Mindful playing, mindful practice:
The *shakuhachi* as a modern meditation tool

尺八

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I am
A hole in a flute
That the Christ's breath moves through—
Listen to this
Music

—Hafiz (Ladinsky 1999)

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Abstract

This paper is a practice-based performance research project investigating the possibilities of applying mindfulness meditation to the act of playing *shauhachi*. The *shakuhchi* has a history of being used as a tool for meditation for Zen Buddhist monks between 17th and end of 19th century, although transmission of meditation ceased, thus I furthermore investigate Buddhist writings from that period. In order to reflect on how the monks may have meditated while playing, I base my investigation on 6-month daily practice, including diary notes, and on my mindfulness meditation training and sources from the Edo period.

Conventions

In the present paper, Japanese names are presented according to the Japanese practice of placing family names first and given names second.
I have here followed the Hepburn romanisation system, with the long vowels ō and ū indicated by a macron. Thus shoh is rendered as shō.
Japanese words take the same form whether in singular or plural. Thus the term shakuhachi can refer to one or more instruments.
Japanese terms used here are defined at their first appearance only. A glossary of definitions is provided at the end.

1. Introduction

For many *shakuhachi*[1] players, the instrument's history as a tool for meditation used by Zen Buddhist mendicant monks is a major part of the attraction of playing the instrument; indeed, no few players first learn of the instrument via their interest in Zen Buddhist meditation.[2] On various online *shakuhachi* fora, players proclaim not to to be interested in playing music when playing the instrument—but to meditate.[3] An example of this attitude is for example the post on shakuhachiforum.com by Markintheworld (pseudonym) from Saratoga Springs, New York, from 19 March 2010:

> I enjoy [playing] as a meditative practice, and as a good pre-amble to a sitting meditation… I am not interested in the shakuhachi as an instrument of musical performance, but rather as a meditation tool.
> (http://shakuhachiforum.com/viewtopic.php?id=4466, accessed 15.09.14)

A recent google search on the Boolean search term 'shakuhachi and meditation' gave me 206,000 hits and a plethora of CDs recordings of *shakuhachi* music are described as 'meditation music'.[4]

While the *shakuhachi* was indeed used a tool for meditation by the *komusō* monks (lit. monks of nothingness), the mendicant monks of the Fuke sect, a subsect of Rinzai Zen, the available evidence indicates that the study of the *shakuhachi* as a religious tool ceased soon after the sect was permanently abolished in 1871 by the new Meiji government (1868–1912). The music, however, continues to be transmitted today. Publications concerning, for example, the revival of the Myōan-ji[5] temple in Kyoto in 1890 have been focused on how Higuchi Taizan (1856–1914)[6] recreated the repertoire of the Myōan group based on traditions taken from several temples, while those dealing with secular developments describe how skilled players began to form guilds and and introduce the instrument in ensemble music (see for

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1 Organologically, the *shakuhachi* is defined as a Japanese vertical notched oblique bamboo flute.

2 Both statements are based on my active engagement in the *shakuhachi* scene these past 20 years.

3 See www.shakuhachiforum.com and www.shakuhachiforum.eu among others.

4 See, for example, Richardson, Stan. 1997. *Shakuhachi Meditation Music: Traditional Japanese Flute for Zen Contemplation*. Boulder: Sounds True M301D and Lee, Riley. 2012. *Shakuhachi Flute Meditations: Zen Music to Calm the Mind*. Boulder: Sounds True: m2505d.

5 The Myōanji-temple and the Myōan kyōkai (society) are today the most important gatherings of *shakuhachi* players who continue in the tradition of the *komusō* monks.

6 Higuchi Taizan was appointed as the *shakuhachi* master of the newly founded Myōan Kyokai (society) in 1890. He modernised the notation system and compiled a collection of *honkyoku* that became the Myōan repertoire.

example Kamisangō 1988 and Takahashi 1990), but nothing has been written concerning the transmission of its use as a tool for meditation.

It is my intention to carry out practically based performance research on how to combine mindfulness meditation and *shakuhachi* playing by drawing on my own experience as a *shakuhachi* player and practitioner of meditation – thus a first person (subject oriented) approach - while also utilising interviews of other non-Japanese *shakuhachi* players. The reason I chose to interview non-Japanese players is that the majority of Japanese players view themselves as having a secular approach to the playing of *shakuhachi*, thereby distancing themselves from the Fuke sect and *komusō* monks, while the *shakuhachi* interest of non-Japanese players, as we have seen above, is frequently accompanied by an equally great interest for Zen Buddhism.[7]

My aim is to propose how to combine *shakuhachi* and meditation and describe the process of how to practice this approach.

2.1. Research Questions

How can mindfulness-based meditation be applied to *shakuhachi* playing and thereby restore that aspect of meditation so important in the heritage of that instrument?

Can applying mindfulness-based meditation to the playing of *shakuhachi* reveal an understanding on how the *komusō* monks may have used the *shakuhachi* as tool for meditation, with the ultimate goal of reaching enlightenment?

A few more questions will be asked in the Mindfulness Meditation section on page 12.

2.2 Hypothesis

In my experience, performing mindfulness meditation while playing the *shakuhachi* is no easy task. One of the reasons for the difficulties a player encounters in attempting to do so is the lack of guidance; the experience gained by the *komusō* monks under some two centuries and more has now faded into oblivion. Here I utilise my own experience of these two genres

[7] I have observed a shift in the orientation of younger non-Japanese players, who seem to have an interest in Japanese culture due to an upbringing in which *manga* and *animé* have been a part of their everyday lives.

to frame an hypothesis on what concrete from this practice may have taken; due to the inadequacy of the record, written and otherwise, my reconstruction can constitute no more than a suggestion of how the *komusō* monk's meditation *may* have been implemented and transmitted. My hope is to be able to provide a clear description, which can serve as an inspiration for other *shakuhachi* players who wish to use the *shakuhachi* as a tool for meditation and enlightenment.

2.3 Methodology

The investigation will be based on my background as a *shakuhachi* player since 1989 and the my decade-long experience in meditation, in particular the mindfulness training I have received during my participation in the mindfulness meditation instructor course at *Skolen for Anvendt Meditation*, my own study of Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness meditation and my training in meditation – in particularly since I moved to Vækstcenteret in 2007. As an ethnomusicologist and performer of *shakuhachi*, I find I can range freely between theoretical knowledge of academic disciplines and the embodied and applied praxis of art and meditation. This project is thus a personal perspective and account of a musician-researcher inhabiting the space between art, science and meditation (see also Biswas 2011:95-6)
As a part of the practice-based research, I have maintained a diary of my daily *shakuhachi* and meditation practice from 4 April 2014. Currently I thus have notes from six month of practice to draw from as a lived, subjective experience. I have furthermore interviewed seventeen *shakuhachi* players from around the world, who volunteered to tell me how they use the *shakuhachi* as a meditation tool, in response to a call I posted on online *shakuhachi* fora and in *shakuhachi* groups on Facebook.
I find present-day techniques for mindfulness meditation to be excellent for *shakuhachi* players, as, while they have roots in Buddhist meditation practices (as in the case of the *shakuhachi*), they are not specific to any institutionalised religion; thus even non-Buddhists can utilise them. While, unfortunately no documents from the Edo period (1603–1867) describing how the *komusō* monks meditated or the instructions they received during their training remain to us, we do have access to written material on Zen Buddhist meditation from the period, which, as noted above, is the period during which the pieces which now form the

shakuhachi honkyoku were created. I believe that the Edo period material will inform my investigation at the same time that the latter will add to our knowledge of the meditation practices during that period. The present project thus constitutes a modern attempt to reunite meditation and *shakuhachi* playing.

3. The *shakuhachi*: History and background

It is today generally believed that the *shakuhachi* was introduced into Japan from China via the Korean peninsula during the Nara period (710–794) as one of the instruments in the *gagaku* (court) ensemble (Tsukitani *et al*. 1994: 105), although other versions of how and when the instrument came to Japan exist. Such an example is Kyotaku denki kokujikai (Japanese Translation and Annotation of the History of the Kyotaku) in which it is written that the Buddhist priest Shinchi Kakushin (1207–1298) brought the shakuhachi and the tradition of playing, which dated back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), to Japan from China (See: Yamamoto Morihide: 1795). However, the earliest extant examples of the *shakuhachi* today are found at the Shōsōin, a repository built in 756, which contains eight *shakuhachi* used in the ceremony performed for the consecration of the Great Buddha of Tōdaiji temple in 752 (Tsukitani 2008: 147), which indicates that the instrument's history in Japan is at least five centuries older than Shinchi Kakushin's journey to the Southern Song. When the *gagaku* ensemble was reorganised in the mid-ninth century, the *shakuhachi* fell into desuetude (See Nelson 2008: 41-2). A period of several centuries ensued in which no references to the instrument appear in surviving historical documents.

The first mention of the instrument after this hiatus appears in 1233 in the *Kyōkunshō*, a ten-volume treatise on *gagaku* written by Koma Chikazane: 'the short flute is called *shakuhachi*. It is now played by *mekurahōshi* (blind monks) and performers of *sarugaku* (theatre)'. The first known illustration of a *shakuhachi* is found in the *Taigenshō* (1512) although the illustration is dated to the late fourteenth century. The *shakuhachi* is then called *hitoyogiri,* or 'one node *shakuhachi*' (after Tsukitani 2008).

During the early seventeenth century, a loose fraternity of itinerant *shakuhachi* playing beggars converted into a recognised subsect of Rinzai Zen, the Fuke sect. A decree, Keichō no Okitegaki, enacted in 1614 by the first Tokugawa Shōgun, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616),

served as the legal basis for the establishment of the Fuke sect, which only admitted men of the *samurai* class and *rōnin* (unemployed *samurai*) as members of the order. The special privileges granted the *komusō* included monopoly rights over the use of the *shakuhachi* (laymen were officially prohibited from playing the *shakuhachi* – a rule implemented in 1677) and travel passes that allowed them to travel to any part of Japan (Berger and Hughes 2001: 834). According to the rules of the sect the *shakuhachi* was to be used exclusively as a *hōki*, a sacred tool, for the purpose of spiritual training and for *takuhatsu* (religious mendicancy).

In all, Nakatsuka Chikuzen lists seventy-seven Fuke temples that were scattered around Japan during the Edo period (1979: 95-102). Three of the most important were Myōanji in Kyoto and Ichigetsuji and Reihōji in the Kanto region, the area around Edo or present day Tokyo (Olafson 1987: 1). A *honsoku* (set of rules) was issued when a man of *samurai* class entered the sect. A standard *honsoku* from Ichigetsuji took the following form:

> The *shakuhachi* is an instrument of the Dharma and there are numerous meaning to be found in it… The three joints are the Three Powers [Heaven, Earth, and Man]. The upper and the lower fingerholes represent the sun and the moon. The five holes are also the Five Elements [Earth, Air, Fire, Water and Space]. Taken as a whole, the *shakuhachi* is the profound wellspring of all phenomenal things. If a man plays the *shakuhachi*, all things will come to him. His mind and realm of light and dark will become one.
>
> The *tengai* hat is an implement of adornment of the *Buddha-kāya* (the Triple Body of the Buddha). It is an item of clothing authorised to our sect [alone]… (after Sanford 1977: 422-3).

Each temple developed its own corpus of music which, when taken together, comprise the repertoire of approximately 150 *honkyoku* (original or fundamental pieces) from the Edo period known today. *Honkyoku* is thus a term that refers to the solo pieces with roots in the Edo period which were played by *komusō* monks either for their spiritual meditation training for or religious mendicancy. Music other than *honkyoku* was referred to as *gaikyoku* (outer pieces) or *rankyoku* (disorderly pieces) (Linder 2012: 98), which the monks were enjoined from playing. It is known that all *komusō* did not fully observe the rules mentioned above, and

that some played *rankyoku* and even opened *shakuhachi* teaching schools in for example Edo (present day Tokyo) and that the relationship between the *bakufu* (the Edo government) and the Fuke sect worsened due to difficulties controlling the sect and criminal behaviour on the part of some monks (Takahashi 1990: 117-9).

The Edo *bakufu* was overthrown in 1867 and in October 1871, the new Meiji government issued a decree, a Dajōkan Fukoku, which, among other things, banned the Fuke sect. Begging was prohibited in 1872, although it was again made legal in 1881 (Lee 1993: 151). These events, along with the Meiji Government's decision to prioritise Western music in compulsory education, naturally had a strong impact on the *shakuhachi*, its music and environment and led to major changes. According to Tsukitani Tsuneko and Shimura Satoshi, after the abolition of the Fuke sect the *shakuhachi* was to follow two distinct paths: secular and religious (Tsukitani 2008: 152, Shimura 2002b: 705) – the religious path becoming marginalised and ignored in the highly professionalised *hōgaku* (Japanese traditional music) world. As noted above, the available evidence indicates that the transmission of the study of the *shakuhachi* as a meditation tool ceased even in the Myōan Kyōkai, which was established when Myōanji temple was revived in Kyoto in 1890, while the transmission of the music continued and continues today. Publications concerning, for example, the revival of the Myōan-ji[8] temple in Kyoto in 1890 have been focused on how Higuchi Taizan (1856–1914)[9] recreated the repertoire of the Myōan group based on traditions taken from several temples, while those dealing with secular developments describe how skilled players began to form guilds and and introduce the instrument in ensemble music (see for example Kamisangō 1988 and Takahashi 1990). And from here, we turn to the present:

4.1 Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is the cultivation of the ability to be present in a given moment, while being non-judgemental and intentionally aware of that moment. Thus staying with that present moment, as it is, means to stay with and let go of the identification of the emotions,

[8] The Myōanji-temple and the Myōan kyōkai (society) are today the most important gatherings of *shakuhachi* players who continue in the tradition of the *komusō* monks.

[9] Higuchi Taizan was appointed as the *shakuhachi* master of the newly founded Myōan Kyokai (society) in 1890. He modernised the notation system and compiled a collection of *honkyoku* that became the Myōan repertoire.

sensations and thoughts (after Risom 2013, Kabat-Zinn: 1994). One further concept can be added to mindfulness meditation as described above, which is 'witness consciousness', a state of awareness in which habits of the mind, such as thinking, being distracted, and assessing, are replaced by non-distracted present awareness (Risom 2013: 43). This paper will in particular be concerned with mindfulness and witness-conscious mind during the playing of *shakuhachi*.

While attempting to grasp the concept mindfulness – a word that has during the past decade entered everyday vocabulary – I became curious about its etymology. The Concise Oxford Dictionary from 2001 explains 'mindful' ('mindfulness' is not entered) as to be 'conscious or aware of something' and inclined or intending to do something' (Pearsall: 2001: 906), while the Oxford Dictionaries Online defines 'mindfulness' as:

1. The quality or state of being conscious or aware of something
2. A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mindfulness. Accessed 04.10.14)

which clearly shows that the world 'mindfulness' has become a common word. The Online Etymology Dictionary describes that 'Old English *mindful* means 'of good memory' (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=mindful&allowed_in_frame=0. Accessed 04.10.14). The Pali[10] word *sati* is often translated as mindfulness although etymologically, it means 'to remember' but in Buddhism it refers to skilful attentiveness (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sati). Accessed 04.10.14). All the above, including the archaic meanings, reinforce my understanding of the word today. The archaic meaning 'to remember' – I find – is a key element in carrying mindful meditation into effect. One has to *remember* to be aware – an important and lengthy aspect of the training of meditation. This brings me to self-forgetfulness in which one forgets to be mindful. In my opinion, self-forgetfulness is an aspect of the human mind that musicians become well acquainted with. Self-forgetfulness is the mind being bound to and identical with its content, condition, and experiences and thereby forgetting *who* is experiencing this particular moment (Risom 2013: 59). As

[10] Pali is a dead Indo-Aryan language, in which many earliest extant Buddhist scriptures are written.

musicians we are often wholeheartedly absorbed in the production of sound. And with the self-forgetfulness comes the evaluating mind as if it was a henchman, which is an instinctive and – in fact – a reasonable aspect of music making as a large amount of time, we are bringing to perfection the musical output. Thus one of the questions I had in mind before embarking on this project was how can I find the delicate balance between having a non-judgementally attention on the sound I produce while accepting the present moment and thereby the sounds to be as they are – and still produce sounds that are musical, in order to draw listeners into the musical sound world? I believe it is a general experience among musicians to experience music playing when it flows without effort. However, I also believe many become self-forgetful in this pleasant state of being which brings me to the next subject. It is my hope that I will be able to somewhat the answer to the question during this paper.

4.2 Mindfulness and music

Many people, including musicians believe that 'meditation naturally appeals to musicians' as Rolf Hind, composer and pianist at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London wrote in the Guardian in 2011[11]. He argues the above with

> the time [the musicians] spend – even as children – in a state of solitary absorption, called practice. And when they perform, they seek "flow states" where, in the coming together of all the preparation and the right circumstances, playing feels wonderfully natural and unselfconscious (Hind: 2011).

Others state that listening to music is mindfulness practice in itself. One such person is Patrick Groneman, who on 11 October 2013 writes: 'Sometimes people will ask me whether or not listening to music counts as mindfulness practice. I'd say sure…' and he goes on to explain 'what makes a session of mindful music appreciation unique and distinct from a mindful breathing practice'. He explains that 'Music is a language of energy, a "vibe" of emotions and joy. It speaks to our core desires and feelings. It spans language barriers and political borders, making it a powerful means through which humans can connect. He then

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quotes Karen Armstrong saying: 'Beethoven's string quartets express pain itself [however] it is not my pain' (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/patrick-groneman/mindfulness-practice_b_3894331.html, accessed 08.10.14).

However, I am not convinced that meditation *naturally* appeals to musicians and listening to music itself is mindfulness meditation. I believe it is not an easy task to apply meditation to music playing and that it requires as arduous training as any sitting meditation form. I find that people, myself included, are confused by the notions of concentration, flow, and meditation. They overlap, and they are not mutually exclusive ; however, I do not perceive them to be the synonyms for the same phenomenon, which I shall discuss below. *Shakuhachi* and meditation undoubtedly overlap due to history. And *shakuhachi* playing as meditation is often described as *suizen* (lit. blowing Zen), often as a counterpart to *zazen* (lit. sitting Zen or the meditation practice performed in Zen Buddhism). However, I have not seen the word *suizen* in any historical documents, and nor had prof. Tsukitani Tsuneko (1944–2010), who explained to me, that the first time the word appeared was when the stone, in which the word is engraved, was erected at the Myōanji temple in Kyoto in the early 20th century (personal conversation 2007). Thus, meditation continued to be important for (some) *shakuhachi* players even after the abolishment of the Fuke sect, although—as noted—the transmission of practice seems to have faded away.

5. Zen Buddhism during the Edo period

Zen Buddhism, including the Rinzai school, which was said to have stagnated, experienced a decline during the early Edo period. Many scholars have therefore focused on Neo-Confucianism during the Edo period, with Buddhist movements often viewed as decadent or of merely secondary importance (Mohr 1994: 341) during the period. However, Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1768) and Takuan Sōhō (1573–1645) are generally thought to have revived the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism during a period important for the Fuke sect. Takuan explains clearly the Buddhist principles of how a person trained in meditation perceives the world:

> …when you put things in front of a mirror they are reflected in it according to their

> form. The mirror does not discriminate between the objects to whether they are beautiful or ugly, but still the mirror reflects their beauty or their ugliness… So it is with the strategist when he opens *isshin* (the one mind) like a mirror, the innocent mind, in front of his opponent. He can see good and bad clearly without the mind discriminating between good and bad. He can act absolutely freely, 'walking on the water as he walks on earth' and 'walking on the earth as he walks on the water' (Hirose 1992: 43-4).

In the context of *shakuhachi* playing and Buddhism, I find Takuan's phrase 'He can see good and bad clearly without the mind discriminating between good and bad. He can act absolutely freely…' of great interest. One of the trouble I have had when reflecting on meditation and *shakuhachi* playing has been an opinion commonly held among *shakuhachi* players that a player may be excused for not playing well because he is more interested in the spiritual aspect of *shakuhachi* playing than the musical. This is like saying 'as long as I sit down in the meditation position, the quality of my meditating does not matter'. To my mind, if meditation and *shakuhachi* playing really *can* be combined and have a contemplative effect, the same sort of effort has to be made during 'plain meditation' as is made during sitting meditation. Thus the playing skill does matter—in my opinion.

Hakuin is well known for having convinced Zen Buddhist students once again that freedom was to be found in the authentic realisation of *kenshō* or enlightenment attained through vigorous *zazen* and *koan* study directed toward, and later beyond enlightenment (post-enlightenment training) (Waddell 1994: xii). One noteworthy thing about Hakuin – also in the context of this paper – is that he seriously devoted himself to calligraphy and painting later in life, and thus developed an artistic relation to Zen Buddhism. In fact, art became a central part of Hakuin's teachings and one of the chief hallmarks of the Zen lineage after him; he considered his paintings to be part of his sermons with a more direct and universal appeal, and his work is considered to 'possess an ability unique even among Zen artists to translate visceral Zen experience on paper (Waddell 1994: xxi), which bears a striking relevance to *shakuhachi*, as one might well say the same thing about the playing of music being a translation of visceral experience into sound. However, Hakuin also describes the situation of monks contemporary to him as either sitting alone in retreat, not realising that others are being 'rowdy miscreants haunting down the town streets engrossed in these unsavoury pastimes… it all takes place in broad daylight for everyone to see, their black sins become known to all' and mentions that 'even the masterless *samurai* talk of their flagrant misdeeds'

(Waddell 1994: 11). Since the *komusō* monks, who were often masterless *samurai* (Takahashi 1990: 113), were also known for being rowdy and engaging in pastimes not suited to their status, one could perhaps consider a general decline in Zen Buddhism and the lack of control of the wandering *komusō* monks of the Fuke sect as related phenomena.

Another aspect which I cannot avoid mentioning here, although I will not deal with the matter in this paper, is the thorough investigation performed by Yamada Shoji on Zen and art (Yamada 2009). Titles like 'Zen and the art of…' are well known and began with Eugen Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* from 1948. According to Yamada, Herrigel hardly spoke Japanese, and the most important moment of Zen Buddhist teaching to which he points is taken from an event in which he was alone with his archery teacher. None of the other senior archery students had received teachings in Zen Buddhist archery. In fact, archery and Zen Buddhism were—according to Yamada—never mentioned together prior to the publication (2009: 207). Yamada's hypothesis is that a misunderstanding led to this belief in a strong connection between Zen Buddhism and art. Yamada's excellent and illuminating book is recommended for further study to the interested reader. Although in the case of the *shakuhachi*, a connection between Zen and the art of playing is undeniably present, I wish there to point out that such connections between different art forms and Zen are not necessarily innate in Japanese culture. Thus, the relationship between Zen and playing the *shakuhachi* to be viewed as a thing *sui generis*, rather than an example of a general case.

6.1 Meditation while playing *shakuhachi* I

My own journey in *shakuhachi* playing and meditation has been a long path. I did not – as many fellow players – come to the *shakuhachi* through Zen Buddhism but rather through an attraction to the timbre. Thus unfortunately I never listened carefully to my teacher Okuda Atsuya's explanation on the connection between the music and Zen Buddhist philosophy during the eleven years I studied with him in Tokyo. I never thought it was strange that meditation was never taught directly, although the history of the *shakuhachi* as being a meditation tool in order to attain *ichion jōbutsu* (lit: Buddhahood in one note or enlightenment though one note) is very important for players, as a large part of the transmission is done wordlessly. Most of the many hours I practised with my teacher we

played together. I simply imitated his playing, and learned the musical vocabulary through imitation. I believe I have played some of the melodies together with him more than hundred times. Okuda would answer my questions and if we entered the realm of philosophy, he was unstoppable. But the music was mostly transmitted wordlessly. An experience in Zen Buddhist meditation at a temple on Yaku Island in Japan in 1996 supported this understanding of transmission. During a several month stay, the only 4 instructions in meditation I received the first morning were: 'Sit here, face the wall, gaze here and empty your mind'. Like many other *shakuhachi* players, I approach the notion of playing coupled with meditation with curiosity – but had no instructions other than arcane ingredients in Okuda's teaching such as that the aim is to contain the universe in one single sound and to succeed in the union of opposites. Okuda never elaborated on what he meant with the 'union of opposites' other than that in musical terms he told me that extramusical sounds had to be present when playing a musical sound and vice versa. The 'union of opposites' stayed with me and has helped me since then in my search to combine *shakuhachi* playing and meditation.

In the beginning when I attempted to add meditation to the act of playing, I aimed at being mindful by trying firstly to focus on the breath. Focusing on the breath – inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the mouth as much as possible in order to produce a sound. The breath has a central role in *honkyoku* playing. It is the only rhythm, thus every player will have his or her own rhythm or pulse.[12] Focusing on the breath gave me a rhythmic sensation that can be felt as a profound state of absorption similar to trance.[13] Playing a piece that I had assimilated to a degree that I need not think about what I was doing or about to do gave the most satisfying results as the mind did not have to occupy directly with what to play. For years I thought that this must be what meditation and playing was all about – a conclusion, however, I came to question several years ago. Is this all? When I asked ethnomusicologst and *shakuhachi* player Shimura Satoshi about meditation and playing, and why there are no accounts of any *shakuhachi* player attaining *ichion jōbutsu* or enlightenment through playing one note—to which he replied 'Perhaps reaching *satori* (enlightenment) requires much more

[12] Some *shakuhachi* schools such as Kinko and Tozan have a notation for rhythm while in others including the school I have trained in did not have any indication of rhythm.

[13] Trance is defined in Oxford Concise Dictionary as 'a half-conscious state characterized by an absence of response to external stimuli typically as induced by hypnosis or entered by a medium (Pearsall 2001:1521).

vigorous practice than *shakuhachi* playing'. I began to feel that the way I was approaching meditation and playing was insufficient—in particularly if the aim in the past had been to break through to the state of *satori*. I had no expectations of reaching *satori*; however, I did feel a need for the training to be more vigorous.

I posted a call for descriptions on how people meditated and how meditating differed from a state of flow to *shakuhachi* groups on Facebook, as the latter question was one of my key dilemmata. Vit Rozkovec replied as following:

> It seems to me, that we are talking about the same thing. To be very focused, in a flow or to meditate, it seems like those things are the same. When taking it from the Zen perspective, to be the one with the action you are doing, that is the state when you meditate. There is no "I" doing it, there is just the activity (www.facebook.com, accessed 05.10.14).

Another person, using the pseudonym 'Psychedelic Zen' answered:

> [The way] I play Shakuhachi to approach mediation is to use improvisation and apply mindfulness of breathing called *Anapanasati* into it. Breathing is very important, both exhaling and inhaling while playing for me… I would focus at first [before I] start playing, holding the Shakuhachi and placing it to [playing] position. Then I would play and flow with my breathing… Flow playing can lead me to the awareness and consciousness which will reflect and appear in the sound I am playing (www.facebook.com, accessed 29.09.14).

The above two examples seem to indicate that other players had similar experiences to my own. Meditation became a deep sense of flow. I now felt, however, that this identity did not suffice for my exploration into meditation and *shakuhachi* playing, I had to go deeper. Thus in my own analysis of meditation and *shakuhachi* playing, I came to the next theme:

6.2 Distinguishing between 'flow' and meditation

> I stepped out on stage in St John's Smith Square – a high profile venue in London. The audience was clapping, the large choir sat down at the back of the stage in order to give the soloist—me—the stage on my own. When the clapping ceased, I brought the flute to my lips and began playing a *honkyoku*. At a given moment during the performance, I realised the music was flowing out of me effortlessly, without thought and beyond my control. The latter frightened me as I became aware that I had no idea which note I had just played and which note I was moving

> to next – something of which I usually have full control. In a subtle panic, I tested several strategies in order to remember where in the piece I was. I then understood I had to let go of my eagerness to know the place in the music – otherwise it would inhibit the flow and I will not be able to play. I played on and suddenly I noticed, my normal focused mind had taken over, and I knew exactly where in the music I was.

The above is a description of a concert situation on 13 March 2008. I would consider this experience to be an example of *flow* and not meditation although there are certain similarities. According to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, flow is a mental state of complete immersion in an activity in which concentration is focused on a challenge suitable to the person's skills. It gives the protagonist a loss of reflective self-consciousness and a distorted temporal but rewarding and positive experience (Csíkszentmihályi 1990). The largest discrepancy between flow and meditation for this project lies in the complete immersion in an activity and the loss of reflective self-consciousness. Due to my training in mindfulness meditation, I find this experience to be lacking the aspect of witnessing awareness required for it to be called 'meditation'. Although it is clear from the description above that I was aware of the flow, I was nonetheless not conscious my own awareness. I am immersed in the awareness, which itself is blind for me. Thus the total immersion and thereby self-forgetfulness and the awareness of being aware are the key aspects of the difference between the two. However, I do find flow, as described above – to be necessary – if not sufficient - for meditation when playing. The deep immersion and focus is the concentration part of the meditation – the next step for me was to practice letting go of the immersion into what I was doing and adding the witness function.

6.3 Meditation while playing *shakuhachi* II

In the beginning of 2012, I began to work with the breath as a means to transmit the quality of stillness I experienced while trying to play and meditate. I worked with the visualisation of a flow entering me from above my head down into the breath and out through the heart and the *shakuhachi*. With this approach I would literally blow empathy through the instrument out to the audience or the world in general. This way I was able to train the ability of feeling compassion towards others and to some degree feeling a deeper sense of contemplation and

presence in my existence (see Bertelsen 2010, Risom 2013, Rigtrup 2009 on empathy and mindfulness). I taught this method of training compassion at some masterclasses in Kiev, Ukraine during November 2012. I was pleased to see that even some flute students from the Tchaikovsky National Academy of Music came for a second masterclass as they were curious about this approach. I realised compassion was indeed universal.

However, I still had some steps to take before I felt I had an idea of how *shakuhachi* playing and mindfulness meditation could be executed simultaneously. That is when I began consciously to add witness awareness to playing. I realised early on that real immersion and flow is more likely to take place when a *honkyoku* piece was fully memorised and assimilated I thus practised adding witness awareness when I realised I was in a certain quality of flow. In order to get into the state of flow while playing a piece I had mastered. I began playing after first sitting for perhaps five minutes in quiet stillness, focusing on the breath. This practice may lead to a sensation of flow and to this I applied the compassion method described above, which led to an increase in energy level. Finally then I would apply witness awareness, which led to a panoramic state of being as described by Risom (2013: 63, 155). At some given moment, I felt the contemplation level had reached a level similar to that I had reached during quiet sitting meditation – which was a gain for my musical practice.

6.4 Mindfulness meditation while playing *shakuhachi*

When I began to be able to—with a certain amount of effort—to draw witnessing awareness into my musical practice, I experienced it as an a perception of something inherent in *shakuhachi* playing and as if it had been 'the missing link'. However, maitaining witnessing awareness for any length of time was no easy task ; soon I would discover that I was back into my usual focused flow mode of attention – totally immersed in playing, sound production and judging whether the sound was good nor not.

The *honkyoku* piece *Shin kyorei* (真虚霊), as taught in Okuda Atsuya's Zensabō style), is to be played almost at an inaudible level or *pianissimo*. Playing at such a low volume had always made me generate bodily heat – some times I even had to go outside in snowy weather dressed in T-shirt, in order to cool down. While practising mindfulness and playing as described above, I realised *Shin kyorei* could be used to increase the energy level, which

could be directed into the meditation practice. Thus from April 2014, I included this piece in my daily practice. I only applied mindfulness meditation after I had played it for a while since I had forgotten the piece and needed the score to play. The more I incorporated the piece into my being, the better I was able to apply mindfulness while playing and this intensified the experience of the already augmented energy level due to bodily heat. In an entry in my diary on 18 July 2014, I wrote about experiencing a phenomenon of expansion of the already expanded panoramic state in mindfulness meditation. I observed that with the focusing on breathing and the sound produced, the mind's conceptual rigidity relaxed in an efficient way; thus I was able to observe the subtle changes of energy levels. I noticed the gradual establishment of quiescence that allowed insights I remained aware of – a contrast to many insights regarding the flow state experienced during the concert in St John's Smith Square, which were generated by an elicitation interview[14] conducted by Ninni Sødahl on 26 September 2014.

Slowly, while working with *Shin kyorei*, I began to grasp the role of music in meditation from within. My confusion had been that I had taken the music too seriously – in the sense of being self-absorbed, adding a value to it that only had the aim of honouring my ego. Ansuman Biswas formulates it exquisitely.

> Meditation is a work of attaining a gracefully integrated consciousness. When the roiling turbulence of *verdanā* (sensation) can be brought fully into awareness without throwing it off balance, then there is a gracefulness about the moment. Any object may be grasped to steady oneself. It might be a spoken mantra, a beautiful picture, a geometrical figure, a candle flame, or an idea. The object itself has no particular meaning or significance. Like the Pole Star for a mariner, or the lamppost for a drunk, it provides support rather than an illumination (2011: 100).

Once I grasped the above, I felt that I had overcome one large barrier to the exploration of mindfulness and *shakuhachi* playing at multiple levels of consciousness. It furthermore allowed me to work more freely with energy. I had long also worked with the piece *Nerisaji* (練薩慈), a *honkyoku* piece played very energetically in the Zensabō style – to the degree it may be called violent. Here, I had been inspired by a teaching session of Jes Bertelsen[15] in

[14] Elicitation interview technique is a method aimed at collecting precise descriptions of a lived experience associated with a cognitive process, developed by Claire Petitmengin (see Petitmengin 2006).

[15] Jes Bertelsen (1946-) is a meditation teacher trained in the Tibetan Dzogchen tradition and the founder of

which he encouraged us to bring our entire being—including the negative aspects—into the meditation. With the violent blasts of air, I had previously described by using natural metaphors such as storm, volcanic eruption and tsunami waves to my students, I began contacting my less flattering sides – sides I preferred to hide in order to sustain a more favourable self image. I tried to bring the blasts of air to the maximum pressure my lungs could exert through the instrument while contacting my bestial sides, the violence I contain in me and negative emotions, I'd rather go without – of which the resulting sound became a raw uncensored vibration and expression. Contacting bestial sides made me retrace evolution and sensing I was getting closer to the primal origin or as Biswas formulates as 'integrating rational awareness with the animal body' (2011: 102). I stretched the music and I played Nerisaji even more raw and violent than Watazumi Dōsō Rōshi's versions[16] at some sections while more quietly than I had learned by Okuda at others. I included a larger *ma* (間) – an important concept in Japanese arts, literally meaning interval or pause in the sense of *vacuus plenus—ma* is as important as the sound. If I managed to remain aware of witnessing during these violent gusts of sound, I could bring in a sensation of an expanding stillness during *ma*. This *ma* felt more complete due to the attention of bringing in all aspects of me including negativity, and I experienced myself playing as a microcosm of the world. I remembered the words Okuda had repeatedly told me during lessons: 'Play your *shakuhachi* so that one sound contains the whole universe'. These words suddenly resonated more with me than ever.

I wrote in a diary entry on 2 August 2014: 'Clearly sensing when I fall out of the witness function and can easier use my will to bring myself back again'. My *shakuhachi* playing and mindfulness meditation had clearly begun to take the shape of an average meditation session on my cushion. And, as on the cushion, I found myself again and again being fascinated by various phenomena including a fascination with my own sound. Then there was nothing else to do than bringing myself back a mindful attitude to myself, my 'failure' of having forgotten and to the playing.

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the meditation centre Vækstcenteret, Nørre Snede, Denmark.

[16] Watazumi Dōsō (1911–92) is a skillful *shakuhachi* player with a personal playing style, who broke away from the strict guild system in Japanese arts. See discography for his recordings which include Nerisaji – or Daibōsatsu – as he names it.

7. Getting out into the world

I have previously taught mindfulness and *shakuhachi* playing at festivals. However when I taught at the nunnery Weltkloster in Radolfzell, Germany 19–22 June 2014, I felt I had much more substance to teach and also personal experience that is important when transmitting knowledge. I no longer felt at the border of my knowledge when teaching. I choose two easier pieces, *Kyorei* (quiet) and *Sō shingetsu* (fierce), that would be played in the manner of *Shin kyorei* and *Nerisaji,* but which were not as technically demanding. I was very satisfied with the fact that I could transmit the idea of two different ways of building energy up for meditation, and playing in a state of objective awareness. The quiet *Kyorei* caused more difficulties than the fierce *Sō shingetsu*.

On 28 August 2014, I played a short solo concert at the Mind & Life Research Institute at yet another nunnery on Farueninsel Island in Chiemsee Lake, Germany. It was a long conference lasting 5 full days, which required me to travel the day before to the island and travell home the day after. It had a quasi-retreat format, with Fred von Allmen, Tsoknyi Rinpoche and Martine Batchelor instructing meditation sessions. There was even a day in silent contemplation (http://esri.mindandlife-europe.org, accessed 08.10.14). Thus despite the papers on mostly neuroscience, the participants constituted of meditating scientists. For the concert, I had boldly written in the programme that I was going to meditate while playing. Although I modified it when I presented myself, I tried my best to combine mindfulness meditation and playing. I played four pieces including S*hin kyorei* and *Nerisaji*. I believe that due to the training I had recently gone through, the quality of flow was entirely different from that of the concert at St John's Smith Square. My particular body and breath, space, time and this particular audience made certain moments feel intensively as the music was a vibration of this embodied moment. And with the mindfulness added to the *ma*—an open space without audible sound – 'the unstruck sound, the vibration that is below the threshold of hearing (Biswas 2011: 102) – only the attitude of listening to sounds remained. This enabled me to become more aware of subtle motions of the mind and remain aware that I was aware – until I fell out and had to shorten the pieces to adapt to a shorter time span than planned. I then lost control of time and piece as I did at St John's Smith Square. However, this time I was aware of it and voluntarily renounced the control. And exactly here, I felt I had a glimpse of

mindfulness meditation and *shakuhachi* – the voluntarily release of control. I furthermore felt I had a taste of mindfulness meditation and *shakuhachi* music being in circulation with an attentive audience— in moments of shared consciousness. Thus this concert in Fraueninsel was an important milestone in my search to investigate meditation as conducted by the *komusō* monks.

I also felt I had taken a small step towards an understanding of the flute player in the poem by Hafiz on page 1—but know I am still far from it.

8. Conclusion: 21st century *komusō*? Mindfulness meditation and *shakuhachi* playing

Despite the title of this section, I do not claim to be a *komusō* or the like. The title is meant to reflect on what we can learn from an experiment of adding mindfulness meditation to the act of playing *shakuhachi* and whether we can make any assumption on how the *komusō* monks may have approached their meditation task. Although the mendicant *komusō* monks are the most well known monks of the Fuke sect, and the *jujishoku* or senior monks, who were the resident heads of the *komusō* temples scattered around Japan are less known, they may be the most interesting for the purpose of reflecting on meditation and *shakuhachi*. They were supposed to be fully ordained Buddhist priests (Sanford 1977: 424). After a decline in Zen Buddhism, the words of masters such as Takuan and Hakuin must have excited and inspired them. I imagine—since the *jujishoku* had gone through Buddhist training—that they must have had a meditation practice as well as a daily temple routines. The quote from Takuan 'He can see good and bad clearly without the mind discriminating between good and bad' together with the contemplative experiences during this practice based experiment has answered one of the key questions of which I was previously unaware. I realised that when the player hears the good and bad notes—although remaining neutral to the sounds—he or she can make subtle changes comparable with subtle corrections to any meditation practice, without, however, leaving the musicality behind. In the voluntary renunciation of control, the awareness is so present that musicality has transcended to another level than what I had hitherto experienced. I realised that music is creating a space in which a large range of emotions can be activated. As in the *Nerisaji* described above, I was able to contact negative

aspects of my emotional life in which I almost felt like a beast—and combining mindfulness meditation and *shakuhachi* playing allowed me to practice the attitude of feeling emotions without acting on it as all is happening under controlled conditions. 'In music, since there I no substantive danger or reward, no real-life object or hate or desire, the emotion can be observed in itself, as a bodily fact' (Biswas 2011: 108). When realising this and the renunciation of the self-absorbed musicality, playing music becomes an efficient space for meditation practice. Thus I believe I have indeed found answers to some of the questions I had in mind before embarking on this project. Questions regarding how to attain the delicate balance between maintaining a non-judgemental attention on the sound I produce, while accepting the present moment and thereby the sounds to be as they are—and still produce sounds that are musical, in order to draw listeners into the musical sound worlld. I have grasped more than I thought possible. Whether it is possible for me to frame an hypothesis on how the *komusō* or the *jujishoku* approached meditation and *shakuhachi* playing, I am unable to say; I can only say I have caught a glimpse of it. I suspect I shall have to continue working for some years from this stage and stabilise a practice before I dare make any conjectures.

Glossary

Bakufu (幕府) is the term used for the government or administration under the military feudal ruler *shōgun* during three dynasties: Minamoto, Ashikaga, and Tokugawa, which lasted from late late 13th century until 1867.

Buddha-kāya: The Triple Body of the Buddha

Edo period (1603–1867), a period of relative peace governed by Tokugawa. It was also the period of seclusion from the outside world.

Fukeshū (普化宗): Zen Buddhist sect under the Rinzai school. The *shakuhachi* playing *komusō* monks were initiated members of the sect, which solely admitted men of *samurai* rank. The sect was recognised during the early Edo period (1614) and the sect was abolished 1871 by the Meiji government.

Gaikyoku (外曲): lit.: Outside pieces [of music]. The term used by the Fuke sect to describe pieces that were not *honkyoku* and thereby by definition secular and not sacred music prohibited for the *komusō* to play.

Gagaku (雅楽): Japanese court music. The music originated in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907). It was imported to Japan in the 8th century from Korea.

Hitoyogiri (一節切): A short one node flute, considered to be the link between the *gagaku shakuhachi* and the *komusō shakuhachi*. They were popular from the 14th century till the beginning of the 19th century.

Hōki (法器): Lit: Tool of the Dharma. Often translated as sacred tool. In this case, the *shakuhachi* was considered as *hōki* and not a musical instrument.

Honkyoku (本曲): lit.: Original pjeces. The pieces in the repertoire created by *komusō* monks during the Edo period as meditation and for mendicancy.

Honsoku (本則): rules. Here a set of rules issued to the *komusō monks*.

Ichion jōbustu (一音成仏): Lit: One sound becoming a Buddha. An important saying for *shakuhachi* players during the Edo period as well as today. It is said to be the aim of *shakuhachi* playing to reach enlightenment with the single tone that encompasses the whole universe.

Isshin(一心): One mind, wholehartedness.

Kenshō (見性): Enlightenment.

Kōan (公案): Zen Buddhist question, story, dialogue to be used to create doubt. Also used to monitor the progress of a student.

Komusō (虚無僧) lit.: Monks of nothingness. The monks, of the Fuke sect, who played *shakuhachi* as a meditation tool.

Kufū (功夫): Striving to attain *satori*.

Meiji-period: 1868–1912, the period of modernisation of Japan into a democracy and a player on the international stage.

Mekora-hōshi (盲法師): Blind Buddhist monks.

Myōanji Temple: A small temple in the compounds of Tōhoku-ji in Kyoto, which serves as the headquarters for Myōan Kyōkai (society) today. The Myōan style today represents most of the styles of *shakuhachi* playing, which are not categorised under the two main secular schools (Kinko and Tozan).

Rōnin (浪人): Samurai without a master to serve.

Samurai (侍) or *bushi* (武士): Military nobility of medieval and early-modern Japan.

Sankyoku (三曲): Japanese chamber music ensemble, traditionally played on *shamisen* (3 stringed long-neck lute), *koto* (13-stringed zither) and *shakuhachi*, often with a vocal accompaniment.

Sarugaku: (猿楽): Early *nō* theatre popular between 11th and 14th century.

Satori: (悟り or 覚り): Enlightenment, spiritual awakening.

Shakuhachi (尺八): Japanese vertical notched oblique bamboo flute.

Suizen (吹禅): lit.: Blowing Zen or meditation playing *shakuhachi*. A word that is engraved in a Stone at Myōanji temple, Kyoto, Japan. According to ethnomusicologist Tsukitani Tsuneko, it is a word that did not appear before early 20th century.

Tengai (天蓋): Reed hood shaped as a basket, worn by the wandering *komusō* monks, covering the whole face from around 19th century.

Zazen: (座禅) lit.: Sitting Zen or the meditation practice performed in Zen Buddhism.

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