



A READER'S JOURNAL

Blowing Zen

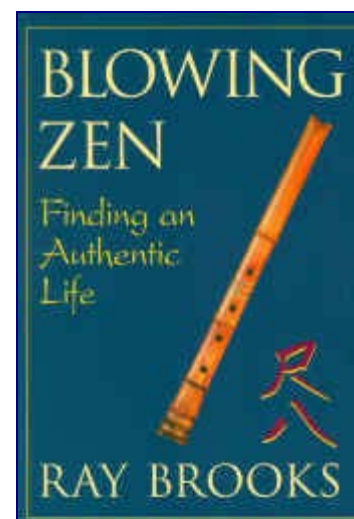
by

Ray Brooks

Finding An Authentic Life

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2003



Like Ray Brooks playing a [shakuhachi flute Zen piece](#), I blew right through this book in three short days around Christmas. Brooks began his adventure as a "Zen tourist" — he went to a three-day Zen meditation retreat where he met a man playing the shakuhachi or Japanese Zen flute, which he had never seen before. Ray was looking for the authentic life, but had no idea what that meant for him. His first hint came to him when during a break between excruciatingly painful zazen sessions, he got up to walk around the Zen garden outside.

[page 7, 8] After washing, I set off down a winding, cobbled path, through the flawlessly manicured garden, passing plants and trees that had succumbed to the discipline of a Japanese Zen gardener. Rocks and stones were deliberately placed, some surrounded by a white gravel that had been raked into ripples of perfection. My eyes were drawn to a few rebellious stones that had escaped onto the path. I wondered if the perfection of the raked gravel symbolized an outward perfection of a Zen mind. The stones on the path: unruly thoughts.

Leaving the retreat Ray began to have "Pipe Dreams" in Chapter Two as he imagined himself playing the shakuhachi. He began a quest to find a flute for himself. He located a CD of Katsuya Yokoyama playing the flute and he likened Yokoyama's shakuhachi music to John Coltrane on the saxophone. Ray's introduction to Coltrane was by a salesman in the record store who described his CD *A Love Supreme* thusly: "Coltrane's blowing the absolute truth."

[page 28] The music I was listening to now was from a completely different genre than Coltrane's *Love Supreme*, but the similarities were striking. Each possessed exquisite tone color and perfect timing. There was that same intensity and seriousness, that same searching introspection. They were both "blowing Zen."

Soon Ray would have his first shakuhachi and would be blowing Zen and wondering why he was blowing Zen. Clearly the tones of the shakuhachi were humming his future and he had stumbled upon a karmic plan he had earlier laid for his own life here on Earth. When someone continues on a path in spite of an obvious lack of progress, one can usually find a karmic plan at work underneath.

[page 32] Why had something as simple as a bamboo flute, of all things, grabbed my attention? It had to be the challenge that was holding my interest because I certainly wasn't making any musical progress. Seven weeks ago I didn't know what a shakuhachi was. . . . This was a chance to study the discipline of working at something every day without expecting instant gratification.

His first teacher or *sensei* was Sasaki who gave Ray the theme that shakuhachi playing could become his "own art". Once Ray asked Sasaki about the certification and grading system of the different shakuhachi Zen sects, and Sasaki went into a furious tearing through his dictionary to express himself succinctly to his errant pupil:

[page 83] "Certification is the mandate of fools," he bellowed out. "Is it possible to have passion without a cause, to play shakuhachi, or do anything for that matter, for its own sake and not merely for status?"

Visibly ruffled, he then went on to tell me the tale of how the rebellious Ikkyu tore up his certificate of confirmation as a Zen master in utter disapproval at the corruption of Zen. Ikkyu also refused to confirm or certify enlightenment in any of his students.

Ray lived in small apartment in Tokyo and needed to find places in which he could practice the shakuhachi, so he located a nearby temple, the Arai Yakushi Temple, and got permission to play his flute. One day he was playing and this older gentleman who spoke very little English came up to him and said, "You ... good sound, good ... pitch." Ray asked him if he played the shakuhachi and the old man nodded, a bit unsure. " 'I hear shakuhachi in market,' he said, smiling and cupping his ear with his hand." So Ray begins showing him his music and tells him about 'Skika no Tone' about two deer, a stag and a doe, calling each other, played by two shakuhachi, and so on.

[page 97] "Your teacher is who?" he asked, halting me in midflow.

"Sasaki Sensei in Hachioji," I replied.

"Sasaki, Sasaki! I am . . . teacher . . . old student him," he said.

"Really? You studied with Sasaki Sensei in Hachioji?" I asked excitedly.

Thus goes it with sparse translations -- the gist of the conversation was inverted. When Ray read the words on his business card, it said, "Katsuya Yokoyama, President of the Shakuhachi Society" and Ray was dumbfounded. He suddenly realized that Yokoyama was Sasaki's teacher, and thought to himself, "I just gave *Katsuya Yokoyama* an introductory lesson!" At this point, I noticed a curious attribution that Ray gave to Sasaki -- it's as if Ray's deep-seated Western sanctification of the process of certification arose from the ashheap to which Sasaki had relegated it. It is equally obvious to me that Sasaki recognized the folly of certification and left Yokoyama for that reason, but note how Ray punctuates the event:

[page 98, 99] Yokoyama was Sasaki's mysterious teacher. Sasaki, wanting to start his own sect, had obviously stopped studying with Yokoyama before he had been certified, hence the hostility against certification.

In any case, Yokoyama good-naturedly used the name "Temple Sensei" to introduce Ray to his other students when Ray took him on as his new sensei, explaining how Ray had given him an introductory lesson in shakuhachi. In the teaching sessions, Yokoyama has a student play a piece and then has him play the piece a second time as Yokoyama plays along with him. Ray says that he could "immediately hear Yokoyama's influence. The performance was hauntingly beautiful. Goose bumps rose on my arms." A beautiful description of Ray's internal experience in *process* - that is, what Ray actually experienced during the flute playing. But when asked a few seconds later his opinion of the piece, Ray could only stammer out, "Er . . . fantastic . . . er . . . very proficient. Very well played." Note the switch into *content* when Ray was asked for his opinion. Content is the province of certification -- it is the reified expression of the process of flute playing or any other activity and it is this very reification that Sasaki rightly labeled, "the mandate of fools." How foolish of Ray to keep his internal direct experience to himself, for us readers, and to verbally express only a judgment on the playing. "Fantastic" had to serve as a meager pointer to the "goose bumps" that the playing created in Ray. (Page 115)

In all great music the musician disappears as a player and enters into the music. There is no content left for the player, only the playing fills the air and the ears and the bodies of the listeners. There is, rightly understood, no piece that can be played the way Beethoven played it because only Beethoven played it that way, only he could be certified, if you will, to be Beethoven. Each piece of music must become the musician's music and the musician must disappear into the music for it to be authentic music. Yokoyama was aware of this as this next passage intimates:

[page 116] "Each phrase is played in one breath," he said. "Intensity of breath and control are most important. Sometimes we need an explosive blast of air, sometimes just a wisp. The beauty of the piece relies on the quality of your tone, color, perfect timing, and space." He then said it was important for each piece to be interpreted by the individual, becoming the player's own piece of music.

In the art of Japanese calligraphy we can find and appreciate the frozen process of the artist's brush. When Ray played with Yokoyama the first time, he used this as a metaphor to describe the subtle playing of his new sensei:

[page 119] This time we played in unison. The gravity of his first note startled me, and by the second line I couldn't hear myself. I watched his fingers and head movements intently. Where each of my notes ended abruptly his finished in perfect pitch and were barely audible, the effect like the final stroke of a calligrapher's brush.

One day Ray visited the Zuisenji Temple and following a trail of incense, he walked into the cemetery. He met a mourner there and explained to her, "I followed the smell of the incense and it reminded me of another place and time."

[page 122] "Smells do that. They can release the smallest, forgotten memory," she said, in near-perfect English. . . . "It's a pleasure to talk to someone who appreciates 'listening to incense.'"

When Ray said that he'd never heard that expression before, she told him that *Koh* means incense and that *kohdo* means the "appreciation of incense." She asked him if he had ever heard of *koboku* and explained that it was a type of incense.

[page 124] "Koboku means aromatic wood and comes from fallen trees that have been buried in tropical forests for hundred of years. The resin within the wood becomes thick and hard, and when smoldered on hot embers, has an exquisite fragrance. My husband collected many rare and expensive types of koboku over the years."

Then Mrs. Chen invited Ray to dinner and along the way she explained the Buddhist term *en* to him. Her explanation makes sense if one understands how each person makes plans for this lifetime on Earth during the time between death and a new birth and those plans involve coming to Earth during the same time as the souls one knew during a previous lifetime would be there. This ensures that one would meet these old friends again and be able to interact with them. Karma, rightly understood, makes no sense unless one is able to meet and interact with a person that they had known during a previous lifetime and during the interaction correct any imbalances from the previous meeting. Such karmic meetings can be characterized by the wonderful words that Emerson spoke on friendship, "We will meet as though we met not and part as though we parted not." That's *en*.

[page 131] "En means 'an inevitable connection,' or the reason people are sometimes fated to meet by chance or coincidence. En expresses the existence of relationship. Usually in Japan, relationships are established by a go-between," she explained. "But on rare occasions when we meet someone new, en already exists and can be developed. We have to be extremely careful when making new acquaintances. If en doesn't exist, cause and effect can sometimes take you down a dark path. I feel that en already exists

between us," she said.

Ray began to get better at the shakuhachi and was urged to take his playing public which meant busking for coins in the public areas as indigent musicians in Japan are wont to do, such as Two Tone Tony who knows only two notes on the shakuhachi and played them continuously in front of a subway entrance. Ray became friends with Tony and found him to be well-versed in philosophy and other subjects, a fact belied by his scruffy appearance which tends to bring him coins of pity as much as musical appreciation.

One day as Ray was playing during the cherry blossom festival, large crowds gathered and wanted to take his picture. As he obliged by moving from one side to another, someone shouted that his bag of money had been stolen. Ray was upset, but say, "Shoganai. It's okay." and thought to himself, "So what? It's only money."

[page 160, 161] But soon everyone in the crowd opened their wallets and purses. I protested, but all I could do was watch as the scene unfolded. The young woman who had first spoken to the crowd collected the money and handed it to me. She apologized and said that the thief had not been part of the crowd. I thanked them and bowed, then asked I could play another piece for them.

"Hair! Dozo. Yes, please!" was their unanimous answer.

"What would you like me to play?" I asked

"Amazing Grace," someone called.

Others gave their agreement. I composed myself. No one moved. There was complete silence around me. Passersby, sensing something special, joined in the group. Imagined or real, the air felt charged with the human spirit. The notes drifted into the night air, the breeze carrying them through the darkness.

Next Ray took on a shakuhachi marathon, a self-imposed sixty-day *shugyo*, which means a "practice undertaken as an ascetic path to realization." The form Ray's shugyo took was a daily walk to the top of Mount Takao followed by several hours of shakuhachi playing. As the days grew shorter into November, his hands became very cold as he played, and a remarkable thing happened to him.

[page 170] On these occasions, it was rare for a group of women to pass without stopping and holding my freezing hands in theirs, each taking turns and commenting on how cold mine were. This was the height of generosity, the sharing of warm hands with a stranger.

After a long rainy spell where Ray was restricted to indoor playing, the weather cleared and Ray took another hike to Mount Takao where at noon he liked playing a duet with the noon temple bells.

[page 209] At noon the main temple bell rang, and, as always, I played along with it. If my timing was right, it created an amazing atmosphere, as both my sound and the tolling of the bell blended and echoed across the valley.

Once Ray was accosted by a Japanese hoodlum in a yellow jacket who made him an offer he couldn't refuse: to play for his boss. In spite of Ray's protestations that he spoke no Japanese, sign language and universal gestures make it clear to Ray that he would play. At the gathering of hoods, which filled a banquet room at a nearby restaurant, Ray sat and pretended to neither speak nor understand Japanese, requiring them to use their primitive English skills on him. The boss got up and began to tell a story on "Yellow Jacket" which severely tested Ray's ability to keep from laughing, causing him to attempt to stifle his laughing with mouthfuls of sushi. It seems that YJ had gone shopping for a new pair of denim jeans and tried on one pair that was so tight that when zipped up it caught and imbedded itself into his penis. Unable to remove the zipper, YJ put his coat on to cover his all-too-visible problem and went to pay for

the pair of jeans so he could take it home to remove the zipper. The clerk insisted that he must take off the pants for her to remove the Anti-Theft tag. Finally she had to call the manager to whom YJ very privately explained his predicament. The manager deftly turned off the door alarm so that he could quietly leave with his purchase. At home, YJ still had no success removing the zipper, so he cut away the zipper from the jeans, drank an entire bottle of whiskey, put on new pants and went over to his girl friend's place for her over to remove it, which she does, taking a piece of his private parts with it. At this point in the story, with everyone laughing, the big boss turned to Yellow Jacket and said, "Show us the scar!" This anecdote is so funny that one imagines the book could be made into a movie of which this would be the highlight!

Near the end of the book, Ray returned to Japan and visited the man who first introduced him to shakuhachi during the Zen retreat. Ozawa is very unhappy with his life and could see no way out from the hectic business of his job till some far future retirement day. Ozawa was either busy with his work or dizzy with drink trying to forget work. This seems strikingly similar to many white and blue collar workers in America today, the only difference between the two being the choice of drink: martinis or beer. When Ray suggests that he look at what's behind his misery, Ozawa's explanation is, "We have to go about our business, Ray-san. We have to earn a living. I have not time to look into these things." Ray responds that Ozawa has to be serious if he wants change and sums it up this way, "Seriousness is its own change, Ozawa-san."

[page 225] "What you're saying, Ray-san, reminds me of a Zen story. Perhaps you've heard of it. It's about a monk who somehow, during the night, got lost in a monastery and fell out of a window. Fortunately, he was able to grab the sill and hang on for dear life. After a short while, the pain became unbearable, and there was no choice but to let go. He fell, only to find that he'd been hanging merely three feet from the ground.

Two years later Ozawa's life had turned around for the better, and like in the Zen story, it happened just at the point where life had become unbearable for him. It was as though his karmic debt had been paid and the dungeon master of life had come into to turn him loose from his dire straits into a world of happiness.

[page 255, 256] He hadn't run away and joined a monastery, as he had once half-jokingly wished, but ironically, had been made redundant when the company he worked for was dissolved after being caught in one of the many corruption scandals in Japan. He was now running his aging uncle's tourist inn in Kyoto and had never been happier.

In a return visit to Tokyo, Ray joined Nakamura for a recital. His teacher introduced him to the students by saying that Ray had given him a present that left him speechless, and he held up Ray's new [CD of shakuhachi music](#). "This is the result of Ray's diligent efforts," he said.

In this last paragraph of the book, Ray refers to Mount Takao as one might refer to a friend by adding the Japanese word *san* to the end of his name. The equivalent in English would be like calling the mountain Mister Takao out of respect.

[page 257] The next day I didn't have any engagements, so I did what I loved best on my visits to Japan. I caught the train to Takao-san, hiked up the mountain to my cedar tree, and played shakuhachi.

[~ See also A Zen Wave by Robert Aitken ~](#)

*Now! Days come, days go
A gecko on the window;
A smile is soul food.*

