



the empty bell

Blowing Zen:
Finding an Authentic Life
by Ray Brooks

A Book Review by Robert A. Jonas, Ed.D., ©2000

Everyone in late-20th century America and Europe recognizes that our inherited religious institutions have declined dramatically in influence and energy during the last one-hundred years. In the U.S., the constitutional separation of Church and State, a rapidly expanding capitalist-consumer economy and an intensely individualistic, materialist culture, have combined to almost totally marginalize religion and spirituality. Baby boomers who were raised as Jews and Christians have gone East in droves to find some inspiration and peace. In America, attendance at Buddhist retreats in particular is at an all-time high. Thousands of people show up for all the Dalai Lama's talks. If urban book stores have a religion section at all, my guess is that Buddhist books, primarily in the Vipassana (South-east Asian Insight) Japanese Zen and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, outnumber Christian books 4 to 1.

However, some Buddhist traditions have not yet made it through the East-West cultural barrier. For example, in Japan, more people follow the devotional path of Pure Land Buddhism than practice zazen meditation, and yet we in the West hear nothing about the Pure Land. Until now we've also not heard of another curious and powerful path to Buddhist enlightenment, an obscure Japanese spirituality called sui-zen, or "blowing zen". Fortunately, a sui-zen practitioner who also happens to be a good writer has stepped forward to offer the general reader a first-hand account of this strangely attractive tradition.

Ray Brooks' new book, *Blowing Zen: Finding an Authentic Life*. (Tiburon, CA: HJKramer, 2000) is a gem. It's a memoir of his journey from being a denizen of the London nightclub scene to his new-found spiritual life as a first-rate student of the best sui-zen teachers in the world.

From Brooks we learn that the "blowing" aspect of blowing zen refers to an end-blown bamboo flute called the shakuhachi. An early version of this five-holed flute is said to have come to Japan from China in the 8th century. In fact, it arrived about the same time that Zen came to Japan from India by way of China. The shakuhachi was played by court musicians and peasants enjoyed it as a folk instrument but early records show that Buddhist monks took it up as a spiritual tool. In bringing full awareness to each breath, each note, the monk intended and hoped to attain not only a momentary sensation of peace, or merely an aesthetic realization, but rather a complete transformation of mind and heart, what is called in Buddhism, liberation or enlightenment. One hoped to achieve *Itchion jo Butsu* (becoming Buddha in one sound).

For these monks, the chanting of the Buddhist sutras as a meditative practice was replaced by the playing of the shakuhachi. Gradually, these monks gathered themselves under the name of the Fuke school, and soon Fuke monasteries were built. Some monks, named komusō or "monks of emptiness," traveled with their shakuhachis, playing the meditative music as they stood alongside their begging bowls. Gradually, recognizable

pieces of their meditative music, called “honkyoku” (origin music), emerged and were passed on by oral tradition from monastery to monastery, monk to monk.

Today in Japan, the shakuhachi is primarily a “secular” musical instrument played in ensembles with stringed instruments such as the koto and shamisen. And of course, it is still a popular instrument for the layman who plays folk music at family gatherings and festivals. The Fuke sect of Buddhism died out over a century ago, but fortunately, blowing zen has survived. Not in monasteries but rather among lay practitioners (almost entirely men) who have collected and written down hundreds of honkyoku pieces that have ripened in various monasteries around Japan. Sadly, there aren’t many authentic sui-zen teachers today. Since the 1960’s, only a few hundred Westerners have studied the shakuhachi, and fewer still have been interested in the komusô dimension of it. Ray Brooks is one of those few who knew what he wanted and was lucky or graced enough to find and study with several spiritual descendents of the komusô, including two of the best, Yokoyama Katsuya and Nakamura Akikazu.

Ray’s book is a delight to read. The reader learns some history of the shakuhachi and receives a general understanding of the difficult techniques that contribute to its reputation as a “haunting” “dazzling” or “mysterious” instrument. But the strength of Brooks’ book is in its stories. I always love to hear about the adventures of “gaijin”, the Westerners who make their way in Japanese culture by teaching. Brooks’ tellings are often poignant, always compassionate (except perhaps in the case of the Japanese mafioso, the Yakuza), and often tender and beautiful. The reader is treated to one fascinating encounter after another, all told with an extraordinary sensitivity to the sometimes grating and baffling cultural surprises that most visitors to Japan will recognize.

Throughout *Blowing Zen* runs the thread of Brooks’ relationship with his new friend, Ozawa-san, a young Japanese businessman who dabbles at zazen and shakuhachi. In the beginning of the book, Ozawa-san introduces Brooks to the Eastern art forms that will soon become his spiritual and ethical center of gravity, and at the end of the book, Brooks turns to help Ozawa-san by listening deeply and compassionately as Ozawa-san struggles through a depression and career crisis.

Along the way we meet other appealing and intriguing characters: his smart and incredibly supportive wife, Diane (this is one adventurous and truly extraordinary marriage!); the Yakuza lackey he appropriately calls “Yellow Jacket”, Ozawa-san’s old, wise flute teacher, Teruhiko Ota, the curious taxi-cab driver, Perry the Aikido student, and the skilled, knowledgeable and sometimes opinionated flute teachers, Yamada and Sasaki Sensei. Those who play shakuhachi must envy the demanding and yet aesthetically joyous relationships that Brooks develops with Yokoyama Katsuya and Akizuki Nakamura. He is a fortunate man.

As a writer, Brooks strikes me as appropriately humble and self-effacing throughout, even when he is telling us how his teachers praise his work. He seems to have benefited by the Buddhist discipline of training the mind to neutralize self-oriented thoughts. This frees him to tell funny stories—often at his own expense—that don't gloss the genuine human suffering that runs like a continuous river through every ordinary experience. His comical stories about busking (playing on the street for money), encountering Yokoyama for the first time, and keeping his head in the midst of a kidnapping by the violent and drunken Yakuza are painted with a gentle wash of humor in the best tradition of a particular Japanese aesthetic called wabi-sabi, noticing the delicate beauty in messy situations.

By the end of the book you begin to appreciate how well, how deeply, Brooks has integrated some truly beautiful Japanese sensibilities into his own life. As a Western man, he does not seem to be plagued by the culturally predictable self-accusation that deep feeling is a weakness. Brooks doesn't say it, but one suspects that the discipline of the shakuhachi has refined, clarified and tempered his emotional life in a Zen sort of way, allowing him to see “what is”, but always in the context of compassion. Of course, with Japanese Zen one always worries that the emotional life will become so refined that it evaporates altogether just when you need it most. I don't know about the real Ray Brooks, but for the Brooks of *Blowing Zen*, this worry seems unfounded. Ray can have feelings, but they are always sensitively understated as when he listens to Ozawa's story and then says, “I felt saddened, even a little helpless, at not being able to suggest anything to relieve Ozawa's frustration.” Of course, American readers, inveterate problem solvers that we are, might wonder why Brooks didn't make some concrete suggestions to his friend. Certainly it is more “Zen-y” to feel sad and helpless and just sit with it until it disappears.

Brooks' authorial benevolence is crystal clear in his touching stories of Mrs. Chen and the old hermit Tibetan monk in Dharamsala. One feels, with Brooks, the inevitability of these meetings, and the precious, fragile gift of friendships that seem to transcend our ordinary experiences of fear, self-doubt, judgment, greed or grandiosity when meeting new people. Rather than claiming the high ground of enlightenment, Brooks gets out of the way, allowing his once-in-a-lifetime characters to speak their truth. So, Brooks relays Mrs. Chen's wisdom to the reader when she explains that the Japanese word *En* means an inevitable or fated meeting between two people “We have to be extremely careful when making new acquaintances,” says Mrs. Chen. “If *en* doesn't exist, cause and effect can sometimes take you down a dark path. I feel that *en* already exists between us.” These are people I can trust.

Here and there, I quibble with Brooks. Mostly he is right-on to pronounce negatively on the Japanese blindness to environmental destruction, and to the average person's need for family time and recreation. He sees clearly the horrible consequences of corporate bondage in his own friend, Osawa-san. Brooks notices and comments on the craziness of fake

Japanese medieval castles and the ubiquitous, giant, and garish pachinko parlors. But I think he loses his grip when he wonders if “these palaces were Japan’s new zendos, or meditation halls” because, he figures, the participants must let their thinking drop away in order to play well. Here, Brooks’ generous spirit goes too far. Certainly, one must focus attention to play pachinko, or violent computer games for that matter, but this is not Buddhism. There is no real discipline of the mind in pachinko, no ethical structure, and it nurtures no vision of connectedness or compassion—all essential elements of any Buddhist school. I’ve been in these parlors in Japan. They are a sink-hole of the human spirit, similar to our Las Vegas-type casinos. When playing the machines, one enters a narrow isolation ward of self-centered stimulus-response behavior. To me pachinko parlors and casinos symbolize the absolute end of civilization. One might forgive Brooks for being kind or subtly ironic, but there is danger in his observation. Too often, Buddhism has been criticized by Westerners for being narcissistic and nihilistic. Too many westerners see Zen as something like playing pachinko and we shouldn’t encourage these stereotypes.

Brooks also rankles when, in speaking with the monk Ota, he says, “The direct understanding I’m talking about, Sensei, doesn’t need the guidance of a psychologist, or some future ideal of self-improvement.” Perhaps, as a psychologist, I take this observation too personally. But over the years I have worked with many clients who meditate. Too often they expect sitting on a cushion (or maybe playing shakuhachi) to resolve all their problems, especially those having to do with difficult relationships. All too often this is not the case. Buddhist meditation can become an escape from relationships and the feelings that arise there. Sometimes we need a trusted counselor to help us sort it out.

Like Brooks, I play shakuhachi in the sui-zen tradition. And like him I would be proud and joyous to see a revitalization of this beautiful aesthetic and spiritual tradition. Still, I doubt if Brooks’ vision of a shakuhachi-induced cultural renaissance will actually happen. Playing the shakuhachi well requires extraordinary commitment, discipline and natural ability. The numbers of those who play will always be small. One can hope that those who do play will be healed, as Brooks apparently was, and that our deepening wisdom will be shared with, and so inspire, others. I expect that his beautiful literary offering will bring sui-zen more to the forefront as a viable spiritual and artistic path for more people.

