuhachi is gaining worldwide is that this tradition is gradually

becoming an international one, since more and more non-Japanese are investing their spirituality into the shakuhachi and its music.<sup>11</sup> But it is a spirituality that is obviously from an outsider's point of view. In this particular situation, this is not simply a case of appropriation in which some outsiders appropriate for themselves a tradition that is not their own, but a form of transpropriation, since they transform and alter that tradition in the process by transferring their own interpretation into it.

Today, a good number of non-Japanese shakuhachi players consider that the solo pieces these monks have created is Zen music, a view that is not necessarily shared by Japanese shakuhachi players. One of the reasons why Zen was accepted in the 13th century was that it had similarity with the views of the time. It is not Japan that adapted to Zen, but Zen that had to be adapted to Japan, otherwise it would not have survived up until today. When a group of happy wanderers like the one I was part of travel to Japan to experience that spirituality, we unavoidably reinterpret it from our own point of view. In the end, the one thing we were looking for, at least in my case, is a spirituality that is lacking in our own cultures, and that is also slowly getting lost in Japan, due to technology and modernization.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For an in-depth history of the shakuhachi, see Henry Johnson, *The Shakuhachi, Roots and Route* (Leiden and Boston: Brill), 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Bruno Deschênes received his master title in shakuhachi in August 2016, from Alcevin Ryūzen Ramos. Following the Japanese custom, he received an artist name: Chikushin, meaning faithful bamboo.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jay Keister "The *Shakuhachi* as Spiritual Tool: A Japanese Buddhist Instrument in the West," *Asian Music* 35/2 (2004): 99-132.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kiku Day, "Zen Buddhism and Music: Spiritual Shakuhachi Tours to Japan," in *The Changing World Religion Map*, ed. S.D. Brunn (Dordrecht, Springer Science + Business Media, 2015), 2815-2831.

<sup>5</sup> There is an 800-year-old statue containing a relic of Kakushin in a hall of Kōkokuji.

<sup>6</sup> Originally, at the beginning of the first millennium, *miko* were women shamans who served as a link between the *kami*, or gods, and earthly beings. *Kagura* is the name given to *shintō*'s sacred dances.

<sup>7</sup> The *tsugaru shamisen* is a type of *shamisen*, the three-string Japanese lute, found in the north of Japan. At the end of the 19th century, a unique rhythmic and improvisatory style was developed by mendicant players.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kiku Day, (2015).

<sup>9</sup> See in particular D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). As well,

another influential book in the promotion of that myth is Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Every four years or so, a World Shakuhachi Festival is organized in different cities around the World (e.g., Boulder, Colorado, in 1998; New York in 2004; Sidney, Australia, in 2008; Kyoto in 2012). The next one will be in Prague, while the following one will be in China. In both cases, the years are not yet confirmed.



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