

Hitori Kotoba

By Hisamatsu Fûyô

Hisamatsu Masagorô (ca. 1790-1845), named Fûyô, was a fourth-generation successor of Kurosawa Kinko¹ and was of exceptional importance to the Kinko school². Like Kinko himself, Masagorô made great efforts to further the Zen aspect of shakuhachi playing and had strong reservations against the use of the instrument in worldly music. Three writings of his have survived: *Hitori Mondo* (written in 1823), *Hitori Kotoba* (before 1830) and *Kaisei Hôgo* (1838). These writings are of special importance as they comprise the only surviving statements from a shakuhachi player from the Fuke tradition on the spiritual background to this practice.

This essay was printed in the *Chikuyû* journal, a quarterly publication of the *Chikuyûsha*³. In the introduction it is said that Fûyô wrote this essay before 1830, and that it was often copied. It is not stated whose hand wrote the manuscript which served as a basis for this printed version.

The title, which can be read as either *Hitorigoto* or *Dokugen*, means “monologue”.

This translation is from Dr. Andreas Gutzwiller and has been taken from his book, “Die Shakuhachi der Kinko-Schule” (i.e. “The shakuhachi of the Kinko school”), published in “Studien zur traditionellen Musik Japans” Vol. 5, Bärenreiter, Kassel 1983). I warmly thank him for his permission to publish this text.

■ **Whoever studies the shakuhachi must rid himself of worldly thoughts, separate himself from his desires and put aside [the idea of] being superior or inferior. He must concentrate his mind in his stomach⁴, so that he can hear the sound of the bamboo.** That is the most important thing.

For this reason, he must play with his eyes closed. Especially in the case of beginners, worldly thoughts will arise when they do not close their eyes.

■ The shakuhachi must not be too tightly held. If it is too tightly held, tensions arise. Should tensions arise, you must relax your mind. Know that tension is the “sickness of the shakuhachi”. The shakuhachi is held with only the thumb and middle finger of the right hand, but you must not grip it too tightly⁵.

■ There are rules for playing the shakuhachi. The basic rule is the notation itself. Whoever injures the rules is outside of the tradition. For this reason one must not repeatedly deviate from the notation.

■ *Meri-kari* is of particular importance. If *meri-kari* is lacking [when playing the shakuhachi], it is as if you were blowing through a stick, and it is most disgraceful. It is actually good when the tone becomes certain and firm, but wildly blowing about is most unpleasant.

¹ Kurosawa Kinko (1710-1770) joined the Fuke tradition at the age of 19 and studied the shakuhachi under Ikkei, *komusô* at Shôjuken Temple in Nagasaki. He travelled throughout Japan as a begging monk and compiled a collection of 36 *honkyoku*, which have remained until today the definitive repertoire of the Kinko school in Japan. In the year 1768 he became *shinanban*, teacher of both main temples of the Fuke tradition in Edo (modern day Tokyo), Reihô-ji and Ichigetsu-ji and taught there until his death two years later.

² The Kinko school began as a revival movement within the Fuke tradition and was originally not a movement that aimed to further develop shakuhachi music. Instead it represented simply one of many traditions within the Fuke lineages. In any case the movement acquired particular importance as it from that point on shaped the tradition in both of the tradition’s main temples in Edo.

³ The *Chikuyûsha* forms today one of the traditions within the Kinko School. At this time, it is head by Kawase Junsuke III.

⁴ Literally “settling one’s mind in the region below the navel.”

⁵ It is worth mentioning that today the best players prefer a reversed hand position in which the left hand is the lower hand which holds the instrument.

■ One must not deliberately strive from the beginning to achieve a beautiful tone. It is disgraceful when someone loves to produce a splendid tone.

■ When the pieces are played they should be uninterrupted from beginning to end, like the stem of the lotus⁶. They must be played without interrupting this connection. In the interruption-connection of the breath the playing happens by using one's mind⁷. In this way from the beginning, no interruptions will arise.

There is no place for interruptions in the case of *tsukiro*, *nayashi* and so forth⁸.

■ Concerning the pieces, it is of great importance that with respect to the time-structure the correct measure prevails. The correct measure must not be omitted. Calm pieces have the correct measure when they are played calmly; energetic pieces have the correct measure when they are played energetically. Each individual piece has a different time-structure. This must be thoroughly practiced.

■ A beginner must firstly practice the technique of playing the shakuhachi. When he has mastered the technique, he must penetrate the mind of the music. **Mastery does not lay in [the mastery of] technique, but in [penetrating] the mind of the music. Penetrating the mind of the music, however, is contained in technical mastery.** Whoever has not mastered the technique will not penetrate the mind of the music. Whoever preoccupies himself as a beginner with the mind of the music, will stay his entire life a theoretician of the way of bamboo. [This is] beyond doubt!

■ **It is bad to always blow around wildly with all your strength. One must play evenly and with certainty.**

■ Recently the finger holes have been enlarged¹⁰. But still [instruments with] small finger holes should not be called bad. When the bamboo is played fully and with a mature style, then the difference between large and small finger holes is of no importance. For the beginner it is difficult to play [on an instrument] with small finger holes. But [for him as well] it is of no importance whether the finger holes are large or small.

■ **There are people who believe that the true meaning of the bamboo tone “sadness about impermanence”¹¹ is to be expressed sadly and with deep emotions. How ridiculous! Playing shakuhachi is actually not about being heard by others.** The shakuhachi is an instrument to develop one's own mind. He who has freed himself from everything can hear this.

Whoever feels sadness [when listening to shakuhachi music] becomes even sadder; whoever feels happiness becomes even happier. Sadness and joy are not on the side of the musician, but on that of the listener. [This is] beyond doubt!

⁶ Unlike bamboo, the lotus has no nodes.

⁷ This means remaining present with the mind over the breath pauses, thus establishing a connection between individual tone units.

⁸ *Tsukiro* is the older term for *nayashi*; the meaning of the phrase, however, remains unclear.

¹⁰ Around the turn of the 18th century, the finger holes of the shakuhachi of the Kinko School were enlarged, in particular making the execution of the *meri-kari* technique easier.

¹¹ *Mono no aware*

■ No one should be criticized when he strays [from the set form of the pieces] when playing alone. However, when he plays together [with someone else] and his partner strays [from the form], they must harmonize with one another. When one of the two wants to dominate the other, the bamboo's tone becomes chaotic. Indeed, the true meaning of the shakuhachi is not found in playing together, but nonetheless those who play together in harmony actualize *shugyō*¹². When playing together, helping the other must be the most important concern.

■ “Other pieces”¹³ should not be disregarded as “farmer’s music”¹⁴. Do not such pieces also have the wondrous *yūgen* tone¹⁵? Should we not learn them as well?

■ The beginner must take care that the pitch of the shakuhachi is balanced. If the pitch of the bamboo is poor, and he continues to practice in this way, his own [perception of correct] pitch becomes poor and he will stray from the correct path.

It is difficult for the beginner to judge if his intonation is good or bad. Still he will, if he studies seriously, later be able to recognize it more or less correctly.

■ The [purity of the] intonation of an individual shakuhachi¹⁶ varies. Normally the intonation of the first and second finger hole is better than that of the third and fourth. Holes four and five are [on most instruments] not as good as two and three¹⁷.

A good shakuhachi is one on which the pitches of the five fingerholes sound out clearly, neither too weak nor too bold¹⁸. On most [instruments], however, the five holes are insufficient¹⁹.

¹² The practice of playing the shakuhachi. The essence is playing “free from reason”, *shugyo* is thus the spiritual discipline to reach the stage where *tettei on*, “the absolute tone”, appears. The “great bamboo” is then blown with *kisoku* the spiritual breath. *Kisoku shugyō* (“the discipline of spiritual breathing”) defines the shakuhachi as a tool of Zen. Within this context of *shugyō*, the *honkyoku* are not a repertoire to be mastered in their entirety in order that one is considered a true player. It is not important how many pieces you have mastered, but rather much more how you play **one single** piece. In a source text, all *honkyoku* are reduced to a single piece; this piece is reduced to *mukyoku* “no piece”; this in turn is reduced to *kisoku* the spiritual breath; and *kisoku* finally is reduced to *kyomu*, “emptiness and nothingness”. “What meaning”, ends the text, “has the number of pieces learned?”

¹³ Meant here are pieces which stand outside the Fuke tradition.

¹⁴ Jap. *inakadake* “rural bamboo”.

¹⁵ Jap. *yūgen* (*yū*: unclear, *gen*: secret, dark) describes the aesthetic principal of *honkyoku*. This ideal that penetrates all of Japanese art, consists in the fact that innuendo is valued more highly than complete clarity, the excerpt valued more than the whole. It also consists in a turning away from closed symmetrical forms in favor of freer wanderings in which the individual parts are to be found in mutual interdependence. The contradiction between precisely executed details and the loosely-fitted entire form is not to be seen as a contradiction but as complementary elements. *Yūgen* is, however, not only realized in the form. The rhythm of *honkyoku* is not manifested as a series of regular and predictable stresses, but consists of a sort of hesitation so that an irregular sequence of tension and relaxation arises. Another aspect of this veiled art is the inexactly definable pitch of grace notes. The same goes for the slow tempo in which the *honkyoku* are played: a significant moment of time is placed between the tone-events, for even taking a breath becomes part of the music.

¹⁶ Plural.

¹⁷ As is also common in the notation, the numbers refer to the opened finger holes.

¹⁸ Possibly this last remark refers less to the tone color than to its pitch. Then the translation would read “neither too low nor too high”.

¹⁹ This means the pitch is irregular.

What the bamboo does not automatically produce [i.e. an even intonation], human skill cannot correct. Such shakuhachi are to be played by submitting to their intonation and by equalizing the intonation through playing technique.

■ Nothing has been transmitted by a master in writing on the subject of how shakuhachi are made. Many make the holes according to their own ideas and without much knowledge, and polish the shakuhachi with all sorts of herbs to produce an outer shine that confuses the [innocent] beginner. Such people are only interested in money. I will not say anything more about that.

What a pity for the bamboo, which is naturally provided with a good tone! When shakuhachi are produced by such idiots, the bamboo is crippled forever and in the end is nothing more than a bamboo club. How sad!

■ There are many who only think about memorizing the external form when learning a piece. This is a grave misunderstanding. *Meri-kari* and the proper time-structure is the essence [of shakuhachi playing] and one who plays, understanding this after having learned the external form, is a good player. A beginner or a mediocre player is under no circumstances capable of doing so²⁰. [For such players] the most important thing is that they imitate their teacher in everything. This is why the choice of teacher is of such fundamental importance. One must not be careless in this! Only playing the outer form may not be called playing the shakuhachi and has nothing to do with the shakuhachi. Be very careful to avoid this!

■ There are many who can produce a tone that resembles [that of the shakuhachi] and who already criticize others, disdaining some who are better than themselves. Entrusting yourself to such people and learning from them is meaningless. With deceitful slander they mislead beginners. Whoever is [once] misled will his whole life long never be able to step onto the correct path.

A village without birds will be invaded by [false teachers like] bats²¹, who spread untruths and cheat the ignorant. So keep your distance when people appear who have not themselves achieved [mastery]. Do not linger there! How pitiful!

In the end one must give one's life entirely to this matter. That is everything!

■ Shakuhachi teachers who meet someone who plays better than themselves should truly wish to allow his students to hear this bamboo tone²², and to teach and lead them accordingly. These students should not separate from their teacher but should have trust in his judgment.

■ In today's practice there are pieces which are not played alone, but rather together with *sangen*²³. Yet in doing so, the shakuhachi is deprived of its bamboo tone and loses its true meaning. This practice is like being arrogant of being the most common of people and being proud of going about with base prostitutes.

²⁰ This means indeed that he cannot yet understand the essence of playing the shakuhachi, as he has not yet mastered the external form of the pieces, which is a pre-requisite to this understanding.

²¹ This refers to the saying: "Bats come to a village without birds". In this case: where no authentic masters are to be found, false ones settle in.

²² i.e. the better player

²³ Jap. *sangen*, lit. "three strings", one name for the shamisen.

These people should be careful about straying from the right path to the wrong one. Keep away [from them]!

Such people have nothing to do with the shakuhachi. They seem to play it, but in fact only steal its name and defile the shakuhachi, which is an important tool in Zen. They should be on their guard! Members of the Fuke tradition should forbid this [practice].

In any case, the end of time has been reached and the end of the right path is in sight. Nonetheless, whoever wants to study the way of bamboo seriously and with dedication must put [these people] aside and not get involved with them.

■ As I have described here, it should be easy for the beginner to find the right path. Still these were [only] general explanations so that [the student] does not end up on the wrong path. How one plays shakuhachi is something each person must learn from his teacher.

Â kashikô²⁴.

²⁴ A closure common in letters.