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Mindful playing: a practice research investigation into shakuhachi playing and meditation

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a practice research project investigating how the practice of meditation may be integrated into the playing of *shakuhachi*, an instrument utilised during the Edo period (1603–1867) as a tool for spiritual practice by monks of the Fuke sect and later becoming part of the *hōgaku* (Japanese traditional music) world as a stage instrument. Although we cannot know how the monks were trained to use the *shakuhachi* in meditation, I have combined my own shakuhachi and meditation experiences, in order to investigate how a *shakuhachi* player today may approach the incorporation of meditation in their musical practice. In transforming my experience into words, I here employ auto-elicitation, a micro-phenomenological interview technique developed by Claire Petitmengin to describe the subtle and fine-grained experiences of meditation while playing. The project here is regarded as a practice research within the field of ethnomusicology and challenges the narrow kind of scholarship in academia, which overshadows the practice research—the research of the act of playing music.

KEYWORDS

Practice research; *shakuhachi*; meditation; spirituality; micro-phenomenal elicitation interview; auto-elicitation

Introduction: why doing research on *shakuhachi* and meditation?

Many international *shakuhachi*¹ players today play the instrument as a means to promote meditation, and the instrument's history as a tool for meditation is a major part of the attraction of playing the instrument. On various online *shakuhachi* fora, players proclaim not to be interested in playing music—but to meditate.² An example of this attitude is, for example, the post on shakuhachiforum.com by a player from New York, from 19 March 2010:

I enjoy [playing] as a meditative practice, and as a good preamble to a sitting meditation ... I am not interested in the shakuhachi as an instrument of musical performance, but rather as a meditation tool.³

A recent google search on the Boolean search term '*shakuhachi* AND meditation' gave me 975,000 hits and a plethora of CD recordings of the *shakuhachi* music are described as 'meditation music'.⁴

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The *shakuhachi* was used as a tool for spiritual practice by the *komusō* monks, the mendicant monks of the Fuke sect, which is regarded to have been loosely affiliated with Zen Buddhism (see Tsukitani 2008: 150–2; Deeg 2007: 20–2). It is, however, also noteworthy that almost no written documentation of their spiritual practices remains today, indicating that the use of the *shakuhachi* as a meditation tool fell into oblivion after the sect was permanently abolished in 1871, although the awareness of the instrument's spiritual background is high among players both in and outside Japan. Publications concerning the revival of the Myōanji⁵ temple in Kyoto in 1890 have focused on how Higuchi Taizan (1856–1914)⁶ recreated the repertoire of the Myōan group, while those dealing with secular developments describe how skilled players began to form guilds and introduce the instrument in ensemble music (see, for example, Kamisangō 1988 and Takahashi 1990), but very little has been written on its use as a tool for meditation.

This investigation carrying out the practice research in the first person (subject oriented) will be based on my background as a *shakuhachi* player since 1989 and my decade-long experience in meditation, in particular, the meditation training I have received since 2007 at the meditation centre Vækstcenteret in Nørre Snede, Denmark (based on Dzogchen, a Tibetan meditation tradition), and as a certified mindfulness instructor. As an ethnomusicologist and performer of the *shakuhachi*, I find I can range freely between the theoretical knowledge of academic disciplines and the embodied and applied praxis of music playing and meditation. The project is thus a first-person perspective and account of a musician-researcher inhabiting the space between art, science, and meditation (see also Biswas 2011: 95–6).⁷ It has long been my aim to investigate how to combine the *shakuhachi* and meditation and describe the process in detail. To get there, however, required a long and determined process. I have maintained an almost daily diary of my *shakuhachi* and meditation practice from 4 April 2014, and it is here that the micro-phenomenal elicitation interview technique comes in handy as an adept methodology in order to analyse notes from several years of lived, subjective experiences. It is my hope that this project will enable the *shakuhachi* players to discuss openly how the instrument can serve as a tool for meditation by contemporary players.

Despite my aim of having such a goal, I also have concerns when publishing research of this kind. Many musical traditions have roots in spiritual practice, yet their intricate character may seem too personal or irrelevant for academic inquiry. Also, the fine-grained praxis and inner knowing that many musicians spend most of their time investigating is all too often mistaken for unconscious and automatic modus aimed at culminating in splendid virtuosic performances. However, the search for how meditation may be conducted while playing the *shakuhachi* is just one example of how lived experiences in spiritual musical praxis defy easy assessment against either academic or virtuosic criteria. The aim of this article is therefore to ask how the *shakuhachi* practice research might be better assessed against criteria for academic and virtuosic excellence and how one's arguably immeasurable spiritual practice through music can even be measured. I hope to contribute to the creation of a language through which this kind of creative practice research can be discussed in a more appropriate manner.

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, although other versions of how and when the instrument came to Japan exist. An example is *Kyotaku denki kokujikai* [The History of the Kyotaku, Annotated in Japanese] 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 1795 [1981]). When the *gagaku* ensemble was reorganised in the mid-ninth century, the *shakuhachi* fell into desuetude (Nelson 2008: 41–2).

During the early seventeenth century, a loose fraternity of itinerant *shakuhachi* playing beggars congregated into the Fuke sect. The special privileges granted included the *komusō* monopoly rights over the use of the *shakuhachi* (Berger and Hughes 2001: 834). A *honsoku* (set of rules) was issued when a man of *samurai* class entered the sect, and according to the rules the *shakuhachi* was to be used exclusively as a *hōki*, a sacred tool, for the purpose of spiritual training and for *takuhatsu* (religious mendicancy) (Sanford 1977: 422–3).

The Edo government 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, 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 2002: 705)—the religious path becoming marginalised and ignored in the highly professionalised *hōgaku* (Japanese traditional music) world (see Day 2013) until a recent revival—especially outside Japan (Keister 2005: 38).

Methodology

To investigate how the act of playing *shakuhachi* may be used as a meditation practice, it was essential to find a methodology that systematically enabled me to investigate intuitive first-person experiences. Autoethnography or reflexive ethnography as methodology of qualitative research is nothing new (see Anderson 2006; Davies 1998; Williams 2005) and in the case of ethnomusicology, works by Kisliuk (1998) and Hagedorn (2001) are good examples of reflexive autoethnography. Peter MacIlveen explains:

The defining feature of autoethnography is that it entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon. Autoethnography entails writing about oneself as a researcher-practitioner, but it is not the same as autobiography in the literary sense ... It is a specific form of critical enquiry that is embedded in theory and practice (i.e. practice as a researcher) ... Rather than a self-absorbed rendering, an autoethnography should produce a narrative that is authentic and thus enable the reader to deeply grasp the experience and interpretation of this one interesting case. (McIlveen 2008: 14–15)

I view my project as performing an analysis of the combination of my own playing related to the phenomenon of meditation. Critics of autoethnography such as Sara Delmont argue that autoethnographic reflexivity is ‘an intellectual cul de sac’ (Delmont 2009: 51). She argues that ‘autoethnography cannot fight familiarity’, that it ‘is almost impossible to write and publish ethically’ (Delmont 2009: 59). She continues:

Ethnographers have powerful methods available to them so that unknown social worlds can be studied ... Autoethnography focusses on social scientists who are not usually interesting or worth researching. The minutiae of the bodies, families or households of social scientists are not likely to provide analytic insights for social science. (Delmont 2009: 59–60)

While acknowledging her points regarding some of the dangers of autoethnography, I strongly disagree with Delmont’s stance. In the case of the present paper, I did almost daily auto-elicitation for 6 years from 2014 till 2020. It brings—in my opinion—a depth to this research that I could not have obtained had I conducted elicitation interviews of other *shakuhachi* players for mere practical reasons. I, furthermore, believe that also in the classical third-person interview and research, the source is first-person experiences. I am here—so to speak—trying to get closer to the source. To do so, I chose a methodology from phenomenology. Jeff Todd Titon wrote in a blogpost on 28 June 2018:

A phenomenological ethnomusicology emphasizes musical experience. Musical experience would appear an obvious direction for ethnomusicological inquiry; but according to Harris Berger ... phenomenology didn’t enter ethnomusicology until fairly late in its history, the 1970s and 1980s.⁸

I needed a methodology that emphasises musical experience and since I am dealing with meditation and how I do it while playing, it was necessary to investigate fine-grained data which also deals with pre-reflexive memory. Claire Petitmengin describes,

Our know-how is, in large part, made up of ‘pre-thought’. This part of our knowledge ... seems to be present even at the centre of our most abstract activities, those most conceptualized, those most lacking in affectivity ... For a person to be able to describe his experience, he must become conscious of this pre-thought knowledge ... The interview of explicitation is a technique which enables us to provoke this awareness during an interview, through the intermediation of the interviewer. (1999: 45–6)

The explication interview (later called microphenomenal inquiry or elicitation), a methodology I have studied with Petitmengin, seemed to be what I needed. Studies in phenomenology have revealed that a large part of our experience remains unrecognised, or ‘pre-reflective’—the part of the lived experience I needed to focus on. However, to become aware of one’s subjective experiences is no easy undertaking. Petitmengin describes two main reasons why this is so. The first one she called ‘Dispersion of attention’

The first reason we have difficulty in becoming aware of our subjective experience is that we find it very hard to stabilise our attention ... in general we are not even aware of this difficulty. It requires specific circumstances, or appropriate training, so that we can become conscious of the extremely fluctuating nature of our attention. (Petitmengin et al. 2006: 233–4)

And the second ‘Absorption in the objective’ which she describes as:

... our attention is almost completely absorbed in the content, the ‘what’ of our activity, largely or entirely excluding the activity itself, the ‘how’. We are like blind persons exploring objects with the tip of a cane, whose attention is entirely directed toward the object, but who are not reflectively aware of the contact and variations of pressure of the stick in the palm of their hands ... The purpose of a micro-phenomenological interview is to help subjects redirect their attention from the content of the experience towards the mode and dynamics of appearance of this content, and to describe it precisely. This redirection is like the gesture of phenomenological reduction as described by Edmund Husserl. (Petitmengin et al. 2017: 222)

The elicitation interview is used when exploring ‘a precise experience, precisely situated in time and in space’ (Petitmengin et al. 1999: 46), as events of longer duration give rise to too many separate details. It is important to make the interviewee relive the experience and rediscover the images, sounds, emotions, sensations that were associated with that experience. This can be facilitated by directing the attention inward, slowing down the tempo, not looking at each other in order to sense inward, and speaking in present tense. The interviewee and interviewer find in collaboration a specific moment in the experience to scrutinise. In the case of this project, I employed *auto-elicitation*, which is interviewing oneself using micro-phenomenal elicitation interview technique—a method I also trained with Petitmengin.

I am personally of the conviction that micro-phenomenology using elicitation interview techniques will add positively to ethnomusicology, a field slowly opening up to the practice research. The act of musicking is—after all—the foundation of our field, and intricate and intuitive first-person experiences can add new perspectives in the pool of knowledge. In ethnomusicology, I am only aware of research using auto-ethnography in which pre-reflexive consciousness is still hidden for us. It is not my opinion that my questions have the danger of becoming ‘leading questions’ as the questions are never long sentences but rather ‘what do you do?’ and ‘how do you do it?’

Meditation

My own definition of meditation is the cultivation of the ability to be present in a given moment, while being non-judgemental and intentionally aware of that moment. It is furthermore a goal that one’s awareness is aware of itself and as a result the boundaries between oneself and the surroundings become blurry (See for example: Bertelsen 2013: 66).

The word *meditation* is described in the Cambridge Online Dictionary as ‘the act of giving your attention to only one thing, either as a religious activity or as a way of becoming calm and relaxed’.⁹ This could not be further from the objective of my project, as meditation while playing the *shakuhachi* would require at the very least paying attention to two things: a detached way of paying attention to the playing itself while also paying attention to the meditating mind. Looking further into the word *mindfulness*, the Online Etymology Dictionary describes that the Old English *mindful* means ‘of good memory’.

The Pali¹⁰ word *sati* is often translated as mindfulness although etymologically, it means ‘to remember’ but in Buddhism it refers to skillful attentiveness.¹¹ The archaic meaning ‘to remember’—I find—is a key element in carrying mindful meditation into effect. One must *remember* to be aware—an important and lengthy aspect of the training

of meditation. This brings me to self-forgetfulness. In my experience, self-forgetfulness is an aspect of the human mind with which musicians inevitably become well acquainted. It is the mind being bound to and identical with its content, condition, and experiences and thereby forgetting *who* is experiencing this particular moment. As musicians we are often wholeheartedly absorbed in the production of sound. And with self-forgetfulness comes the evaluating mind as if it were an accessory, which is not unreasonable since we devote a large amount of time and effort to perfecting the musical output. Thus, one of the questions I had in mind before embarking on this project was how to find the delicate balance between attending to the sound I produce in a non-judgmental way, while accepting the present moment and therewith the sounds as they are—and still produce sounds that are musical?

I have often received questions about the act of playing the *shakuhachi* being a natural state of meditation, and that listening to music is meditation in itself. Patrick Groneman described the same question on 11 October 2013: ‘Sometimes people will ask me whether or not listening to music counts as mindfulness practice’. However, he continues writing

‘I’d say sure ... what makes a session of mindful music appreciation unique and distinct from a mindful breathing practice’ is 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.’¹²

He then quotes Karen Armstrong saying: ‘Beethoven’s string quartets express pain itself [however] it is not my pain’.¹³ I strongly disagree that listening to music itself is meditation or that it ‘spans language barriers and political borders’ already contested in ethnomusicology (see for example Nettl 2005: 42–9). On the contrary, in my experience applying meditation to music playing is no easy task and that it requires training as arduous 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.

Shakuhachi transmission

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. I never trained in Zen Buddhism, I have only done very little Zen Buddhist meditation in my life, and I am not well versed in the Zen Buddhist literature. I, unfortunately, often did not listen carefully to my teacher Okuda Atsuya’s explanation of the connection between the *shakuhachi* and the Zen Buddhist philosophy during the 11 years of intensive study I underwent in Tokyo. I never thought it strange that meditation was never taught directly, although the history of the *shakuhachi* as a meditation tool in order to attain *ichion jōbutsu* (lit: enlightenment through a single note) is very important for players, as a large part of the transmission is done wordlessly (Lee 1993: 210–30). Most of the many hours I practised with my teacher we played together and learned the musical vocabulary through imitation. If I asked questions Okuda would answer them, and if we entered the realm of the Zen Buddhist philosophy, he was unstoppable. But the music was mostly transmitted wordlessly but with a strong awareness of the past, present, and future of the *honkyoku* (the repertoire

of the *komusō* monks) pieces, and a consciousness that they have been—at least in the past—played as meditation or with a spiritual aim (Shimura 2002: 705). An experience in the Zen Buddhist meditation at a temple on Yaku Island in Japan in 1996 aided my appreciation of a transmission style with hardly any instruction. During my 2-month stay, the only four instructions in meditation I received the first morning were: ‘Sit here, face the wall, gaze here on the floor, and empty your mind’. Like many other *shakuhachi* players, I approached the notion of playing coupled with meditation with curiosity—but had no instructions other than the arcane ingredients in Okuda’s teaching such as that the aim is that one single sound corresponding to the sound of the universe and to succeed in the union of opposites. Okuda never elaborated on what he meant with the ‘union of opposites’ other than in musical terms. These concepts stayed with me and have helped me since then in my search to combine *shakuhachi* playing and meditation.

Meditation and shakuhachi I

In the beginning when I attempted to add meditation to the act of playing, I aimed at being mindful by trying first to focus on the breath. The breath has a central role in *honkyoku* playing, I have learned that the breath is the only real pulse, and thus every player has his or her own pulse.¹⁴ Focusing on the breath gave me a rhythmic sensation that can be felt as a profound state of absorption. 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 itself directly with what to play. For years I thought that this must be what *shakuhachi* playing and meditation was all about—a conclusion, however, I came to question. Is this all? I began to feel that the way I was approaching meditation and playing was inadequate—in particular, if the aim in the past had been to break through to the state of *satori* (enlightenment). 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. A player replied:

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.¹⁵

Another player 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.¹⁶

The above two examples seem to indicate that other players had similar experiences to my own. Meditation became a deep sense of flow, which I certainly experienced as a pleasant practice. Although I did not question the genuineness of the experiences referred to above, I felt, however, that my identification with this pleasing experience did not suffice for my exploration into meditation and *shakuhachi* playing.

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 to which note I was moving next. I basically did not know where in the piece I was—something of which I usually have full control. In a subtle panic, I tested several strategies in order to remember where 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 would not be able to play. I managed to relax and let go of the desire to be in control, played on, and suddenly I noticed that 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 greatest discrepancy between flow and meditation for the purposes of this project lies in the complete immersion in an activity and the loss of reflective self-consciousness. The above example was for a moment an exception because I was suddenly aware of this immersion and flow. Due to my training in 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 of my own awareness. I was 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. At this stage, I felt the next step for me was to practice letting go of the immersion into what I was doing and adding the witness function.

Meditation and shakuhachi II

When practicing *shakuhachi* playing and meditation, I search for an interesting moment, which I intuitively know contains information from which I can gain knowledge. This can be for example investigating the moment I slip over from a conscious mind to a mind immersed in the action of playing. During the auto-elicitation interview, I try to relive the experience by slowing down my mind, entering a state of being where I can go back in memory by allowing myself to remember details that had passed without my conscious then paying attention to them by asking myself what I did and thereafter how I did it. Petitmengin writes that 'the process of elicitation unfolds in three stages:

- bringing the subject to the point of living, or reliving, the action or experience to be explored,

- helping him to operate a ‘thinking-through’ of his experience, that is, to pass his know-how from the level of action to the level of representation, and
- enabling him to put into words, to clarify, this represented experience. (1999: 47)

The process of bringing forward the pre-thought ‘lived’ experience means bringing myself to a point where I become able to describe what I really do, rather than what I think I do, including such details as what happens when I see a note in a score till I play that note—something which in a normal state of mind is experienced as instantaneous, automatic, and intuitive. Here, I search for a momentarily intuitive sense of doing meditation while playing. I find that it is important to give myself enough time to relive the experience since I do not have an external helper to bring me there. I slow down and look internally for the information that is somewhat hidden from my normal consciousness. I find that through this process, it is indeed possible to access pre-thought experience and somewhat ‘relive’ the past and retrieve lived experience. After I have compiled several descriptions of similar experiences, I analyse these descriptions and make a model of them. If an experience is repeated or seems to represent a general experience, it is then made into a model.

However, I had to begin at a simpler place. In the beginning of 2012, I began to work with breathing to transmit the quality of stillness while experimenting on playing and meditating. I worked with the visualisation of a flow entering me from above my head, down into my body, and out through the heart and through the *shakuhachi*. This felt like the first step towards meditation and playing, and the visualisation of breath fitted well with the playing of the *shakuhachi* since I could take my time to inhale most of the time, and I was free to remain in the no-breath state after the end of an exhalation. Depending on the school, *shakuhachi honkyoku* leaves a large amount of freedom to the player to play in the here and now, without having to adhere to a strict performance style. I began consciously to add witness awareness¹⁷ to memorised *honkyoku* pieces. Maintaining 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, or at other times I was immersed in thoughts.

The *honkyoku* piece Shin kyorei, as taught in Okuda’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—sometimes I even had to go outside in snowy weather dressed in a T-shirt to cool down. From April 2014, I included this piece in my daily practice. 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 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 earlier.

While working with Shin Kyorei, I wondered if my confusion had been that my focus had been too much on the music production, judging it as good or bad, which only had the aim of honoring 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)

I tried to work as described above, and during 2015 I felt that I had overcome one large barrier to the exploration of meditation and *shakuhachi* playing at multiple levels of consciousness. However, there remained many unanswered questions. I conducted auto-elicitation interviews when I felt there was something I wanted to explore. In a diary entry on 23 October 2015, I wrote:

While playing I try to unfocus.

Q: How do you unfocus?

A: While continuing to play I relax the body and the mind follows.

Q: How do you relax the body?

A: I release the muscles in my upper body from somewhere within—in the middle of the body. I can especially feel it as it expands outward and includes shoulders, back muscles, and arms as I am holding the *shakuhachi*. The sensation is a little similar to sitting meditation as I cannot release all tension as I need to continue sitting. Here I need to continue not only sitting but also playing. I know this without words.

Q: How do you know?

A: I know intuitively so I do not relax more than I can keep playing.

Q: How does the mind follow?

A: A release of tension in my mind follows.

Q: How does that feel?

A: It feels like a relaxation of what I interpret as the mind. It does not have a physical place as such. Today it felt like it is just in front of my face.

As shown above, the relaxation or ‘letting go’ had its limitations when playing at the same time. I therefore began experimenting letting go by the end of a breath in the little time space or *ma* there is between an exhalation and inhalation. This proved to be fruitful as I could follow in my diary an experience of intensity in contemplation and expansion. The expansion sensation I know from sitting meditation. If I do auto-elicitation on the phenomenon of expansion, it feels as if the boundary of myself, which physically is limited by my skin, expands outwards. In sitting meditation, I can experience it as an energy field, warmth—but when playing, the sound also plays a vital role in the expansion as if the sound vibrations push outwards. With auto-elicitation I found that the sound had two directions, one outward and expanding, while the other was inward and enabled an intensification of contemplation.

The above discoveries further allowed me to work more freely with energy. I had worked with the piece *Nerisaji*, a *honkyoku* piece played very energetically—to the

degree it may be called violent. Here, I was inspired by a meditation teaching session of Jes Bertelsen¹⁸ in which he encouraged us to bring our entire being—including the negative aspects—into the meditation. With the violent blasts of air, I began contacting my less flattering sides—sides I preferred to hide in order to sustain a more favorable self-image. I tried to bring the blasts of air to the maximum pressure my lungs could exert through the instrument while taking contact with my bestial side, the violence and the negative emotions that I contain in me and that I'd rather do without. The resulting sound became a raw uncensored vibration and expression. Contacting these brutish aspects of myself 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 tried to play some sections of *Nerisaji* even more raw and violent than before, while other sections I played more quietly than I had been taught by Okuda. I included larger *ma*—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 myself 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' and 'Playing *shakuhachi* is the union of opposites'.¹⁹ These words suddenly resonated with more with me than ever.

Working towards the goal

I wrote in a diary entry as early as 2 August 2014: 'Clearly sensing when I fall out of the witness function and can more easily use my will to bring myself back again'. By 2018 my *shakuhachi* playing and meditation had clearly begun to take the shape of an average meditation session on my cushion. Also, 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 bring myself back with a kind attitude to myself, my 'failure' of having forgotten, and to the playing.

I experienced what I myself regarded as a breakthrough in my search for a method on how to meditate while playing *shakuhachi* in December 2019 while on a short meditation retreat. Inspired by some unpublished writing by Jes Bertelsen, I experimented having my attention on two gestural aspects during the act of playing and meditating simultaneously while being aware of the awareness. I chose to place my attention on the sound itself, something exterior to myself and on my breathing inside the body. My diary entries changed to sentences such as 'I listened for my breathing and rested in its rhythm while being aware of the sounds of the *shakuhachi* simultaneously'. I began to be able to listen to the sound of the *shakuhachi* and ensure I played right or as I intended, and just as I would 'correct' myself when doing sitting meditation when I had been lost in thoughts, I became able to correct my playing without it disturbing my meditative attitude.

Thus, musical correction and meditation changed from being mutual opposites to two compatible entities, which was my question from the beginning when I embarked on this project: How to meditate while judging good from bad in the musical output? I was

astonished that this had taken me so many years to realise. It is something we musicians do all the time. Once I relaxed and did as I usually do, there was no dichotomy between meditation and correcting oneself. My reasoning was that I had over-interpreted what one must do to meditate.

The simultaneous attention on sound outside my body and the breathing inside became a way for me to approach and work towards what is called ‘bi-directional consciousness’ (Bertelsen 2013: 10) in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition Dzogchen while playing *shakuhachi*. If I could maintain this attitude of having an outward and inward focus, and letting go at the end of an exhalation, I felt I was on the right track. In a diary note on 3 January 2020, I wrote: ‘It feels closer to sitting meditation and playing *shakuhachi* is no more an act of doing than sitting down in order to meditate. Something feels right’.

The above descriptions of playing *shakuhachi* while meditating may bring attention to René Descartes’ (1596–1950) distinction between mind and body or Cartesian Dualism in which it is claimed that the mind or soul occupy an independent realm of existence, ontologically distinct from that of the physical world (see Ballard 1957). It ‘is widely recognised that Cartesian dualism between mind and body does not apply to Asian systems of knowledge ...’ (Ozawa-de-Silva and Ozawa-de-Silva 2011: 100). However, if we take master Dōgen Zenji (1200–53), the founder of Soto School of Zen Buddhism as an example, he ‘distinguishes three aspects of cross-legged sitting (meditation): the sitting of the body ... , the sitting of the mind ... , and the sitting of body and mind sloughed off’ (Bielefeldt 1988: 169). Dōgen and the Zen Buddhist tradition share a preference for the latter, a state to be obtained after going through the former two. This rather illustrates the aim of reaching harmony or union of the two distinct elements which only occurs after vigorous meditation training (Bielefeldt 1988: 169). Waldron describes ‘the starting point for Buddhist analysis of mind is not the ontological distinction separating mind and body, but the casual relationship between them’ (Waldron 2011: 69), thus they are not regarded as one either. Ozawa-de-Silva explains that the Tibetan Buddhism ‘acknowledges mind/body dualism (mind is understood as consciousness, and hence is subjective, experiencing and immaterial, whereas body is understood as physical and material) on “coarser” levels, while also admitting an inseparability, and therefore a degree of unity, of mind and body on subtler levels’ (2011: 112–3). I believe I begin the meditation with an attitude that can be described as a dualistic attitude and try to go beyond this limitation. My mind is observing the physical movements outside and inside my body (playing and breathing), and then the mind tries to become aware of itself simultaneously, but my mind is not separate from the experience of the physical movements.

I began working towards discovering what happens just before I realise I am immersed in the playing and thereby having moved away from being aware. On 14 December 2019, I noted in my diary that I had become aware of a momentarily feeling of boredom, and the next moment I am aware of it, I am absorbed in a thought or in the playing itself. This was nothing new but the first time I had put words to this phenomenon. I found this moment to be highly interesting for all musicians—meditation or not—as we all know how suddenly our minds wander off and become absorbed in thoughts. The sensation of boredom puzzled me, and I conducted auto-elicitation with the aim of opening up these exact moments. I found that there were two bodily sensations moments before I

felt bored. First, some sensation of movement moving upward and inward. I experienced this as a movement away from having a focus to what felt like a dissolution of focus. During a month of focusing on this phenomenon, I had noted several movements in my inner landscape, however the upward and inward movement occurred most frequently, and it became the ‘model’ I worked with (Petitmengin et al. 1999: 7) and focused my auto-elicitation on. Second, I sensed that the feeling of boredom was rather a fatigue in my system, which I interpreted as an effect from the concentration I needed in order to try to move in the direction of bi-directional focus. The awareness of these subtle movements prior to the emergence of a thought were interesting to work with. With heightened awareness, I began to be able to notice the sensations before a thought emerges, which enabled me to refocus and thereby remain in the meditative state. In March 2020 when I was rehearsing for a concert tour in the United States, I realized I had built up the ability to notice the same sensations before a thought appears and thereby enabled myself to stay in focus—also when rehearsing challenging pieces of music, which had nothing to do with meditation.

Reflection

Here, I reflect on what might be learnt from an experiment of adding meditation to the act of playing *shakuhachi*. After a decline in Zen Buddhism, 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 *ishin* (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)

After years of trying, I realised that when the player hears good and bad playing—although remaining neutral to the sounds—he or she can make subtle changes comparable with subtle corrections to any meditation practice, without, however, leaving neither the musicality nor the meditative state of mind behind. In the voluntary renunciation of control, the awareness was present to the degree that musicality has transcended to another level than what I had hitherto experienced. It was also clear that the embodiment of the music and years of playing the same pieces aided my ability to transcend levels. I realised that music was creating a space in which a large range of emotions could be activated. I was able to contact negative aspects of my emotional life in which I almost felt like a beast—and combining meditation and *shakuhachi* playing allowed me to practice the attitude of feeling emotions without acting on them as all is happening under controlled conditions. ‘In music, since there is 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 one realises this and renounces self-absorbed musicality, playing music can become a space for meditation

practice. Thus, I believe I have found some sense of 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 as they are—and still produce sounds that are musical. Here, I feel I have reached an important milestone. To claim it is possible for me to frame a hypothesis on how the *komusō* may have approached meditation and *shakuhachi* playing—if they did so—from my results would be a bold statement; I can only say I have caught a glimpse of unsuspected possibilities in this field. I conclude that I shall have to continue working several years from this stage and stabilise a practice before I dare make any more tangible conjectures.

With regard to meditation and playing, I found that combining the duality of inside and outside to be a useful entry point for my practice which led me back to what my *shakuhachi* teacher Okuda had always taught me to bring about the union of opposites. I was surprised by how my understanding of this sentence I have heard so many times changed during the research.

Finally, I believe the micro-phenomenal elicitation interview technique has great potential in the field of ethnomusicology, especially for the practice research. However, power asymmetries in academia privilege a narrow kind of scholarship in which practice research is ‘perceived as atheoretical’ (Dirksen 2012).²⁰ I hope this article has challenged this presumption by demonstrating how practice research can bridge the gap between traditional music scholarship and musicking itself. By researching meditation and music playing, I have ventured into a field of study that could be perceived as personal and non-academic. My research here has used data from first-person subjective accounts of engagements in musical practice that are reflexive in orientation and enable auto-ethnography. This kind of research approach transcends traditional academic language skills and embraces intersubjectivity, non-verbal communication, embodiment, and musical interactions.

Notes

1. Organologically, the *shakuhachi* is defined as a Japanese vertical notched oblique bamboo flute.
2. See www.shakuhachiforum.com and www.shakuhachiforum.eu among others.
3. <http://shakuhachiforum.com/viewtopic.php?id=4466>.
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.
7. This project is based on autoethnographic practices, reflection and archival research. It was conducted according to the ethical standards prescribed by the British Forum for Ethnomusicology. Their ethical statement can be found here: <https://bfe.org.uk/bfe-ethics-statement>.
8. <https://sustainablemusic.blogspot.com/2018/06/experiential-ethnomusicology.html>.
9. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/meditation>.

10. Pali is a dead Indo-Aryan language, in which many earliest extant Buddhist scriptures are written.
11. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sati>.
12. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/patrick-groneman/mindfulness-practice_b_3894331.html.
13. Ibid.
14. Some *shakuhachi* schools such as Kinko and Tozan have a notation for rhythm, while others, including the school I trained, in did not have any indication of rhythm.
15. Personal communication, 5.10.14.
16. Personal communication, 29.09.14.
17. A state of mind in which I try to be aware of the mind that is aware of the playing.
18. 15 November 2015.
19. Okuda's teachings on sounds of the universe and union of opposites, I have only heard from him and can therefore not be regarded as a general teaching in *shakuhachi* playing.
20. <https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/17/piece/602>.

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