



(LYRCD 7436)

ICHI ON BUTTSU

(One Sound...Enlightenment)

Zen Meditation Music for Solo Shakuhachi
Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin, Shakuhachi

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MAKOTO – SHINJITSU (With a heart of true sincerity...)

The shakuhachi is an end-blown bamboo flute with five finger holes, originating in China, but known in Japan for over 1200 years. It is the only melodic musical instrument that is associated with Zen Buddhism. The shakuhachi was used to play ancient Zen music by priests of the Fuke sect. Playing or hearing this music can produce an effect similar to that created by sitting in Zen meditation. Sitting in meditation is known as Za-Zen, whereas playing the shakuhachi is known as Sui-Zen (“blowing meditation”).

In the long tradition of the shakuhachi, these Zen meditative pieces are considered to express the original spiritual voice of the bamboo and there are more religious than musical in nature. The music is rather abstract and a-rhythmical. The player’s primary concerns are more with breather and meditation than with the elements of music production as an art form. Traditionally, one does not perform these pieces for an audience. The intent is not to entertain, but rather to raise the level of consciousness of both listener and player.

Consisting of a single length of bamboo, the shakuhachi is often referred to by the word “bamboo.” Kurahashi Yodo, a Sensei appearing in *Shimin Geijitsu*, Kyoto, Japan, December 1, 1974, has interpreted the ancient text by Haku Raku Ten called *Yo Chiku Ki* (“A History of Cultivation of Bamboo”), to provide an accurate description of the bamboo. He writes in the article, *Take no Kokoro* (“The Heart of Bamboo”):

The essence of bamboo is firmness: by means of this firmness, virtue is established. The character of the bamboo is honesty: by means of this honesty, fortune is established. The heart of the bamboo is emptiness: by means of this emptiness, the path is maintained.

The form of bamboo is a straight trunk marked by regular rings or joints; its substance is at once both firm and yielding, hard yet pliant; its color does not change with the seasons, being green all year round. The tall, noble bamboo is the sole material from which the shakuhachi is made. When the pure qualities of the bamboo become infused with the breath of a living human soul – Heaven and earth become one – a tone rich in essence of Nature flows forth!

The word *Shakuhachi* is both the name of the instrument, and the most commonly used length of bamboo. *Sun*, is a Japanese inch. There are eight *sun* in one *hachi*. *Shaku*, is a Japanese foot, which is composed of ten *sun*. *Shakuhachi* then, is one Japanese foot and eight Japanese inches, or approximately twenty-two American inches and plays in the key of D. There are various *shakuhachi* lengths, which will produce different pitches. The longer flutes produce sounds in a lower pitch and are especially suitable for playing Zen music. On this recording, three lengths; 1.9, and 2.4. are used.

Many *shakuhachi* playing monks, called *komuso*, wandered about Japan in the Edo Period, hoping to strike the one perfect sound that would enlighten the whole world. The *komuso* would also stop to play in front of individual houses to help relieve the people living there the burden of their sufferings.

In the Tokugawa-Period (1609-1868), masterless Samurai known as *Ronin* played this instrument as part of the sect of Zen-Buddhism known as *Fuke-Shu*. They wore baskets, or *Tengai*, over their heads to suppress the ego, as well as for anonymity. The “music” that they played was for healing, and they were known as *Komuso* (or priests of emptiness).

TRACKS:

1. Ifu-Sashi – (9:27)

This *honkyoku* (or original piece) was taken into the *Itcho-ken* temple repertory within the *Meian* line of *honkyoku*, following its discovery in *Hakata*, on the *Isand* of *Kyushu*. “*Sashi*” is the Japanese representation of a Sanskrit word that stands for the death of *Buddha*.

2. Banji – (7:31)

Banji comes from the Dai-Hozan line of Meianji in Otamuro, the present day Koshu in Yamanashi Prefecture. This honkyoku makes use of the Japanese concept “in-ki.” “In” is the equivalent to “yin,” the Chinese symbol for female and darkness. Consequently, this is a sad piece with a dark quality, but speaks to the dignity of solitariness.

3. Omae – (5:48)

Omae (Special Angel) is a lamentation on the pain, loneliness, and rage we feel when a relationship we thought would last, ends. First we let go of our plans, then our expectations, and finally, worst of all, our hopes and dreams.

4. Darani – (8:28)

This piece comes from the Meian Temple in Kyoto, which was headquarters for the Fuke sect during the Edo period (1603-1868). The ideographs for Meian, or Yin and Yang (dark and light), were often worn on the chests of the komuso. This honkyoku gives one the feeling and image of a strong, powerful Buddha.

5. Banshiki – (6:48)

Banshiki comes from the Itcho-ken Temple in Hakata, on the Island of Kyushu. A very Buddhist honkyoku, it is concerned with the subject of death. More importantly, with the soul’s journey from this live, full of attachments and feelings, toward the peace of satori, enlightenment, which lies beyond. The word “shiki” in the titles means to “pass or cross over.”

6. Koku – (10:30)

Koku, or “Bell ringing in the Empty Sky,” is one of the three oldest honkyoku (san-koten). It is said to have been composed after the death of the Zen monk Fuke-Zenji, patriarch of the shakuhachi, who in life is supposed to have walked around ringing a small hand-bell. In the legend the monk predicts the day of his own death. When the villagers hear of his death, they open the coffin and find it empty. However, they look to the sky and clearly hear the sound of a bell getting fainter, as if ascending to the clear, blue sky. The music of Koku (“empty sky”) supposedly represents this event.

7. Mukaiji – (9:33)

Mukaiji, or “Fog, Sea, Flute,” is also one of the three oldest honkyoku, along with Koku and Kyorei. It is said that this piece was composed about 700 years ago by the monk Kichiku, who dreamed he was on a small boat in the open sea in the middle of a thick white fog. While on the boat he heard beautiful shakuhachi music, but could not see its origin. Late he composed this piece to capture the haunting melodies of his dream.

Kichiku was one of the disciples of Kakushin, who brought the Fuke sect of Zen monks (those who played the shakuhachi to reach enlightenment), to Japan. The original founder was the Chinese monk Fuke-Zenji, who, in the Tang Dynasty, was the direct inspiration for all the oldest honkyoku.

8. Kyorei – (9:21)

There is a legend about this honkyoku: it is said that in the Tang Dynasty in China, Fuke-Zenji often walked the streets ringing a bell. After his death his disciples composed this honkyoku to express their yearning for their master. It was later transmitted to Japan.

“Kyorei” means the bell that is the sound of nothingness in Zen Buddhism. This is the oldest and most famous honkyoku.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin is the director and founder of the Ki-Sui-An Shakuhachi Dojo that offers instruction in honkyoku and sankyoku at several locations on the East Coast. Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin studied shakuhachi in Kyoto, Japan with Kurahashi Yodo Sensei, a disciple of Jin Nyodo. There, in 1975, he received the name Nyogetsu and a teaching certificate at the level of Jun Shi-Han in the Kinko School of Shakuhachi. After his return to New York, and efforts to spread the teaching of this instrument in America, Nyogetsu was awarded the rank of Shihan (Master), in 1978. Soon thereafter, he received his Dai Shi-han, Grand Master’s license in 1980.

Mr. Seldin has performed in numerous concerts, lectures, and demonstrations throughout the United States and Japan. He has been interviewed on radio and television, and has appeared on sound tracks of several documentary films, in particular, the Academy Award nominated documentary, “A Family Gathering” (1989) for which he co-composed the soundtrack. Ronnie Nyogetsu Seldin also appears on several recordings of shakuhachi music.

The Ki-Sui-An Shakuhachi Dojo has branches in Queens, Manhattan, Upstate New York, Philadelphia, Providence, and Syracuse. In addition to teaching privately, Mr. Seldin is also part of the Japanese Music Program at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York where he gives lectures on and demonstrates the shakuhachi. He also teaches via cassette, and as of 1997, has students in seventeen states and five countries outside of the United States.

PRODUCER’S NOTE

“When I first met Ronnie not only was I impressed by his tone and quality of sound, but also with the variety of his repertoire. This is his first recording with Lyrichord, and as his producer I found his performance a perfect example of musical mastery. Enjoy!

Rev. Jorge Alfano –

Producer/Sacred Sounds Institute

CREDITS

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