

The Music of Buddha Nature - Blowing Zen on the Shakuhachi

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Abstract

Suizen, 吹禅, a Japanese word which means blowing Zen, is known as a meditative practice of Zen Buddhism using the shakuhachi bamboo flute to achieve a state of self-realization into the Buddha nature. Based on principles of common origin of the Zen School and the Nyingma School, this article presents an interpretation of the understanding of the mind and the seeing of the Buddha nature which are the objectives of Zen practices and reveals this through the music of the traditional shakuhachi repertory.

Keywords: Shakuhachi, Suizen, Zen, Buddha Nature, Tathagatagarbha

1. Introduction

Zen¹ and esoteric Buddhism have the same origin and are disseminated from the Buddha, Sakyamuni. As different paths leading to the same objective, they share common traits based on the theory of Buddha nature or Tathagatagarbha, though emphasis of their teachings varies. To understand the mind in order to see the essential nature is the objective of Zen. The mind is the state of consciousness² and the essential nature is the state of wisdom. In the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism³, it is based on the state of consciousness that enables one to experience the state of wisdom as these two, like the mind and its nature, are always in coalescence. The philosophy of the Nyingma School, which is the original and oldest school in esoteric Buddhism, is quoted in this article to discuss the objectives, practices and realization of Zen through the *shakuhachi*. Geographically at the opposite ends of Asia, Tibetan and Japanese cultures are unified here. Through blowing Zen on the *shakuhachi*, the music of Buddha nature or Tathagatagarbha is appreciated.

¹ Zen also known as Ch'an is a school of Buddhism transmitted from India to China in the fifth century and from China to Japan in the seventh century. Zen masters, Eisai (1141-1215), Dogen (1200-1253), Hakuin (1685-1768) all contributed great efforts for the dissemination and development of Zen in Japan.

² The state of consciousness refers to the mental activities in ordinary beings while the state of wisdom refers to the Buddha's inner self-realization.

³ Buddhism was disseminated into Tibet at the eighth century under Santaraksita and Padmasambhava. The latter as supreme master of esoteric Buddhism was regarded as the first patriarch of the Nyingma School though the name of Nyingma appeared centuries later.

2. Suizen and the Shakuhachi in Japan



Fig.1: Myoan-ji Temple in Kyoto

The words “吹禅”, *suizen*, were inscribed on a piece of stone at the entrance to a Japanese Zen temple called Myoan-ji (明暗寺) (Fig.1) in Kyoto. *Suizen*, literally meaning blowing Zen, is a practice by the Fuke Sect (普化宗) of Japanese Zen using the *shakuhachi*⁴ bamboo flute (Fig. 2). Zen that penetrates into everyday spiritual life of Japanese culture (Suzuki, 1959) finds its representation in music⁵ known as *honkyoku* which are special musical pieces composed for Zen *shakuhachi* practices.

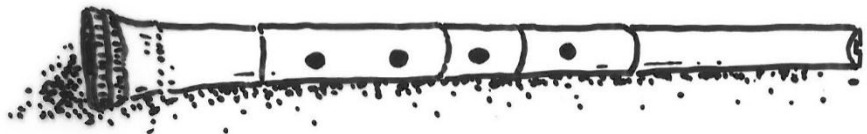


Fig. 2: The Shakuhachi Bamboo Flute

Originated from Tang Dynasty in China, the *shakuhachi* was invented by Lu Cai⁶(呂才) (Blasdel, 1988, 1) for *gagaku*(雅樂), ensemble music of a grand scale played in the palace. It was also in Tang dynasty around the seventh century that the *shakuhachi* was imported to Japan. This was the period of Prince Shotoku (聖德太子) (572-622), the key person who officially brought Buddhism to the Japanese imperial government. He also wrote commentaries on three sutras – the Srimala Sutra (Kyokai and Dennis, 2011), the Vimalakirti Sutra and the Lotus Sutra, all of which had, as their main theme, Buddha nature or Tathagatagarbha.

As a record of the transmission, eight *shakuhachi* from Tang dynasty, made of various materials such as jade, stone, bamboo and ivory, are still preserved at the Shoso-In (正倉院) in the treasure house of Todaji at Nara.

⁴ The shakuhachi is usually made of bamboo to be blown from one end cut into a special shaped mouth-piece called the *utaguchi*. There are four holes in front and one hole at the back for fingering.

⁵ Japanese Zen master, D. T. Suzuki discusses in “Zen and Japanese culture” about the spirituality of Zen inherent in various forms of Japanese life, like the art of tea, Haiku, swordsmanship, etc. However, the music of Zen is not particularly mentioned.

⁶ Lu Cai planned the music system of Tang Dynasty and made 12 types of shakuhachi conforming to the 12 pitches.

Right after this period, the Japanese monk, Dosho, (Dumonlin, 2000) travelled to China to study and brought Zen to Japan in mid-seventh century. Parribajaka of Gango-ji (元興寺極樂坊) in Nara housed the first Zen meditation hall in Japan established by Dosho.

The name of *shakuhachi* (尺八) came from units of measurement used in China, with *shaku* as the official “foot” and *sun* as the “inch”. The *shakuhachi* actually measures one *shaku* (尺) and *hachi* (八, eight) *sun*. However, the *shakuhachi* soon disappeared in China after its introduction into Japan. Playing the instrument was designated as blowing Zen, *suizen* (吹禪), which acted as an alternative to *zazen* (sitting meditation of Zen) and mantra chanting in ordinary Zen meditation. Music pieces written for the *shakuhachi suizen* were usually solo compositions without accompaniment. These were called *honkyoku* (本曲), meaning the original pieces.

The priest, Ennin⁷ (円仁) of Tendai Sect, in the ninth century brought *shomyo* (声明) back to Japan as a method of chanting. The *shakuhachi* was said to be used for accompaniment when chanting in ritual practices. Perhaps this is the origin of the *honkyoku*. Years later, in the eighteenth century, a Fuke monk called Kurosawa Kinko (黒沢琴古) travelled around the country to collect a repertory of 36 pieces of *honkyoku* and founded the Kinko School of *shakuhachi*.

2.1. Development of the Shakuhachi as a Zen Meditation Instrument

After the early spread of the instrument over a few centuries, the *shakuhachi* flourished as a popular Zen instrument in the 16th century, during the Edo period. Even the construction of the flute was adapted to include the root end of the bamboo. Blown on the other end, the *shakuhachi* was well suited for Zen meditation in the form of unaccompanied solo playing. Uninterrupted concentration of the mind and control of breath could be trained through rhythming with the unbroken long notes with the expressive instrument generating rich and mystic tones. This historical type of *shakuhachi* is called the *Komuso Shakuhachi* which is the preceding form of the modern *shakuhachi* (Tanimura, 1990). *Komuso*⁸ (monks of nothingness) are monks of the Fuke Sect. Supported by the Tokugawa government, the *komuso* (Fig. 3) were *samurai* with their *shakuhachi* as their weapons also. They wore a *tengai* basket hat and a *kesa* sash over the kimono. Together with the *shakuhachi*, these were the *komuso*'s three tools (Blasdel, 1988, 2). They also had three seals which were the *honsoku* (permit to enter the sect), the *kai'in* (personal identification) and the *tsuin* (travel document).



Fig. 3. Komuso in the Thirteenth Century

⁷Ennin (793-864) was also known as Jikaku Taishi (慈覺大師). He was chief priest of the Tendai sect at Enryakuji and founded Tofuku-ji in Kyoto which was the patron temple for the Myoan-ji in the seventeenth century.

⁸ At the beginning of the Fuke sect in the thirteenth century, the monks were called *komoso* with the characters *ko* 虚 representing emptiness, *mo* 妄 illusion and *so* 僧 monk. In later Edo period, the title was changed to *komuso* with the characters *ko* 虚 emptiness, *mu* 無 nothingness and *so* 僧 monk.

The *shakuhachi* bears the symbolic meaning of Mahayana Buddhism⁹. For instance, *shaku* as one and *hachi* as eight imply one (non-conceptual) awareness with eight (conceptual) consciousnesses¹⁰. The five holes on the bamboo carry the meaning of the five aggregates¹¹. The hollow inside of the instrument indicates the empty¹² essence of phenomena. In the theory of Buddha nature (Tathagatagarbha), the pristine ground¹³ which is the basis for the ultimate universe¹⁴ can be categorized into three basic constituents (Tam, 2010)¹⁵: the aspect of cognizance (which allows things to distinguish and to be distinguished), the aspect of manifestation (which is life itself to allow things to come into being) and the aspect of awareness (which is the awareness of emptiness). With this understanding, we can see that the *shaku-hachi* (representing awareness and consciousness) indicates the aspect of cognizance to distinguish: the five holes (representing five aggregates) point to the aspect of manifestation to see vitality, and the hollow heart of the bamboo directs to the aspect of emptiness. As the finale, the non-trinity of these aspects is found on the *shakuhachi* as a whole.

This also demonstrates the Buddhist philosophy of non-dualism: when awareness and consciousness intermingle, when open and closed holes of the *shakuhachi* synthesize, when the hollow heart together with the solid bamboo shell sound in unison, etc... Non-dualism in this way is the way of Zen.

Non-dualism is introduced in the Vimalakirti Sutra¹⁶ (Watson, 1997), “*The stirring of the mind and thought – these two form a dualism. But if the mind is not stirred, then there will be no thought. And if there is no thought, there will be no discrimination. The one who has thoroughly mastered this may in this way enter the gate of non-dualism.*” With the mind not attaching itself to dualism, one will neither arouse conceptual thought nor cling onto oneself. This explains why the komuso wears the *tengai* basket hat, which acts as a reminder to erase self-identity. A *honkyoku* piece called *Sokka* (息観) illustrates the practice of non-dualism. The character “*so*” denotes breath and “*kan*” means to observe. Hence, it means contemplation on the breath. In the music score (Fig. 4), one phrase of the notes, *gakufu*, represents one breath. This is an exercise to focus one’s breath until one is totally absorbed in each note: “*to see the truth in his mind’s eye*”. (The International Shakuhachi Society, online)

⁹ The symbolic meanings of the *shakuhachi* were written on a signboard in the hall of the Myoan-ji temple in Kyoto. These meanings are based on Mahayana Buddhism which refers to the teaching of Buddha Sakyamuni for Bodhisattvas (enlightened beings).

¹⁰ According to the Mere-consciousness School, the eight consciousnesses are the sight consciousness, hearing consciousness, smell consciousness, taste consciousness, touch consciousness, thinking consciousness, consciousness of the self-ego and store consciousness.

¹¹ The five aggregates (*skandhas* in Sanskrit) are five categories of our senses. These are the aggregates of form, sensation, perception, formation and consciousness with the first one being the sense on physical objects and the last four being senses on abstract objects.

¹² Emptiness is not equated with nothingness. Precisely because of emptiness, things are not pre-determined and a variety of results and new objects can appear and we call this advancement or progress.

¹³ The pristine ground is the ground of being for everything in all worlds.

¹⁴ The ultimate universe in Buddhism is called the Dharmadhatu which means the world of things and contains all universes and all varieties of space-time.

¹⁵ Tam Shek Wing, the Buddhist Master in both Nyingma School and Chinese Zen, states these three aspects of manifestation, cognizance and awareness (現分、明分、覺分) are the power of the Dharmakaya (the ultimate Zen wisdom), that is, the inner self-realization state of the Buddha.

¹⁶ The Vimalakirti Sutra is one of Buddhist teachings common in the Zen School as well as the Nyingma School. In the chapter on Non-dualism, each Bodhisattva explained his understanding of Non-dualism and when it was Vimalakirti’s turn; he just remained in silence. Everyone then admired this as the true presentation of non-dualism which is ineffable.

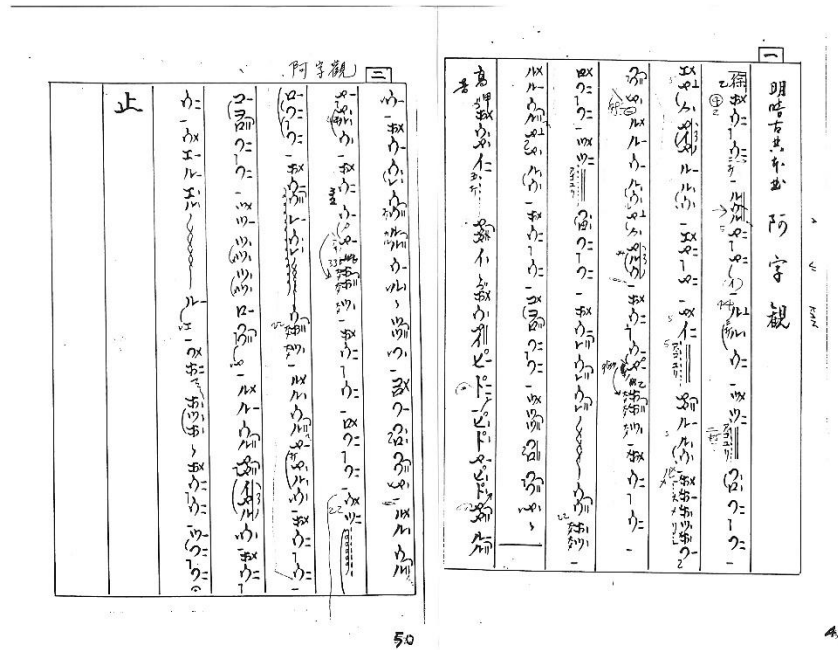


Fig. 4. Music score of Ajikan

The mind of the player focuses on the manipulation of breath to produce the sound. The breath producing the sound in turn allows the mind to function to contemplate on the music. The practice starts with mutual dependency of mind and breath, up until one is totally absorbed in the music without self-identity. Then it is the interpenetration of mind and breath. The consciousness of awareness to hear and play the music, producing the mental state of consciousness, is thus transformed into non-dual awareness of wisdom, producing the mental state of wisdom¹⁷ which is a natural manifestation of the mind itself. So this is what is called, “to see the truth in his mind’s eye”. It is a state of non-dualism for the mind and breath. Similar technique of meditation practice also appears in the Nyingmaschool, with contemplation on breath and visualization.

2.2. Origin of the Fuke sect as stated in Kyotaku Denki

Based on the *Kyotaku Denki*, the official document of the *Fuke* sect (Blasdel, 1988, 3), the first piece of Zen *shakuhachi* was called *Kyotaku* which means “The Bell Which Isn’t”. Once upon a time in China, during the ninth century, there was a monk called *Fuke*¹⁸ who walked around the city chanting Zen verses while ringing a bell¹⁹. A man named Chohaku wanted to become his disciple and made a bamboo flute to imitate the ringing of the bell. The title of the musical piece was *Kyotaku* (虚鐸). It imitated the bell-ringing but was not the bell itself. As a taste of Zen, the bell symbolizes Zen wisdom which is inconceivable (therein the bamboo flute only representing the bell but not the actual bell) but its power can be clearly felt through the imitated ringing sound from the bamboo flute. Like in the Zen story of the finger pointing to the moon²⁰, the moon representing Zen wisdom cannot really be touched physically and the pointing finger is the imitated bell-ringing, which is the awareness of the power of Zen wisdom.

Later, the name of this *shakuhachi* piece was changed to *Kyorei* (虚鈴) meaning empty bell (Fig. 5).

¹⁷ Wisdom (jnana in Sanskrit) denotes the wisdom of thustness to see things just as it is without notions or conceptuality.
¹⁸ Fuke, the Chinese monk, though appeared many centuries before, was considered as the founder of the komoso.
¹⁹ This bell (鐸) was an ancient musical instrument dating back from the Spring and Autumn Period (771-476 BC) to the Han Period (206BC – 220 AD) in Chinese history.
²⁰ The moon is far away and cannot be touched. The teacher uses his finger to point to the moon. The deluded will mistake the finger to be the moon.

After sixteen generations from Chohaku, the piece dating from Song dynasty passed onto Chosan who later taught the Japanese priest, Gakushin²¹ (心地覺心). Returning to Japan in 1254, Gakushin eventually established the Fuke sect and his disciples became proficient in the *shakuhachi*. This happened in the Kumakura Period (1185-1133) of Japanese history. Gakushin composed two more pieces for the *shakuhachi* - *Mukaiji* (misty clouds) and *Kyoku* (empty sky) (Wong, 2005). Together with *Kyorei* the pieces formed the classical repertory of fundamental *shakuhachi* up till now. Then the Muromachi Period (1336-1573) revealed the initial development of the *shakuhachi* and the Edo Period (1603-1868) witnessed the flourishing of the instrument across the whole country.



Fig. 5: Shakuhachi Master Sunny Yeung Performing the Classical Piece of Kyorei

However, *Kyorei* is the only piece of original Chinese Zen *shakuhachi* music. After many generations, there are now several versions but the pieces from the Fudaiji and Taizan Ha schools claim to be the original. The simple melodic composition imparts not just a haunting tune but a beautiful piece with a sense of tension.

The piece starts with long notes to imitate the overtones of the bell. When a bell is rung, the overtone vibrations will linger much longer than the original sound of the bell. Five short melodic passages form the composition, with the first melody returning in the last passage that is sometimes played with an upper register. This is like going through a mental journey and returning home with the objective accomplished to discover the original true nature. The sound of the bell is not exactly the sound of the true bell, yet it gives the sensation and feeling of the true bell through the overtones to arouse awareness of the bell. This is the non-dualism of “is and isn’t”.

Although this story is not without controversy,²² many *shakuhachi* players still believe in the story of Kyotaku Denki. The Fuke sect was banished in the nineteenth century during the Meiji Restoration²³. The *shakuhachi* survived the political upheaval as a musical instrument rather than a ritual tool. Now, there are still about forty *honkyoku* pieces left in the traditional repertory.

²¹ The name of Gakushin (1207-1298) means the enlightened mind. Gakushin learned the esoteric teaching from the Japanese Shingon sect and Zen teachings from the famous Chinese master, Wu-men (No gate). He was the key person to transmit Zen *shakuhachi* playing to Japan.

²² Nakahara Chikuzen disproved the Kyotaku Denki and stated that the Fuke sect was set up as a political intrigue rather than a religious lineage transmission.

²³ With the rise of Meiji imperial power and the emperor being conceived as a living god of Shinto, Buddhism, its beliefs and practices were banned by the Japanese government in 1868. However, after hundreds of years, the spirituality of Buddhism had penetrated all levels of Japanese society and become deeply rooted as part of Japanese culture.

3. The practice of Zen Shakuhachi and the Buddha Nature

Life in the Fuke temples can be appreciated through the following activities (Blasdel, 1988, 2).

The daily routine started in the morning when the piece *Kauseirei* was played by the managing priest to awaken the monks and announce the beginning of the day. Then the monks would gather around the altar to play *Choka* as a daily service and attend a Zen session. During day time, the monks would practice the *shakuhachi*, train in martial arts and go begging for alms. In the evening, they played *Banka* as a ritual piece followed by *zazen* (seating meditation). When the *komuso* wandered on the streets, they played *Tori*(passing), *Kadozuke*(street corners) and *Hachigaeshi* (returning the begging bowl). When *komuso* monks met in the street, they talked to each other through *Yobi Take* (call) and *Uke Take* (answer). When they wished to dwell in a temple, they would enquire with *Hirakimon* or *Monbiraki* (open the gate).

It is with such daily routine that Zen is gradually cultivated. Much more than social usage and animal instinct, everyday life experience is Zen. Suzuki, the Japanese Zen scholar, remarked that “*It [Zen] is something deeply imbedded in every one of us ... and it requires something altogether different from the so-called scientific analysis.*” (Suzuki, 1959) It is getting to the source of being for everything that constitutes our everyday life’s experience.

Also, interpretation of the *honkyoku* pieces depended on the master who would pass the essence of each piece orally to his disciples. There were also temples that would only focus on one piece of music – *ichijiichiritsu* (one temple, one piece). Some Fuke monks only practiced for one piece of music throughout their lives. This does not mean they practiced mechanically but rather the *shakuhachi* lived in their lives as a spiritual discipline. That is why Suzuki says that “*Zen is discipline in enlightenment.*”

Before we discuss on the individual *shakuhachi* repertory, the meaning of Buddha nature in Zen is elaborated.

3.1. Wisdom as the Initial Step to Zen Samadhi

A Zen master told his disciple how to practice: “*No reflecting whatsoever. When you want to see, see immediately. As soon as you tarry, the whole thing goes away.*” (Suzuki, 1959, 1) Zen is beyond conceptualization. It is without notion or conceptuality. As one lingers on an object, conceptuality arises. So how should one behave? This is what Master Tam Shek-Wing taught his students: “When the object appears, the mind responds. When the object is gone, there is nothing left in mind”. This is how the true mind²⁴ works in Zen. D.T. Suzuki (Suzuki, 1964) explains that Zen is the whole mind which is the true inner self-realization together with its subtle function to manifest all activities. This is equivalent to the non-conceptual awareness that functions together with the various conceptual consciousnesses.

To experience the true mind, both the Zen School and the Nyingma School²⁵ start with wisdom²⁶ to attain Samadhi which is a mental state of meditative concentration. Understanding the mind to see the essential nature is the objective of Zen. Understanding the mind is the wisdom of inner self-realization while to see the essential nature is to experience the mental state of Samadhi.

This mental state is explained in the Sutra of Hui-Neng²⁷, (Cleary, 1998, 1) “*There is essentially no dwelling in the meditation; it is apart from dwelling in meditative stillness. There is essentially no conception in meditation; it is apart from conceiving the idea of meditation. The mind is like space, yet without any notion of space.*” The “meditation” explained here stands for the state of the meditative mind. The famous saying in the Diamond Sutra that aroused the enlightenment of the sixth Chinese Zen patriarch Hui-Neng goes, “Without dwelling on anything to arise the mind”. The oldest *shakuhachi* piece *Kyotaku* (The Bell Which Isn’t) points to this mental state.

²⁴ True mind is represented in different terms in different texts and different contexts such as mind-itself, Buddha nature, nirvana, self-nature, reality, complete enlightenment etc. These terms come about because of the emphasis on particular aspects of the meaning.

²⁵ The Nyingma School on the path of enlightenment emphasizes on the view which is the discernment of correct understanding of Buddhist teaching. Even the meditative practices are set for initial realization of the view before actual experience of the mental state.

²⁶ The practice of the Zen School and the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism is based on wisdom to attain Samadhi while many other Mahayana Buddhism schools start with Samadhi to attain wisdom.

²⁷ Hui-neng (638-713) is the Chinese sixth patriarch of Zen (Ch’an) Buddhism. Though illiterate, he came to great awakening by hearing someone reciting the Diamond Sutra.

3.2. The Centrality of Buddha Nature in Zen

Zen had begun with the transmission of enlightenment from Buddha Sakyamuni to Kasyapa with an ineffability of experience (Dumoulin, 2005). It is known as a special transmission beyond scriptures not relying on words. Suzuki commented that, “*It is not to be subsumed in the categories of linguistics.*” because “*As soon as we try to do this, it disappears*”. (Suzuki, 1959, 2)

Bodhidharma who was the first Chinese patriarch to transmit Zen (Ch’an) from India to China in early fifth century said in the Bloodstream Sermon (Red Pine, 1989), “*To find a Buddha all you have to do is to see your nature. Your nature is the Buddha. And the Buddha is the person who’s free: free of plans, free of cares. If you don’t see your nature and run around all day looking somewhere else, you’ll never find a Buddha. The truth is there’s nothing to find.*” The original nature within us is the Buddha nature. To see the essential nature from the understanding of the mind means to see the Buddha nature. The mind that is free and unobstructed is the Buddha mind. It is an inner self-realization so there is no need to look somewhere else.

One may query when Bodhidharma searched for the Buddha, “*There’s nothing to find*”. This is depicted in the Diamond Sutra when the Buddha Sakyamuni asked his disciple Subhuti if the Buddha could be seen in his perfect physical body. The answer was negative. The commentary by Hui Neng (Cleary, 1998, 2) then said, “*The Tathagata²⁸ or Realized One is the formless body of reality. It cannot be seen by the physical eye ... even if they (the deluded ones) can see something; it is only a projected body, not the true formless body of reality.*” The Buddha nature is innate and it is only a mental state of experience, so any act of searching will result in a Consciousness-Buddha! (A Buddha created by one’s own bias consciousness).

3.3. Zen master Eihei Dogen and the Buddha Nature

The Buddha nature was presented in another way in the thirteenth century by the Japanese Zen master, Eihei Dogen²⁹, who explained in “The Issue at Hand” of Sobogenzo (現成公案) (Cleary, 1986), “*Studying the Buddha Way is studying oneself. ... There is ceasing the traces of enlightenment, which causes one to forever leave the traces of enlightenment which is cessation.*” Studying oneself is to practice for inner self-realization. The traces of enlightenment are only signs and conceptions felt by the consciousness and will form the obstructions to further stages of enlightenment.

Buddha nature was advocated by Dogen as the core of his teaching and he gave interpretations of its meaning in a much broader sense. Hee-Jin Kim, Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon, gave a comprehensive introduction and explicit discussion on the philosophy of Dogen (Kim, 2004), particularly regarding the centrality of Buddha nature in his teachings. “*All sentient beings possess Buddha nature without exception*” stated in the Mahapari-nirvana Sutra was read by Dogen as “*All existence is Buddha nature*”. This greatly broadens the meaning of Buddha nature from the conventional sense of potentiality to Buddhahood. Professor Kim commented that Dogen equaled the meaning of Buddha nature with that of thusness³⁰ and Dharma nature³¹ which are the impersonal ground of being. Kim pointed out that Dogen’s view is intimately related to the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha³².

²⁸Tathagata is another designation for the Buddha. It means coming as such, i.e. appearing just as it is to conform perfectly to the contextual conditions.

²⁹Dogen Zenji 道元禪師 (1200-1253) was a great Japanese Zen master. He had been trained in Mahayana Buddhism through the Tendai sect and esoteric practices before learning Zen from the Chinese master, Tiantong Rujing. He founded the Soto School of Zen in Japan and established the Eiheiji (Temple of Eternal Peace).

³⁰Thusness or suchness is *tathata* in Sanskrit. This refers to the mental activities to see things as they objectively exist on realization of Buddha nature.

³¹ Dharma nature is *dharmata* in Sanskrit. This refers to the original nature of things (dharma) as they truly are. In the treatise, *Maitreya’s Distinguishing Phenomena and Pure Being*, (Scott, 2004, Snow Lion), dharma (phenomena) and dharma nature (pure being) are depicted as “not identical and not different”. To see things from the viewpoint of dharma, things are ordinary; however, to see things from the viewpoint of dharma nature, things become thusness.

³² The philosophy of Tathagatagarbha is the main theme in the third (and the last) promulgation of the Buddha’s teachings.

Dogen put forth the philosophy that all existences and Buddha nature were “neither identical nor different”. Furthermore, Dogen saw existence and time as inseparable so he stated the theory of existence-time. This existence-time interpenetrates with space-time totally and exhaustively. Hence, spatiality and temporality would be crucial to existence as well as Buddha nature. Dogen also wrote, “*In exerting life you are not obstructed by life, in exerting death you are not obstructed by death. ... When you understand that [the body of the five skandhas] is formed by various conditions at hand, you are able to exert it unobstructedly. This is the supreme Buddha. The abode of this supreme Buddha itself is the wondrous Pure Land.*” Professor Kim explains that this total exertion refers to the liberation of the self and the world, which is the natural manifestation of Buddha nature. To attain the free and unobstructed mind is the objective of Zen practices.

This has to be further explained from the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha and the meaning of enlightenment.

3.4. Buddha Nature as Interpreted through Tathagatagarbha

What is ultimate enlightenment?

The answer can be found in the Lankavatara Sutra³³, the text used by both the Zen School and the Nyingma School. The Buddha told the Lord of Lanka (Suzuki, 1932), “*By tranquility is meant oneness and oneness gives birth to the highest Samadhi, which is gained by entering into the womb of Tathagatahood, which is the realm of noble wisdom realized in one’s inmost self.*” The ultimate tranquility meditation is beyond dualism so it is called oneness. This highest Samadhi is accomplished by the wisdom of inner self-realization of the Buddha nature or Tathagatagarbha³⁴ (the womb of Tathagatahood).

What is Tathagatagarbha?

“*It is the domain of the Tathagata ... not in the domain of logic*”³⁵. The definition can be found from the sutra designated as the Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala³⁶ (Wayman, 1974) in the chapters on Tathagatagarbha and Dharmakaya. The term Dharmakaya means the inner self-realization wisdom of the Buddha which is a mental state with the ultimate wisdom collection. Queen Srimala says, “*This Dharmakaya of the Tathagata when not free from the store of defilement is referred to as the Tathagatagarbha.*” This can be understood as the wisdom of the Buddha together with its defilement in this ordinary world (such as delusion, greed and hatred) called the Tathagatagarbha. This is a simple explanation but the state in which the Buddha’s pure wisdom fuses with the defilement in the mundane world will be difficult to comprehend. Yet Master Tam Shek-Wing³⁷ provides a simple analogy.

This is the analogy of the television (Tam, 2000, 2).

The pristine ground where all objects and phenomena appear is like the TV screen and the aspect of manifestation and aspect of cognizance are the function or power of the TV screen. The worldly defilements are the images appearing on the TV screen. They are the state of consciousness following conditions to appear naturally in the state of wisdom.

Master Tam explains the two levels of coalescence in this philosophy of Tathagatagarbha.

³³ Bodhidharma passed the scriptures of Lankavatara Sutra to the second patriarch, Huike, as basis of Zen teachings. Initially, the Zen (Ch’an) school was called the Lanka sect.

³⁴ Tathagatagarbha is a Sanskrit word meaning the garbha(womb) of Tathagata (Buddha). It is analogous with a chamber where the Buddha is seated. Suppose one cannot get inside this chamber so on the outside one knows there is the Buddha within but the outside appearance only shows a building. The chamber can only be appreciated together with the building. Hence in this analogy, the whole building with the inside chamber is Tathagatagarbha, while the ordinary mind will see only the inside mystic chamber as the Buddha nature. Translated as Buddha nature or merely focused on the “womb”, some of the original meaning of Tathagatagarbha has been lost.

³⁵ Beyond our conventional logic, the realm of the Buddha is inconceivable.

³⁶ The Lion’s Roar of Queen Srimala is a scripture belonging to the third turning of the doctrinal wheel of the Buddha. The philosophy of Tathagatagarbha is explicated here through the words of Queen Srimala.

³⁷ Master Tam Shek-wing (談錫永) wrote extensively on the subject of Tathagatagarbha stating this as the centrality of all Buddhist teachings. Some of his works in Chinese include:

如來藏三談，四重緣起深般若，如來藏論集，如來藏二諦見，如來藏經密意，寶性論梵本新譯，勝鬘師子吼經密意，入楞伽經梵本新譯， etc.

The first is the coalescence of the Tathagata Dharmakaya with the power of the Dharmakaya defined as Tathagatagarbha. This is the analogy of the coalescence of the TV screen together with the power of the screen. We can understand that this coalescence is in itself unity.

The second is the coalescence of the inner self-realization state of the Buddha together with the natural manifestations following contextual conditions, also defined as Tathagatagarbha. This is the analogy of the coalescence of the power of the TV screen together with the TV images.

Master Tam remarks that one start with the second level of coalescence to practice seeing the mind³⁸ itself or thusness³⁹ and then the first level to reveal the Dharma nature (Dharmata).

Also, when things are said to follow conditions to appear, the Nyingma School taught on the dependent origination through mutual obstruction⁴⁰. Obstructions are limitations or confinement. When we define a term, the meaning of it will be within confinement. Life is living to adapt to limitations. Tools are invented to suit conditions. In such context, things just naturally appear according to conditions. We are obstructed by our mind so we look at things from our self-ego or our human perspective. We are also obstructed by space-time subtly so everything to us is naturally three-dimensional spatially and one-dimensional temporally. Being free and unobstructed by all these is the Buddha mind.

For the TV images, there are always the existent and the non-existent, as life and death in our conventional world. However, for the TV screen, it is beyond the existent and even the notion of “beyond existent” itself, so it is said as “not existent and not non-existent”. This is called the Middle Way⁴¹ in the Lankavatara Sutra.

Two more issues are stated in the Srimala Sutra about Tathagatagarbha.

“Tathagatagarbha is wrapped up in all the defilement-store” means the state of wisdom is always with the state of consciousness like the TV images must not be separated from the TV screen. Hence, though the Buddha’s wisdom is inconceivable, it is always connected with the conventional defilements. So it means we can practice from the defilements to attain wisdom.

“The Dharmakaya of the Tathagata is liberated from all the defilement-store” denotes the state of wisdom which though always connected with the state of consciousness is never contaminated. Hence, the realization one gets from Tathagatagarbha is the pure authentic immovable wisdom. This is like the TV images have nothing to do to the TV screen. Hence, from the angle of the TV screen, the TV images are nothing good or bad, beautiful or ugly, virtuous or evil, happy or sad, etc. Thus, traces of enlightenment are only images on the TV screen and should not be confused with the TV screen itself. *“Zen just feels fire warm and ice cold”* (Suzuki, 1964). The feeling is all in all. Even clinging onto this feeling will miss the true mind!

The aforesaid has briefly unfolded the meaning of Tathagatagarbha. Though a term easier to understand, “Buddha nature” cannot completely represent the original meaning of Tathagatagarbha. Zen master, like Eihei Dogen, tried to broaden its meaning by providing his own interpretation. However, if we put the original meaning of Tathagatagarbha or Buddha nature into Zen, many of the *koans* (case studies) can be resolved. It may not be really coincident that when Prince Shotoku first brought Buddhism to Japan in the seventh century, he made commentaries and lectured on the three Sutras of Vimalakirti, Srimala and Lotus, all of which are related to the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha.

³⁸ Three-fold natural liberations are taught in the Nyingma School. These are the natural liberation of the mind itself, the natural liberation of dharmata and the natural liberation of equanimity. In the last liberation, even the obstruction due to space-time is transcended.

³⁹ Thusness can be understood as the images as they naturally appear on the screen without further discrimination or judgment.

⁴⁰ The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism taught four folds of dependent origination, namely, karma and causality, mutual dependency, relativity and mutual obstruction. The first three can be easily appreciated in our conventional world while the fourth one can be applied to all natural manifestations.

⁴¹ The Middle Way is not in the middle of two extremes like modesty is between good or bad but rather it denies either extreme and even the notion or definition of the extreme.

3.5. The qualities of Tathagatagarbha

In Kensho⁴² Thomas Cleary, a prolific translator and author of 80 books, wrote on the true meaning of all things and stated the meaning of the true self as the Buddha nature which is described in scriptures to have the qualities of “Pure, Blissful, Permanent Selfhood”(Cleary, 1997). From the scripture, Queen Srimala said, “Because the Dharmakaya of the Tathagata has the perfection of permanence, the perfection of bliss, the perfection of self and the perfection of purity. Whatever sentient beings see the Dharmakaya of the Tathagata that way, see correctly.” (Wayman, 1974) This explains how the inner self-realization of the Buddha or the wisdom of Tathagatagarbha can be summarized in the qualities of “purity, self, bliss and permanence”.

Such an interpretation sounds controversial when compared to the “Suffering, impermanence, non-self and impure” which was taught by the Buddha as basic facts of existence in the first turning of the doctrinal wheel. “Suffering” results from our passion and desire for worldly things. “Impermanence” is the transient nature of things. “Non-self” is a remedy against the self-ego. “Impure” arises from our conception of things based on self-ego, greed, hatred and delusion. However, using our analogy of the television, these latter qualities refer to the images on the TV screen while the former qualities of “purity, self, bliss and permanence” refer to the TV screen itself. Further insight into these qualities will be necessary.

4. The Qualities of Tathagatagarbhaas Revealed in the Honkyoku Pieces

Hon Shirabe(本調) is the first piece of *honkyoku* (The International Shakuhachi Society, online) learned by most *shakuhachi* players and often played at the beginning of a concert or in one’s own practice. It is a piece from the Dokyoku / Chikushinkai School and also known as *Watazumi no Shirabe*. *Hon Shirabe* literally is “basic melody”. It has all the basic components as in other *honkyoku* pieces and prepares one’s mind and breath to master further pieces. This is like the preparatory practices of the esoteric Buddhist practices to get the practitioner’s body, speech and mind ready for the coming advanced practices.

Though simple in composition, a good rendition of the piece is difficult. One should play to feel each note, each tone, each intensity and each mood. Play with the widest dynamics and then remain as quiet as one can be. This is an exploration to exhaust values in our conventional world of dualism – where loud and quiet, sound and silence, prevail. Experience both extremes. Play until different notes are sensed as unity. Do not concentrate on tuning of the piece or how well it will sound, but focus on driving each breath into the bamboo and mastering the control of each breath. In this piece, one is forced to be completely absorbed into the *shakukachi* without discrimination on the outer or inner. The mental state is described as like “a wind descending from the sky to hit a bamboo grove and disappearing, leaving no trace.” There is no “I and mine” here. Appearances exist objectively and naturally. The character “hon” refers to “*honin no kyoku*”, one’s own tune. “*Shirabe*” derives from “*shiraberu*” which means to investigate. This is to learn to play in one’s own character to make one’s own tune. “*Hon*” also means original and may be related to “*hon-ne wohaku*”. This means seeing one’s original true self. Hence, this is the investigation to understand the mind. Blow the long notes until the last bit of energy is exhausted to the point when the sound is dissolved into silence. At this point, the conceptual extreme is exhausted and one will feel a moment of emptiness. This relativity of sound and silence is the Japanese aesthetics of *ma*⁴³(間). Seeing the mind itself is the first stage in esoteric Buddhist practice.

Summarizing the fundamental essence of practice, there is a verse on playing the *shakuhachi* that goes around among the folks. It is called “Verses for Realization of the Mind from Bright and Dark” (明暗心悟偈):

*The bamboo stem has the original empty heart
with one song to meet the natural reality.*

The high tone represents tolerance.

The low tone represents modesty.

The middle tone indicates equanimity.

The rhythm tells impermanence.

⁴²Kensho means the seeing of the original nature which is the realization of Zen practices.

⁴³*Ma* is the Japanese conception of emptiness. In music, it is expressed as silence. It means a gap between structural parts, the interval between the notes. It is better understood as the awareness of the gap. So in music the awareness is on the sequential passage of sound and silence. In Zen *shakuhachi*, *ma* coincides with the interval for breathing.

*There is no beginning before blowing.
There is no end after blowing.
Moment by moment it is spontaneous
To attain to the sound of unity thought after thought.
When one moves to the position with no sound,
It is precisely one's own mind.*

The title of the verse is “Realization of the Mind from Bright and Dark”. This implies understanding of one’s mind through sound (which is the brightness that one can feel) and silence (which is the darkness without anything). Bright and dark are the mental activities of dualism in our mind.

The bamboo stem of the *shakuhachi* is originally hollow and, with this empty heart, sound can be produced. The natural appearance of the bamboo plus the empty essence in coalescence initiates a mental state that corresponds to reality or thusness. The Nyingma School designates this as “manifestation-emptiness”⁴⁴. It is manifestation-emptiness (the *shakuhachi*) to produce manifestation-emptiness (the song) to realize manifestation-emptiness (the mental state). This is a universal application.

Tones are the varieties of sound produced by the *shakuhachi*. Not analyzing as high or low, the penetrating high tones are expressions of tolerance and the sustaining low tones are expressions of modesty. Neither high nor low are the middle tones so they stand for equanimity. As a successive movement in the variation of sound, the changing rhythm shows the phenomenon of impermanence. Life progresses from instant to instant and our mind follows as such. Through the meaning of the tones, one sees the true mind.

Silence is eternal. It exists before there is sound. It is just the pristine ground of sound. It is the empty base of existence. With the mastery of breath, each moment is spontaneously reacting to the conditions. With mind concentrating on breath, every thought is a breathing action. Based on non-duality of mind and breath, every thought will realize the sound of unity. When the breath is exhausted, all notion and conceptuality is cleared, one moves from sound to silence and the mind itself is experienced.

Understanding the mind to see the Buddha nature, the four qualities of Buddha nature are presented as “purity, self, bliss and permanence” with reference to the *honkyoku* pieces.

On the four qualities, the *Treatise on Buddha nature called the Mahayana UttaratantraShastra* (Fuchs, 2000) written by Maitreyahas the following stanzas:

*“The [dharmakaya] is purity, since its nature is pure and the remaining imprints are fully removed.
It is true self, since all conceptual elaboration in terms of self and non-self is totally stilled.
It is true bliss, since the aggregates of mental nature and their causes are reversed.
It is permanence, since the cycle of existence and the state beyond pain are realized as one.”*

4.1. Purity as the Quality of Buddha Nature

Koku (Fudaiji)(虚空) is one of the three oldest classical *honkyoku* together with *Kyorei* and *Mukaiji*. It was first performed with two *shakuhachi* and a gong at the Myoan-ji of Kyoto. It sounds very ancient and Buddhist, like a bell ringing in the Fuke temple. It also reminds of the story of Fuke ringing the bell and disappearing in the empty sky.

Literally the empty sky, *Kokucan* stand for more profound meanings like the emptiness or *sunyata* in Sanskrit. However, here it represents the Dharmakaya, the innate pure wisdom without any contamination. Clouds and mists are just appearances like the TV images while the sky itself, like the TV screen, is never contaminated by the TV images.

“On Zen”, the Japanese Zen master, Dai-O⁴⁵, said (Suzuki, 1935, 1),
“There is a reality even prior to heaven and earth;
Indeed it has no form, much less a name;

⁴⁴ Manifestation-emptiness is a teaching in the Nyingma School. As illustrated with the verses of the heart sutra, manifestation-emptiness represents the meaning of “Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. Form is no other than emptiness and emptiness is no other than form”. Master Tam illustrates this by pointing to the palm and back of the hand to represent manifestation and emptiness. They are not even two parts of one thing but an indivisible non-duality.

⁴⁵ Dai-O (1235-1308) is an outstanding master in the teachings of the Japanese Rinzai School of Zen.

*Eyes fail to see it;
It has no voice for ears to detect;
To call it mind or Buddha violates its nature...
It is Dharma truly beyond form and sound."*

The reality in Zen is the Dharmakaya, a formless existence beyond our consciousnesses.

On purity, the commentary of the Mahayana UttarantraShastra(Fuchs, 2000) says,

"Buddha-dharmakaya, which is the fruit, has the general characteristic of having been by nature utterly pure since beginningless time, and it has the specific characteristic of the adventitious stains along with their remaining imprints being eliminated without any exception. Thus it constitutes the perfection of purity."

The adventitious stains are the notions and conceptual activities of worldly phenomena while imprints are the subsequent habitual tendencies. Even time is our worldly conception having no effect on the Dharmakaya. The pristine ground of the Dharmakaya allows all worlds of different dimensions to appear. This is the pure great equanimity⁴⁶: like the TV screen can show various stations of different languages without discrimination.

This piece was composed in the 12th century by a priest called Kyochiku in Nara. While meditating, he found himself like in a dream but floating in a boat at night with the clear sky. Then all of a sudden, thick mist covered the sky and blocked off the moon. Then a moving melody of *shakuhachi* sounded and he took his *shakuhachi* to accompany this ethereal melody.

Floating in a boat with the clear sky is like knowing the Dharmakaya is there through belief in the teachings. One is just a phenomenon appearing on the pristine ground. The thick mist blocking the moon takes one back to the mundane world with entanglement of defilement. However, the appearance of the moving *shakuhachi* is a natural appearance of the Dharma nature (*dharmata*). Playing the *shakuhachi* to cope with the ethereal melody (of the Dharma nature) is to meditate through the mind itself. The mind itself is actually the mental Dharma nature. One cannot see it because of the obscurations from our mental and human perspectives. When the mind itself indeed matches with the Dharma nature, one will actualize the natural liberation of the mind itself.

The piece begins with three long notes recalling the overtone of bell ringing. The long notes carry the audience to distant places. The audience is expected to relax and forget everything like floating in the empty sky.

4.2. Self as the Quality of Buddha Nature

Ajikan (阿字觀) composed in the Itcho-ken Temple in Hakata is a very popular tune in the Zen temples. It means contemplation on the syllable "AH" which is the first syllable of many languages including Japanese and Sanskrit. The practice of the same name, *Ajikan*, is found in the esoteric Shingon⁴⁷ Sect where the AH represents the basis of everything. "Kan" is to observe with the heart (*kokoro*) to see this basis. This practice was taught by Kukai⁴⁸, founder of the Shingon Sect.

AH represents the issue of "non-arising" which refers to objects and phenomena not actually arisen from causes. When images arise on the TV screen, they are not created by the TV screen but the TV screen acts as an "embracing cause" to make the TV images appear. This is like we are not born by the earth but without the support of earth and its environment, we cannot survive. As such, things arise from this basis of non-arising. In the AH meditation of Shingon, the contemplation is to see non-arising in the nature of the mind.

Not only humans, but Buddhas also arise from non-arising. This is symbolized in the Byodo-in of Uji in Japan. The statue of Amida Buddha is seated inside the Phoenix Hall which is a Japanese temple in the traditional style. The whole building is elevated on timber columns and located within an artificial pond called the pond of AH. Hence, the Buddha is contemplated as arising from the non-arising AH, which is the common basis from which everything arises. Arising from the Dharmakaya is non-arising.

⁴⁶ The pure great equanimity is the ultimate realization in the Nyingma School following that of the mind itself and the nature of Dharma respectively.

⁴⁷ Shingon means "true words". This sect originated in India with the first human patriarch as Nagarjuna. The lineage was passed to Kukai in the ninth century. The teaching concentrated on tantras and the mandala of two realms.

⁴⁸ Kukai, known as the Grand Master who propagated the Buddhist teaching, inherited the esoteric Buddhism of Tang Dynasty (this lineage originated from India to China) from Hui-kuo at Qing-long Monastery in 803 and founded the Shingon School in Japan and first established the monastery in Mount Koya. Later in China, anti-Buddhist persecution was ordered by the Emperor (842-845CE) and the Tang esoteric Buddhist sect disappeared.

The question on existence or non-existence of the self follows this line of seeing.

On self, the commentary of the Mahayana Uttarantra Shastra says,

“The conceptual elaboration consisting of the belief in the existence of a self as it is imputed by the *tirthikas* and so on, and the conceptual elaboration consisting of the belief in the non-existence of a self as it is imputed by the *shravakas* and so on, have been totally stilled and pacified without any remainder. Thus it is the perfection of true self.”

When one falls on either extreme for the existence or non-existence of a self, one will fall into either view of permanence or annihilation. Yet this is only conceptual elaboration. The TV images are only projections on the TV screen so they are not existent. The inconceivable TV screen does have images projected on it so they are not non-existent. Hence, such self is said to be “not existent and not non-existent”.

Alternatively, we can ask why we conceptualize on the existence or non-existence of self. This is the discussion between the Buddha Sakymuni and his disciple, Mahamati, in the Lankavatara Sutra (Suzuki, 1932, 2). They discussed on “*the notion that the hare’s horns are non-existent, assert that bulls has horns*”. The discrimination occurs “*owing to the idea of the horns*”. This conceptuality is due to a notion or a name. This philosophy of “not existent and not non-existent” is known as the Middle Way.

This piece contains straight-line and curving-line patterns, intermingling together and making it one of the most difficult *honkyoku* to play. The two contrasting patterns signify the dual characteristics of phenomena. In the end, they all blend into the same silence.

In the “Song of Meditation” (Suzuki, 1935, 2), Japanese Zen master, Hakuin⁴⁹ says,

*For such as, reflecting within themselves,
Testify to the truth of self-nature,
To the truth that self-nature is no-nature,
They have really gone beyond the ken of sophistry.
For them opens the gate of the non-duality and non-trinity.
Abiding with the not-particular which is in particulars,
Whether going or returning, they remain forever unmoved;
Taking hold of the not-thought which lies in thoughts,
In every act of theirs, they hear the voice of the truth.”*

“Not-thought” is like silence while “thought” is sound. Sound is always with silence though one will not be aware. To hear silence with sound is to hear the voice of the truth. This conforms to the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha.

4.3. Bliss as the Quality of Buddha Nature

San’an (産安) originally represented a prayer for the safe delivery of babies and was played during ceremonies when komuso cooked the rice offered to them as alms. In time, a more significant meaning was acquired to show all the hardships and struggles towards the progress of creating new things and in the end the mind was pacified by the quiescence. A dedication was said to make to both beings and non-beings.

On bliss, the commentary of the Mahayana Uttarantra Shastra says,

“All suffering has been ceased without any exception. This is because karma and the mental poisons have been totally eliminated, up to the point that [even] the skandhas, which are of mental nature, and their causes have been exhausted. These causes are on one hand the subtle poisons present on the level of the remaining imprints of ignorance, and on the other hand the undefiled karma. Since even these causes have been entirely reversed and exhausted, the dharmakaya is the perfection of bliss.”

To exhaust the karma and mental poisons means to understand thoroughly the very cause of these defilements. The very subtle imprints of ignorance and undefiled karma are all created from our habitual tendency without notice. We are born in this world with three-dimensional space and one-dimensional time. Everything appears to us in this way without exception. We just live in such a world and conform to its limitations naturally.

⁴⁹Hakuin (1685-1768), the great Zen master, exerted great efforts to the revival of Zen in the seventeenth century to lay down the foundation for modern development of Zen and its effect on Japanese culture.

In this respect D.T.Suzuki (Suzuki, 1964, 1) writes of Zen,

“An earthquake shakes the earth and Mt. Fuji topples over. Is this a great event? Yes, so long as the conception of space remains. But are we really living confined within an enclosure called space? Zen would answer at once: ‘With the burning of an incense-stick the whole triloka⁵⁰ burns. Within Joshu⁵¹’s cup of tea the mermaids are dancing.’ So long as one is conscious of space and time, Zen will keep a respectable distance from you.”

This very subtle obstruction is our space-time. Hence, in the Nyingma School, the fourth time⁵² and the indeterminate space are taught to transcend this obstruction.

This *honkyoku* also contains the meaning of meditative practices. *San* also signifies *sanmai*, the Japanese Buddhist term that stands for the Sanskrit word *samadhi* which is a mental state concentrating on an object. *An* is to arrive at the state of quiescence. Composed from an improvisational arrangement by Wadatsumidoso and based on an earlier composition titled *Jinbo Sanya* (Three Valleys), three (*san*) undulations (*ya*) appear in the music.

Hence, the piece depicts continuous practices and attainment of stability experienced with bliss along the path of enlightenment. This is one of the most technically demanding *honkyoku* with complex fingering and subtle ornamentation.

4.4. Permanence as the Quality of Buddhature

On permanence, the commentary of the Mahayana UttarantraShastra says,

“Samsara and nirvana⁵³, the cycle of existence and the state beyond torment and pain, have been realized as being equal in that they are not two different things that should be rejected and adopted, respectively. Thus the two benefits are uninterrupted and the dharmakaya constitutes the perfection of permanence.”

Why are *samsara* and *nirvana* of the same essence? With the analogy of the TV, the nature of the TV images (*samsara*) is identical with the nature of the TV screen (*nirvana*). The TV screen is effortless and always allows the TV images to appear. Likewise, the Dharmakaya has the function to effectuate any appearances naturally according to conditions. This action is permanent though what we see in the world appears to be transient because of changes in conditions. Because of this quality of permanence, like the sun always shining in our world, there is life. Permanence refers to the uninterrupted vitality.

Another *shakuhachi* piece illustrates this quality. *Sagari Ha⁵⁴* (*Nezasa Ha*) 下り葉 (根笹) means leaves that are down. A small, trunkless, low bamboo grass called *kumasasa* (fig. 6) grows on the ocean cliffs of Niigata Prefecture. This plant will not grow upwards and can generate a wave-like sound under the wind. Listening to this tune, one can imagine oneself in the bamboo bushes of Niigata pressed down by the cold wind of Siberia. This piece was said to be composed in memory of a monk who realized enlightenment when listening to the wind blowing the bamboo grass or waves.

The piece incorporates dual feelings of the pleasure of enlightenment through the sound of the bamboo grass and the suffering from the bitter cold winds. This combination becomes a special context to form the tone of life. A special blowing technique called *sasabuki* (bamboo-leaf shaped breath) is employed to resemble the bamboo bushes rustling against each other under the wind. This special technique in the *shakuhachi* indicates the vitality that is permanent from the power of the Dharmakaya.

⁵⁰Triloka is the Hindu word to mean the three worlds. In Buddhism, it is a generalization of all the possible existences through the world of desire, the world of form and the world of formlessness.

⁵¹Joshu (778-897) was a Chinese Zen master in the Tang dynasty.

⁵² The fourth time is beyond the three times of past, present and future. As space- time is always inseparable, entering the fourth time will be entering into indeterminate space.

⁵³ Samsara is our conventional world believed to be in constant cycle of birth, life and death while nirvana is the state of quiescence with the mental liberation from the poisons of samsara.

⁵⁴*Sagaru* presents the concept of “down”. *Ha* means leaves.



Fig. 6. Sagari Ha

Chinese Zen master, Daiju Ekai⁵⁵ (Suzuki, 1964, 2), wrote,

“The confused do not understand that the Dharmakaya, in itself formless, assumes individual forms according to conditions. ... The confused take the green bamboo for the Dharmakaya itself, the yellow blooming tree for Prajna itself. ... But Dharmakaya exists, Prajna exists, even when there is no blooming tree.”

From formless Dharmakaya to assumed individual forms, according to conditions, refers to the adaption to meet with obstructions. This is the profoundly dependent origination, through mutual obstruction.

This piece opens with a short introduction to warm up the player and purify the *shakuhachi*. Then a high-pitched melody is played for ten breaths and repeated again. The piece ended with a *tsuyuharai* (which means brushing away the dew) in three breaths.

Thus the discussion on the four qualities of Buddha nature or Tathagatagarbha is completed.

The aforesaid examples of *honkyoku* pieces only serve to demonstrate the understanding of Zen and esoteric Buddhist principles but do not mean that if one plays or listens to these pieces, they will experience any sort of enlightenment. However, the author hopes this article will throw light on the understanding of the philosophy of Buddha nature, or Tathagatagarbha, as the centrality of Buddhist teachings and recommend better appreciation of the *Zenshakuhachi*.

5. Concluding Remarks

A final remark is made on the first Fuke temple, the Myoan-ji, and the *shakuhachi*.

Myoan-ji (明暗寺), as the founding temple for Zen *shakuhachi*, has “brightness”(明) and “darkness”(暗) as components of its name, which can symbolize sound and silence respectively. “Myoan”(明暗) has the meaning of “cognized” and “hidden”. This refers to a more profound issue, signifying “existing and manifesting” as well as “existing but not manifesting”. The former is the Dharmakaya with the defilement store which is the mind itself, and the latter is the Dharmakaya itself, which is the inconceivable state of the Buddha’s inner, self-realization wisdom. The Zen objective of understanding the mind is to “cognize” and to see the essential nature to experience the “hidden”. This is in accordance with the philosophy of Tathagatagarbha.

A special *shakuhachi* with no hole for fingering appears as just a bamboo stem. It sounds with only one note. It implies that the natural wisdom of Buddha nature has only one taste⁵⁶. Hence, it is said as *ichionjobutsu* – to attain enlightenment with only one sound.

⁵⁵DaijiEkai (died 788) also called Ta-chuHui-hai was an influential Chinese Zen master who wrote “A Treatise on the essence of Sudden Awakening”.

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⁵⁶ One taste refers to the state of "one-ness only" beyond all relativity. It is the ultimate non-conceptuality. In the analogy of TV, any TV image appearing on the TV screen will have the same nature with the TV screen. One sound is the sound of "one-ness only".