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DHYANI YWAHOO - A Cherokee woman, 27th lineage holder of the Cherokee Nation; founder of the Sunray Meditation Society.

Costs: 3 days: \$110 non-mem., \$75 mem. (incls. meals and accommodations)

2 days: \$75 non-mem., \$40 mem. (includes meals and accommodations)

1 day: \$40 non-mem., \$25 mem. (includes meals)

Child care: \$10/day

Registration requires a \$10 deposit.

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THE SOUND OF WIND An Evening of Shakuhachi

by Anthony Manousos

In the darkened dharma room sat the shakuhachi player, a slim, bearded, formally robed Westerner, his face illuminated by candlelight, his gaze one-pointedly fixed on a piece of driftwood and a few stones suggesting a Zen garden.

His audience consisted of around forty people, many of whom were from the local community and had no previous exposure to Zen. They avidly dined on such Korean delicacies as kimbop (vegetarian sushi) and kimchee (highly seasoned pickled vegetables), socialized with members of the Providence sangha, chanted sutras, and now sat expectantly listening as the shakuhachi player began to speak:

"My name is Bob Seigetsu Avstreich, and for the past twelve years I have studied and practiced sui-zen. The name Seigetsu ('Clear or Peaceful Moon') was given to me by my teacher, Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin, as a mark of my attainment in this art. Sui-zen is a 1200 year old tradition of direct meditation and healing utilizing the shakuhachi, an end-blown, five-holed bamboo flute.

"Shaku is actually a unit of measure, like a foot. It's as if we were to name our Western flute or recorder 'a foot-and-a-half.' The three flutes I play are the standard 1.8, a 1.9, and a 2.4 length, all made by the renowned maker Kono Sensei. The longer flutes are used for pieces of the older, more meditative mode.

"Traditionally, the art of sui-zen was offered not as entertainment, but as a form of healing meditation for player and listener alike. Practitioners of honkyoku ('music of the original self') aimed to alleviate suffering and create 'the one perfect sound that would heal the world.'

"It is significant that the shakuhachi is made of bamboo, a material which, in the East, is esteemed because it embraces all the qualities of Nature: it is flexible, strong, evergreen, wide-ranging, utilitarian, and perhaps most important from the Zen point of view, it possesses a hollow or empty center.

"Joining the textures of breath and bamboo, the shakuhachi player celebrates the union of spirit, nature and humanity in the manner of the Chinese proverb: 'Heaven and Earth live together, and all things and I are one.'"

According to legend, sui-zen originated in the 9th century with the Chinese Zen master Fuke whose ringing bell and bamboo flute were a main component of his wandering teaching. This unique and sometimes controversial style of musical meditation was brought to Japan in the 13th century, where it was practiced by wandering monks of the Fuke order.

"Try not to listen too closely. Just let it be there."

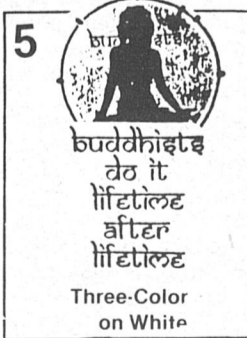
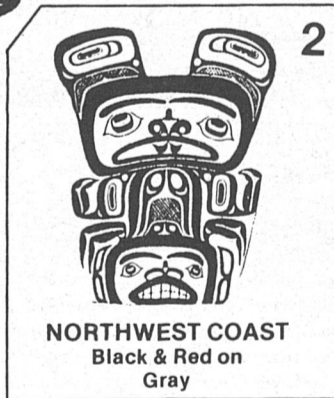
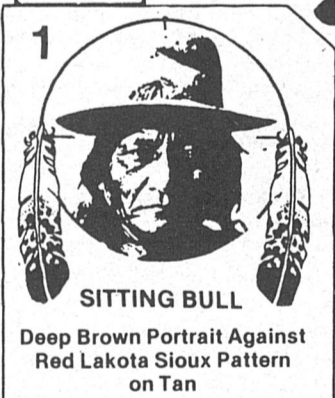
When Japan was unified under the shogun in the 1600's, the Fuke sect came under special government protection. The ranks of these wandering "priests of nothingness" were swelled by the ronin—unattached samurai whose services were no longer needed for the battles of feudal Japan. The life of a Zen monk was one of the few honorable paths open to these samurai; and although some of them became sincere practitioners, many others became part of an extensive spy network. (The figure of the komuso, head covered by the traditional basket, still lurks in the popular Japanese imagination as a symbol of evil.) In the mid-19th century, when the Meiji Reformation overthrew the power of the shogunate and the Fuke sect, the playing of shakuhachi was banned in Japan. This edict was rescinded within 10 years, however, and, for the first time, the playing of shakuhachi was available to the general population. Today the Fuke order survives and can be experienced at Myoan-ji Temple in Kyoto.

In Korea, shakuhachi players strayed from their spiritual mission to become travelling minstrels and vagabonds. They secularized traditional Buddhist themes and created lively and popular folk songs and dances that were often accompanied by hand bells. Organizing themselves into "tribes" that did not adhere to Buddhist precepts, they occasionally ate meat, drank wine, and engaged in free love. Like the hippies and street musicians of the 1960's, these free spirits made their living by panhandling and were regarded as the riffraff of society. Observed one writer, "like other despised classes, they endured long and disappeared."

As Korean Buddhism degenerated towards the end of the Chosen dynasty (ca. 1910), bamboo flute playing became associated with blind masseurs, who used the haunting sound to attract customers at night. A decade ago, the practice of itinerant begging—a venerable Buddhist practice—was formally prohibited by the Chogye Order in an effort to improve its public image. As Korea increasingly turns to Western values, such as competition, achievement, and material gain, sui-zen and the art of shakuhachi have virtually disappeared.

Like the original wandering monks of the sui-zen tradition, Avstreich regards the shakuhachi as a spiritual practice and is willing to offer his music to those in need, regardless of ability to pay. He travels widely, performing at colleges, museums, churches, and cultural events, such as the Omega Institute, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, M.I.T., the Brooklyn Botanical Garden "Cherry Blossom Festival," Amnesty International, the Sierra Club, Interface, Smith College, and many more. A serious musician as well as sui-zen practitioner, he has collaborated with such artists as Susan Osborne, the Omega Liturgical Dance Company and Persis Ensor, a lutenist and singer of Medieval and Renaissance music.

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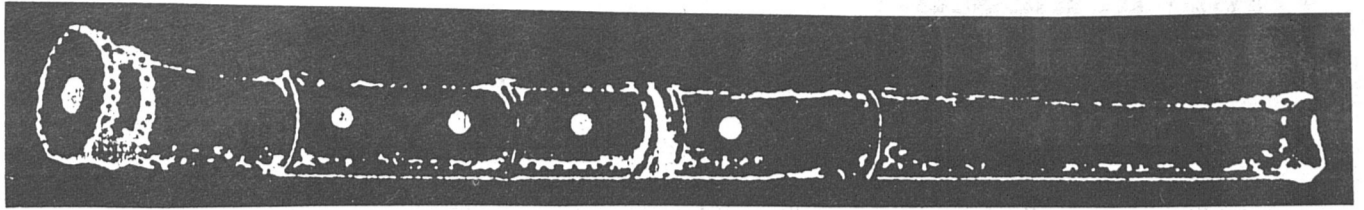
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AND WATER

Flute with Bob

Seigetsu Avstreich



The music of the shakuhachi initially sounds very strange to Westerners, since it lacks external rhythm and melody, and does not possess the strict back-and-forth cadence usually associated with the Orient. Shakuhachi pieces have an organic quality, as phrases emerge from and return to silence, like the ebb and flow of the sea or the rising and falling of the wind through the trees.

In order to make the experience of shakuhachi more accessible, Avstreich introduced each piece with a brief dramatic reading of a Zen story or poem. He also used humor to help people relax and flow with the music.

"Make yourself comfortable," Avstreich told his audience after finishing his first piece, a 400-year-old *sanya* meant to express 'a free floating, boundaryless state in which there is no up or down, left or right—a state in which, as one mystic wrote, **you must be nothing but an ear which hears what the universe of the Word is constantly saying within you.**' When several members of the audience lay back on their cushions and appeared to be either in a boundaryless state or dozing off, Avstreich remarked: "Whenever I tell people to relax, somebody usually falls asleep, and it's always someone who snores. But in Zen there is, or should be, no distinctions. Snoring and the sound of the shakuhachi also must live together."

Introducing his next piece, Avstreich recounted the story from Chuang-Tsu about the man who fell asleep and imagined he was a butterfly. Upon awakening, he wondered, "Am I a man dreaming that I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?" "This story in its gentle humor expresses the mutuality, the indivisible interpenetrability of Life, which sui-zen celebrates," Avstreich observed. "Man and butterfly are inseparable in their act of Becoming, which we call being alive."



"The most popular piece for the shakuhachi," Avstreich continued, "is a duet. Not definitely part of the sui-zen tradition, it exists by itself and is called **Shika No Tone** (pronounced **to-nay**), two deer, male and female, calling to each other across the hills in spring." To set the mood, he recited the following Chinese poem:

Wild geese fly across the sky.
Their image is reflected on the waters.
The geese do not mean to cast their image on the water.
The water has no mind to hold the image of the geese.

The most striking and memorable piece of the evening was undoubtedly **Sagari**, which means "air" or "melody" (lit. "wind through the autumn leaves"), but which sounded more like a hurricane tearing through the forest. "**Sagari** was developed from the Bushido, the samurai tradition," Avstreich explained. "Its style of playing uses the ancient traditional method of panting from the diaphragm. It is very strange-sounding and discordant. Imagine it like a great rushing river. If you are in a river that has great force and you try to direct your own way, you'll have great difficulty. If you let it take you, if you ride with it, you will arrive safely when the rapids cease. So try not to listen too closely. Just let it be there."

The next piece was Ajikan, "the most well known and popular existing in Zen tradition and monasteries." Ajikan (a composite word combining characters from "Amida [Buddha]," "sound," and "hear") could be translated simply to mean, 'Perceive sound' [or Kwansum Bosal]. Its mood was one of peacefulness and stillness.

The last piece, appropriately enough, was the oldest in this tradition. Call Kyorei ('False bell,' or 'Echoing of the Bell'), it is supposed to evoke "that remembrance of reality that we all carry within and which gets awakened by a bird's call at dusk, or a gull's cry over the waves, or a flower or the wind." This title also refers to a legend about the founder of sui-zen who often walked down the street ringing a bell. When he died, or rather disappeared, a bell—or was it the echo of a bell?—was heard in the sky as a ghostly echo of his teaching.

Avstreich concluded his performance by reading poems by Wallace Stevens and Pablo Neruda that seemed to echo, in an uncanny fashion, the Zen experience. These poems were a compelling reminder that what Zen art tries to convey is universal and cannot be confined to a particular culture or style.

After the concert, people crowded around to ask questions and to take a closer look at the flutes and at the strange Japanese notations.

How was the music of sui-zen preserved?

"This music was originally transmitted from master to disciple as a pathway of enlightenment. It was not formally written until the turn of this century. In the komuso (mendicant priest) tradition, the great shakuhachi master Jin Nyodo traveled to the remaining monasteries to learn and notate the pieces. About 80 remain of the more than 140 that existed when the tradition flourished.

How did you get started playing shakuhachi?

"Some ten years ago I casually borrowed a record from my local library entitled 'The Mysterious Sounds of the Japanese Bamboo Flute.' I was completely unprepared for the experience of first hearing the shakuhachi, though in fact I had been awaiting it all my life. The sound simultaneously pierced and filled my soul, fulfilling a hunger of spirit which I could never before identify.

"Within two weeks I began studying with Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin, Dai Shi Han (Grand Master) in Kinko School of Shakuhachi, whose Ki-Sui-An Dojo (Dojo of "Empty Breath" or "Blowing Nothingness") in New York City is the largest in the world outside of Japan. I have also had the opportunity to study in master classes with the world famous musicians Aoki Sensei and Yokoyama Sensei."

You have been a music therapist for nearly a dozen years. What do you see as the relation between music and healing?

"I have used this music in my work with an adult schizophrenic outpatient population successfully for many years in several different settings, including Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

"The music cannot create change in and of itself. Rather, by being non-directional and spontaneous, like the sound of wind and water, it helps to create the context, the "potential space," within which healing work can be accomplished.

"This sense of the healing environment has been rediscovered in the West in many ways. Joseph Campbell in his studies of ancient mythologies describes it as 'the place of passage.' The eminent British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott described it as the 'facilitating environment.'

"Perhaps because of its unique musical structure and because it is a form of meditation that requires neither action nor non-action on the part of the recipient-meditator, sui-zen promotes both self-integration and relaxation. It encourages a state of active receptivity that is perhaps congruent with Michael Balent's theory of 'passive object love' and the controversial Japanese concept of *amaeru*.

"Neurologically, this state of active receptivity has application in the study of brain patterns, the nurturing environment for premature infants, and the brain repatterning needed for those suffering from stroke or brain damage as well as certain forms of schizophrenia..... I have found that sui-zen is the music of Peace in all meanings of the word."

"I was completely unprepared for the experience of first hearing the shakuhachi, though in fact I had been waiting for it all my life."

Do you improvise or compose your own sui-zen music?

"I enjoy this question since I do play and occasionally perform blues, jazz and folk music on a variety of other instruments. The question always reminds me of the Zen dialogue in which the disciple requests enlightenment to find his 'true self' and the Master replies, 'What would you want with a self?'

"Sui-zen is unlike jazz or blues in that the musician is encouraged to express himself. Sui-zen is not concerned with self-expression but rather with unself-conscious awareness. The form of the music contains my 'self.' I give my 'self' up to the inevitability of the form in the same way I give myself up to the inevitability of breathing. The form takes care of my self. Without a self to worry about, who knows what wonders may be experienced?"

It was indeed a night of wonders for many members of the audience. Patricia Jalette, a psychiatric counselor who brought her 11-year-old daughter to the concert, explained: "Lauren loved the music but she was especially intrigued by the stories. When she got home the next day, she drew a picture of a butterfly with a bearded man's face. For some reason, this story left a deep impression on her." Others, including the harried writer of this article, reported feelings of incredible well-being and calm.

Avstreich embarks this spring on his first concert tour of Japan. Asked about future plans, he said: "I'd like to work more with Buddhist organizations. The experience of playing this music at a place like the Providence Zen Center has been truly wonderful. I hope to connect more often with places like this in the future." □

Anthony Manousos, a recent resident at the Providence Zen Center, is a freelance writer and former editorial associate to Fellowship in Prayer, a bimonthly Quaker publication based in Princeton, NJ.