MUKYOKU: INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS FOR TAIMU [OR HOCCHIKU OR SHAKUHACHI]

PART I

FORMING THE EMBOUCHURE: STEP BY STEP

1) Relax your face, look straight ahead, lips together, teeth slightly apart as if humming, "Hmmmm."
2) Maintain slight pressure of the lips against each other and let a small stream of air escape or be **gently** pushed out of the very center of the lips. Mentally, keep the stream the diameter of a coffee stirrer-straw; when looking in a mirror, it should appear as a sideways grain of rice- or orzo-sized slit (not a round hole).
3) Do not make an "O" shape, do not push the lips out or away from the teeth. It will be like blowing out a candle at close range, but more gently; it is not going to be like whistling.
4) Practice aiming this air stream at the center of your open hand held 4, 6 or 8 inches away in front of your mouth. Move your hand slowly up and down and follow the center of your palm with the air stream.
5) When starting the exhale (after a proper inhale: expanding as low as possible), keep the lips together, force the gentle air stream out with a "P" or "Phew" sound, aiming the air at the blowing edge. [This "Phew" sound is just for very beginning sounds and should not be used during pieces, exercises or even Long Tones in general, except when you need to remind yourself of the steps of embouchure formation listed here.]

PLACING THE UTAGUCHI, FLUTE AND BLOWING EDGE INTO THEIR BEST POSITIONS

0) Remember: you are splitting the air stream in half on the blowing edge, you cannot blow **into** the flute, nor can you blow absolutely **across** the utaguchi opening and expect an efficient or resonant tone.
1) Try placing the blowing edge in between your closed lips. (Either the flute will be lifted for this, or your head will tilt down.)
2) Start the directed air stream with "Phew" as described above, and gradually increase the distance between the lips and the blowing edge, remembering that you should direct the air stream at the exact **edge**, and not inside of or over top of it. Try different chin placements and pressures.
3) In general, the lips, and their surrounding muscles especially, can stay flexible as long as they do not push out into strange or rounded shapes. The bigger the flute (or the lower the pitch), the less tightly pulled back the corners of the lips will appear, at least at first. In terms of what your embouchure develops to look like from the outside, this is an area of personal experimentation and an important matter to work on with your teacher's guidance.
4) The angle, rotation, and tilt of the flute all have a big effect on the successful air stream direction and tone. Go for centered symmetry at first, but it may end up looking off-center or asymmetrical when you get your best tone.

Embouchure Formation and Directing the Air Stream
Part II: Taimu

Shakuhachi embouchure development is a long, disciplined, and often paradoxical process. Much reward and frustration are ahead of the new player. This path, and its pleasures and pains, can only truly be known by other shakuhachi players. The large utaguchi on Taimu makes it almost like starting over, and it is a test of the adaptability of the established shakuhachi embouchure to get the raw, glowing Taimu tone. In terms of the physiological adjustment, it can be likened to the change from violin to cello; from trumpet to trombone; from a sports car to a conversion van. The category of flute is the same, but the volume is increased, and the capacity and purpose is slightly shifted.

The chin placement is a major consideration in this process as Taimu vary a great deal among themselves as to thickness. Certainly all of them are thicker than the usual shakuhachi diameters, and although this thicker bamboo may feel comfortable on the chin, you may also feel, perhaps, that the blowing edge is now too far away: just slightly out of reach.

For all of the above reasons, I can recommend approaching the process of "getting your sound" (which really breaks down into 1-directing your air stream and 2-finding the correct flute/arm/chin position) slowly, methodically and exclusively. In other words: hold the flute comfortably in order to adjust to its angle and its relation to your chin/lips/head. For instance: put both hands on top, or hold the bottom of the flute underhand: whatever it takes to focus on the **flute** position and not the **finger** placement yet.

Use the notes "i"  or "ri"  or "chi" 

for getting your
first Taimu sounds.
[note: You can press on trying to get Ro for 8 hours a day, but let me know the address of the hospital you end up in so I can send you a "Git Well! (Told Ya So!)" card and flowers.]

In spite of the size and shape differences, Taimu and shakuhachi embouchure and air stream directing are essentially the same.

1) Experiment, stay flexible, enjoy the process. This could take years of attaining, dissolving, and back again: keep it fun.
2) Listen to your teacher.
3) Watch your favorite players live and on youtube and imitate their facial/muscular approach. There's a lot going on inside, but luckily on flute we can see the facial muscles and lip-shape by observing closely.
4) Remember the "Total Temporary Breakdown of the System" axiom. [See "Additional Ideas…" section III.]
5) Long Tones, Long Tones, awareness, and Long Tones.
6) Be as aware as possible of your posture, breathing, the flute position, and the pressure of it against the chin.
7) Every so often reset, relax and reference what your face is doing by intentionally altering your lips a new way.

Additional Ideas and Training for Taimu and mukyoku

I. Taimu Special Topics [Breathiness of Tone; The Wrath of Kan; Air Volume; Chin Physiology; Range]

II. The Pseudo-shamanic Approach and Other Observations

III. The Total Temporary Breakdown Axiom

IV. Practice Guide: Approaching a New Piece

V. Special Theories and Methods [Advanced work on inner mouth shape and tone resonance; Stretching]

I. Taimu Special Topics

Most Taimu I have played have some idiosyncrasies that are worth making note of as you build your connection with a Taimu and work on these or any other pieces. Most of these traits occur as Ken departs from the "standard" bore width-to-length ratio used for most shakuhachi flutes: Taimu are always wider, sometimes much wider, than shakuhachi. In this way, they are comparable to most hocchiku. Also, like hocchiku, Taimu maintain a *jinashi* (without *ji*: only the inner bamboo surface) interior and generally have no utaguchi inlay. The walls of the flute are thick, the root ends are heavy, and the whole thing becomes more of a club or small tree. Already shakuhachi are thicker and heavier than most "world" flutes, especially most transverse bamboo flutes, but the Taimu and the hocchiku take this thickness to a new level. The main difference between these two larger flute types is in the finger-hole size and the volume capabilities of the completed flute. How Ken accomplishes the glowing, full quality of Taimu and exactly how he tunes them so well remains a mystery to me, but I have been enjoying exploring the results.

Breathiness of Tone: Part One: the short version (see 4th part of Section II for the rambling version)

There is a process to focusing your air stream and refining your tone, but there cannot be one formalized standard for the kind of tone you will end up with because a) people are different and b) flutes are different. The best tone is simply the best version of the interface between the two. Some Taimu are quite windy, and others prefer a refined pure tone, some prefer one tone in *otsu* and not in *kan*, and some are the opposite of that; some Taimu can achieve both aesthetics through a slight tilt, expansion or change in air-flow or approach, and some vary slightly note-to-note. You can also count on your own assessment of these details to change over time. The basic differences between Taimu and hocchiku can be spelled out as: volume potential, tuning and adaptable breadth of expression. You can generally achieve a louder core tone on Taimu when desired.

To achieve and improve your best possible tone on any wind instrument, there is a law of efficiency involved. We know that the physics of flute playing demand that we actualize the law of least effort as much as possible: the work is generally on narrowing the lip opening so that a larger percentage of your out-breath is converted into sound. Beyond that, your tone should feel the most right to you and the only way to assess this is to ask: is this the tone of the flute itself? In other words, are you interfacing so completely with the flute that you are symbiotically creating the best tone possible for the flute and for yourself at this moment? The adventure of flute training is that this process is never complete, and there is ultimately no absolutely "correct" result. [Except for the result your teacher wants, of course…]

The Wrath of "kan": attaining and tuning high notes on Taimu

One of the risks in increasing the bore width on these flutes is that it throws the tuning ratios and pitch relationships within the flute into new territory. There is a width beyond which certain notes will no longer be part of the primary (minor pentatonic) scale. On the longest and widest (2.8) Taimu that I work with, ro-no-kan (second register Ro) is quite sharp, and if I want to use the note as Ro, I have to play it in meri position. The next note to suffer is the next octave of the Ro pitch, ha-no-an (a.k.a. go-no-ha). On this same 2.8 (which was originally "not for sale" due to tuning issues, but it's an amazing flute), I cannot get this pitch through either the all fingers down with 5-hole cracked fingering, or with i-no-kan [no fingers, just the 2-hole or just the 1 & 2-holes fingering]. The flute is just too wide to get this pitch, it is already a half-step or more too high when the usual fingerings are used. Therefore, be aware that the wider your Taimu, the more adapting you might need to do on these pitches specifically. On the 2.45 (which has the widest utaguchi of the 4 flutes I train on), the i-no-kan is very fragile. Although it comes out in tune, it will not come out at all unless I approach it like a "Yin" or meri-pitch by backing off the air power for it.

The best reference tone for *kan* on any Taimu (or any shakuhachi that is new to you) is ou-no-san ( ) (a.k.a. san-no-ou) the upper octave pitch that comes out when you cover all holes except for 3 and play strong and in kari-position. The pitch equals hi-meri but it really likes to pop out as the strongest high note. This method was directly recommended to me by Chikuzen Sensei and it really works. Don't even worry about tuning yet, just find the *kan* sound with this fingering and then work from there. The *kan* notes on Taimu are described as thick-walled. They are denser and less "flutey" than on shakuhachi and the raw bamboo of the utaguchi may add a grainy or windy quality to the high pitches at first. You can eventually shape them to be more brassy, windy, or flutey as you develop them.

Another great reference tone for *kan* on Taimu is a note which is rare in other shakuhachi music that I have used a lot in mukyoku. Often referred to as "alternate Tsu-meri" in the upper register, I have used the notation of or "shi-go-no-ha otsu," which I have seen used in Fukuda Rando and dokyoku notation. Because this is a Yang or strong pitch, I do not like looking at a Tsu-meri symbol when I play it even though the pitches are equivalent: they are very different in tone and fingering. Like san-no-ou, this is played in kari-position with strong air, except now only 4 and 5 are open. (Because of the kari-position, this *otsu* version of shi-go-no-ha is one half step higher than the same note in *kan* if it is played in meri or slight meri-position depending on the flute and how much you crack the 5 or 4 hole up there.) This pitch with this fingering is a great option on Taimu when half-holing and meri-ing can start to cause real discomfort if you aren't careful. For instance, as an alternative to Ro to Tsu-meri played in *kan*, instead you can play "I" (1 & 2 down only) and then add 3 and kari a bit and you have the same pitch sequence. However, in point of fact, the note that comes out is not actually an *otsu* note: it is in *kan*. You can tell because it has a *kan* quality that is not there if you kari real far on I, for instance (getting the same Tsu-meri pitch). Thus, we use an *otsu* symbol in its notation, but in fact you can work on your lower *kan* tone by exercising on this note.

THE AIR VOLUME ISSUE (a.k.a. "Gosh, you must have a lot of air to play those!")

The physics of wind instruments is kind of a peripheral concern of mine: I explore it when it seems like it is useful and can provide new perspectives to expand my playing or my students' playing. I would not, however, feel totally comfortable giving what could be considered a thorough, well researched, or factual lecture on the topic. Scientists who have worked in the field of acoustics and interviewed or worked with musicians of all levels know that many of our highly-valued pedagogical methods or cherished personal theories on what is actually happening are sometimes completely false from a scientific point of view. The important phrase here is "point of view." For instance, if the goal is to achieve a glowing golden tone on, say, the note Chi (a fine goal on Taimu), and you achieve it 90% of the time by visualizing actual liquid gold filling up your throat, nose, and mouth and propelling it out into the flute then: mission accomplished. It doesn't matter if "scientifically" there's no actual liquid gold involved, just as it doesn't matter if you can truly "scientifically" breath into your belly, move your soft-palette, dilate your sinuses, or other methods that can get you positive results in flute training.

The same goes for the air volume issue. Why do we hear that it takes more air to play a flute than it does to play a tuba? This seems to contradict logic, and maybe it's a good legend to make flute players feel more awesome, but likely this was either a) some special scientific measurement involving air that turned out to produce unexpected results and got paraphrased many times or b) a visualization mechanism employed by flute teachers (or tuba teachers) to illustrate or motivate a certain point about air support. Certainly to get an air stream through a tube you will need a slightly greater volume of air if the tube is slightly longer, and the same goes if it is slightly wider since the air is probably bouncing around in there and not taking a straight path (like water would).

But what vibrates in a flute to get a sound is the air that is *already inside* of the flute, not the air that we split over the edge and send about half down the flute and half out into the room (give or take: especially on shakuhachi this 50/50 split is always getting altered). This air stream we work so hard on just sets the pre-existing air column in motion. If this "inside the flute" air volume is bigger does it take more "effort" from the split air stream to set it vibrating? Probably a little bit more, yes. If we need to get our air stream all the way down the flute in order to get our best tone, will it take more volume of air on a fatter, bigger flute? Possibly, but the actual volume increase is not so much as to really feel like "whoa, I am using sooo much more air!"

My main point here is this: the reason you might feel this sentiment when switching from shakuhachi to Taimu (or from Western flute to shakuhachi) is not primarily because of the increase in volume of air inside the flute. This might account for 10% of your efforts and adaptation to the bigger flute. The primary aspects that you are challenged with in this situation are: the new utaguchi shape and size; and holding the flute itself; the new feel of the flute position (both on your face and in your hands); and the realignment and refocusing of your air stream to get the most efficient out-breath-to-tone conversion possible. This repositioning/realignment is at least 90% of your effort, especially if you are already an adept shakuhachi player, the increase in air volume inside the bigger flute is not your primary challenge. Unless visualizing this increase truly helps you get your best sound, in which case it becomes true.

THE CHIN INDENTATION ISSUE [a.k.a. "My chin is too flat to play shakuhachi as good as Watazumi"]

It has been proposed that Watazumi excelled at the one million different flutes and laundry poles that he played due to his specific chin physiology. I can't remember where I read that, and I am not sure if there is any truth to it, but I can say that thinking about your own chin skeletal structure can help you improve your flute position and tone. I am not sure if there is a "chin type" that makes someone more adaptable to shakuhachi or Taimu than another type, but where the flute meets your face is a very important region in the development and evolution of your sound.

In fact, the extreme difference in size and shape of the blowing end between shakuhachi and Taimu is probably **the** most important difference to accommodate and focus on. The ideal is to somehow know exactly where the blowing edge is and consistently line that up with your lip opening no matter what the other side of the utaguchi opening is shaped or sized like. This is not so easy to do in the earliest stages of playing, so by thinking about where the flute hits your chin you can get practical insights into how to shift and improve your tone.

One common tendency for beginners is to play quite flat on the flute. This is not a big deal in the early stages (except for when trying to play with others and figure out your tuning) and you can always improve this as your tone and embouchure muscles are better trained. Playing flat is generally the result of being too close to the blowing edge with your lips. This is a natural tendency since one of the great challenges of flute playing is accurately bridging the gap between your lips and the flute edge. It is a type of target practice, and you naturally feel that by getting closer to the edge, your aim will become more accurate. In a way, this is also good practice for the eventual development of meri-notes, but **only** if you remain willing to continuously evolve your embouchure. If you do not, then this first mode of playing flat will only lead to tiny sounds and out of tune playing.

To return to the chin: tiny fractions of change in position can make your sound great or non-existent. This is the challenge for beginner flute players of any type of flute. Only you can work slowly and patiently on the best position for your Taimu blowing end to push into your chin. Another tendency is to start in a good position and slowly--due to tension in the arms created by the effort exerted to play a song, passage or note--the flute shifts on the chin: usually upwards or at a slightly rotated tilt (it will generally rotate in the direction of your lower [usually right] hand). Like all wind instruments, the greater the volume you seek to generate, the greater the pressure will be in certain areas. On shakuhachi type flutes, these areas will be: the abdomen (diaphragmatic air support), the lip muscles (creating the focused air stream), the mouth interior (expanding to maximum size for tone resonance), and the flute pressing against the chin. Stay flexible and periodically reassess how much pressure you are using to push the flute into your chin: this effects tuning, tone, and fatigue.

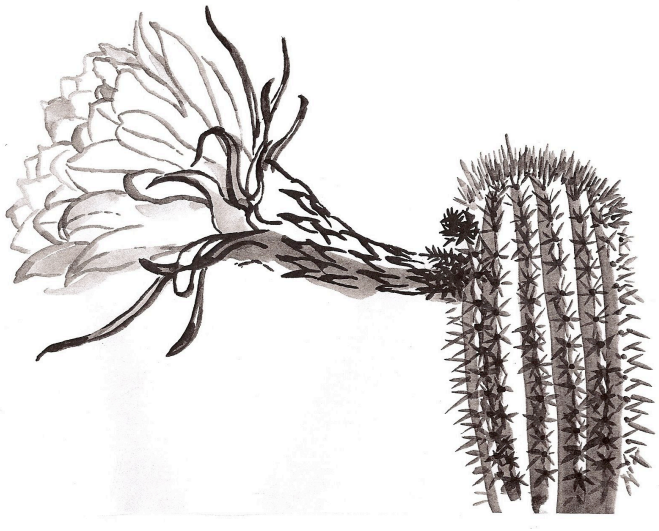
RANGE

Some players really like to explore the far upper reaches of altissimo (very high, 3rd octave and beyond) pitches on their flutes. I am not one of these players, although I do enjoy training on the upper harmonics (overtones) of all fingerings on the flutes, I do not necessarily keep track of what pitches are coming out and how well in tune they are or what to call them. If you like playing high notes on big flutes then I recommend exploring this territory more and perhaps sharing your results.

II. The Pseudo-shamanic Approach and Other Observations

The Yin-Yang theories at work in mukyoku

Taniguchi Sensei refers to "plus" and "minus" notes in shakuhachi playing. This is "strong" and "weak" or "Yang" and "Yin" or, generally, "regular" and "meri-" notes. In Taoist thought, these are the first energies to emerge from the Void. For the human mind to experience or examine anything in the phenomenal world means to look at Yin and Yang. If we were allowing psychological-philosophy to dictate our experience and approach to Taimu or shakuhachi playing, then we could explore the meaning, significance and usefulness of contemplating Yin, Yang and balance in our playing, and perhaps someone will select this kind of approach. However, in the spirit of operating primarily from the notion of Zen as "direct experience" and *not* as an abstract philosophy or symbolic ideology, the approach that I have taken for mukyoku places a stronger emphasis on the Yang or strong aspects of the Taimu: not because it cannot play "weak" notes well, but because, to me, it seems to offer such a range of possibilities with its "strong" notes which act as gateways to the rest of its tones. Most shakuhachi players can attest to the challenges of meri-notes: "Yin" playing is a challenge that improves as the player matures and has a stronger connection to the flute and the repertoire. Because these pieces are an introduction to making sounds and music on Taimu, there is a purposeful de-emphasis on weak or meri-notes, and this was an intentional decision made for philosophical, practical and musical reasons. The benefits to breath manipulation and melodic variety that come from working on meri-notes are significant; however, on Taimu, at first, there is a significant physical demand on the head, neck, arms and hands when attempting too much rapid alternation between "plus" and "minus" notes. Therefore, mukyoku are designed in favor of comfortable physical execution and stronger tones. There are plenty of honkyoku that offer more "Yin" notes should anyone feel drawn to exploring more of that side of Taimu sounds: the flutes are ready for it if you are.



The Pseudo-shamanic Approach

What I am hoping to encourage in this section is your own personal approach to the flutes that emphasizes the non-thinking mind, the intangible, the peripheral and the ephemeral. The prefix "pseudo-" means "false; pretending to be something it is not." A Shaman is a human who acts as an intermediary between the spirit or invisible realm and the human, mundane and material realm. There are Shaman equivalents in every ancient culture and they have various abilities and roles depending upon the culture and the time in history that you choose to focus on; however, the basic idea that a human can have esoteric, hidden inner abilities is what I find inspiring. This is the basic motivation behind every occult path and every human attempt at spiritual refinement: the idea that we can develop something within us that is almost impossible to put into words or to learn about in the same way that we learn how to use tools and language. I have no authentic training as a shaman, hence the "pseudo-" prefix, but I have an intuition that the primary importance of the sounds and music that we can make on these flutes might lie just outside the "regular" boundaries of music creation. Dealings with the invisible can often lead to actual or perceived charlatanism. In this case, I am using the pseudo- to alleviate any pressure of authenticity, and the final and only judge of this is you: the player. This is not an exact practice that can be subjected to empirical development and verification at this time, but that doesn't mean that it is not worthwhile.

Flutes appear since ancient times in connection with the spirit world, and this is likely due to the fact that the substance that is vibrating when flutes make sounds is air: it is not metal, reed, string, membrane or any other substance that you can hold in your hand. This adds an additional connection to the invisible world. All sounds are perceived as vibrations of air particles, which then engage our hearing apparatus and neurology, but in general something that we can touch has been set in motion in order to start these vibrations. This is not so with any flute or whistle.

Ultimately, we hear musical structures with a similar part of our brain that constructs stories and solves problems and thinks in pasts and futures. You don't have to delve very deeply into Taoist, Vedic, or Zen philosophy to discover that it is primarily this part of our brain and our unique ability of reflexive self-awareness that set a myriad of contradictions and obstructions in motion. It is the one function of our organism that has grown out of proportion with itself and has led us into a state of imbalance and disharmony. One path back to balance, then, could be an intentional approach that de-emphasizes this ability in certain circumstances. One such circumstance could be flute playing, for example.

If you can empty your mind as you pick up the flute, and have the intention of continuing this emptying process as you play sounds on it, you can be said to be practicing "pseudo-shamanic" flute playing. Taken to its conclusion, this could lead to the ultimate emancipation of sound from music. Therefore, these pieces can be approached as a bridge from music to sound: the music is eventually left behind. By leaving behind notions of musical structure you are free to explore sound, the invisible and other realms. None of this exploration is meant to be "listened" to by a separate, third-party audience as is the case with most music performances, but if the journey is of benefit to you, then it will also benefit others whether they are listening to the sound or not.

GETTING YOUR HEAD OUT OF THE NOTATION AND BACK TO THE AIR-STREAM

The practice of memorization in any kind of pre-composed music is very valuable. Training in honkyoku requires memorization and the player can only achieve a certain depth through memorization. Performing from memory and maintaining an absolutely present, spontaneous approach to this performance is one of the great paradoxical achievements of performers at the highest level of their craft. We use notation in order to hand songs down in a written medium and to help the training process. Also, because the rational mind is overactive and constantly seeking structure and riddles, we provide a pre-composed piece for the mind to sink its teeth into: there is structure and flow to it, and this satisfies the mind. Using the piece as a vehicle, we can focus on absolute sound production: breath-support and fullness of tone. Our primary attention is on the successful stringing together of various sounds with the breath as the fuel and the piece as the vehicle. Once we can stop looking at the notation, all of the considerable effort that was devoted to our visual sense and the language/notation processing centers of the brain can be redistributed to other areas that more directly support our tone, the exploration of sound, and the effective rendering of a specific composition or the effective spontaneity of an improvisation. In addition, there are great benefits to your posture as a shakuhachi or Taimu player when you stop looking at notation.

Breathiness of Tone: Part Two: Knowing your personal musical aesthetic

The amount of breathiness or windiness that is acceptable in a flute tone is very subjective and changes drastically between different types of flutes, sometimes due their design differences, sometimes due to the differences in musical styles in which they are used, and sometimes just because of someone's personal preference. In Western flute playing, for instance, the aesthetic is for a very pure, crystal clear tone that can be both penetrating or floating in quality and is generally very rich in overtones throughout all registers. The highest quality orchestral flute players will have no more trace of breath or airiness in their tone than a piano does, and if it is called for in a modern piece to accomplish this, they generally will find it to be quite challenging as their training has been in the one direction of purifying the tone. In spite of the frequent appearance of *mura iki* and other breath effects in shakuhachi music, in general the aesthetic is now approaching that of Western flute, especially amongst *jiari* (with *ji* or specially crafted non-bamboo inner surface) shakuhachi players.

On some level, this is an objectively accurate approach to high-quality flute playing on any kind of flute. To improve and achieve your best possible tone on any wind instrument, there is a law of efficiency, a law of least effort, involved. If you puff your cheeks out while playing a saxophone, for instance, this is unlikely to improve your tone and it simply means that some of your air is not being used to directly enter into the reed/mouthpiece opening of the instrument, and this can be seen as inefficient (in addition to causing, because of the pressure, bits of your cheeks to start peeling away where they meet the gums). As you work through the beginning stages of flute playing, most of the effort is not in attaining the correct kind of breath support (although this will help later) as it is on other wind instruments. Most people have enough air power to fuel a flute with no problem, except that it is very difficult at first to achieve the correct 1) air focus and 2) flute blowing edge position with accuracy and consistency. Your lip shape (embouchure) and the position of the whole flute are your primary concerns for a long while until you are able to get any sound at all to reliably emanate from the flute. After you get your initial sounds, the work is then on narrowing the lip opening even more in order that a larger percentage of your out-breath is converted into sound. This keeps you from getting too dizzy, allows you to play longer musical phrases and also refines your tone and decreases the breathiness or fuzziness of it. Thus, the ongoing process of refining and purifying your tone is a natural process for any aspiring flute player of any kind.

However, some players simply continue to work with the very same embouchure that got them their initial sounds. They refine this as much is it can be, which is generally limited in some way, and then get on with trying to play music or repertoire with this kind of tone production. It is much more likely that as a developing player you will need to completely reform and constantly recondition your embouchure over a period of 3 to 7 years as a shakuhachi player, and slightly less time, depending on your goals, on most other flutes. Interior mouth shape, tongue position, diaphragmatic breath support, vibrato, dynamics: these are the tone-improving pursuits of the advancing intermediate player who has a core functioning embouchure that is also flexible enough to adapt, assist and accommodate any new improvements in these other areas.

All this being said, some flutes are windier than others no matter how much you refine the breath-to-tone efficiency through embouchure improvements and air focus. Ideally, those who play or listen to shakuhachi related music have an open-minded aesthetic that is not bound by any kind of musical perfectionism or elitist approach to an instrument with very old and very mysterious origins. Just like we can never know what Beethoven's Ninth Symphony actually sounded like to its premier audience, we can never know first-hand what the shakuhachi tones of medieval Japan were actually like. What we can do is craft our own personal aesthetic to be as parallel as possible to the spirit in which we suspect that the flutes were originally approached with.

Where that leaves us then is back in the pseudo-Zen, "anything goes" arena. Not quite, as we know the physics of flute playing demand that we actualize the law of least effort as much as possible. Beyond that, your tone should feel the most right to you and the only way to assess this is to ask: is this the tone the flute itself has? In other words, are you interfacing so completely with the flute that you are symbiotically creating the best tone possible for the flute and for yourself at this moment? The adventure of flute training is that this process is never complete. It is an exact parallel to personal spiritual development: all of your actualization happens in this moment, but there is also an aspect of ongoing, slow, steady evolution and purification that continues as long as you draw breath and walk the planet.

All this is to say: some Taimu are quite windy, and others prefer a refined pure tone, some prefer one tone in *otsu* and not in *kan*, and some are the opposite of that. Some Taimu can achieve both aesthetics through a slight tilt, expansion or change in air-flow or approach. The great advantage then of Taimu over hocchiku can be spelled out as volume potential, tuning and adaptable breadth of expression. Most hocchiku are played and approached as giant "meditation" flutes, which is generally a euphemistic way of saying, "No one should ever hear that in performance. Just play it on your cushion when no one is around: maybe endlessly working out the "riddle" of getting it to "sound good" might lead you to Nirvana by way of exasperation." Once again, this really depends on your own personal goals and aesthetics.

For me, I have been through the ringer and trudged up and down and around and around the endless cycles of musical achievement, perfectionism and competitiveness just long enough (27 years as of this writing) to have let go of most external ideals when I need or want to. In this way, I truly can be as moved and inspired by frogs in the distance, gusts of wind, irreverent 4-year-olds hooting on recorders or banging on drums, 66-year-old beginner shakuhachi players or 110 decibel electric doom metal as I am by any formal performance by a "virtuoso" on any instrument. I am not suggesting that to be "authentic" a person needs to open up their tastes in exactly this fashion, but for me I do not necessarily have the same critical judgment of chaotic, poorly executed or out-of-tune music as almost any respectable professional musician would. I just no longer have the capacity to maintain unfounded standards when really the only assessment to be made is the state of mind in which sound creation is approached. If the intention is authentic and pure to any degree, then the results are self-evident: judging and categorizing become irrelevant. The sound is an intangible, temporary blip of suchness that could only have happened under those exact circumstances. This is also pretty much the definition of existence as far I as I have discovered so far.

III. The Total Temporary Breakdown Axiom

This is an Axiom that I am developing in order to allay frustration in developing wind instrument students and help them to trust in the unknown and unpredictable. It can probably be applied to instrumental students in general (and probably even more so to vocal students) but for now my focus as well as my evidence is derived from and directed back into the wind instrument learning process. See if anything like this has ever happened to you: one day, your upper register is working nicely, reliable, with good sound and decent connection between notes. After playing for 20 minutes or so, you go to get some water. When you come back, only low notes will come out and the flute will not make even one reliable high note for you. This had nothing to do with the water, and perhaps nothing to do with putting the flute down and picking it up again. If we remember the Total Temporary Breakdown Axiom at this point, we will continue our practice session with a positive attitude and just play what we can, working on other things like dynamics in the low register, phrasing, breath support and rhythm or pacing. There are three possible outcomes the next time you play: you still can't play well, the high register returns the same as before slowly or suddenly, OR, very suddenly your upper register is coming out with an entirely new kind of ease and beauty of tone that you have never produced or personally experienced before. This is the most auspicious outcome from The Total Temporary Breakdown Axiom.

Trusting in the relative mystery of all things and the possibility that some of the most beneficial and important things to us cannot be seen or talked about can greatly increase your success in shakuhachi and Taimu training. There is transformation, and then there is metamorphosis. Transformation is the general term for change, but the more extreme change in structure and behavior is metamorphosis. When this occurs in amphibians and insects, the change seems miraculous and barely explainable: in fact, the cells that occur within some chrysalises are known as "imaginal" cells: they are undifferentiated and can become anything. Somehow, biological programming (genes, etc.) determine what these cells will become, but in the meantime the organism, formerly a very real creature who was recently out and about in the world, is completely incapacitated and can often do no more than wriggle within the chrysalis. Taking this as an analogy to our own personal evolution, transformation or metamorphosis, we should not expect predictable and linear results from our work. In other words, there will be times when the whole system and all we have worked on seems to breakdown completely, take a turn for the worse, or otherwise fail in some way. This is temporary, and your intention, attitude and fortitude at these junctures has a great influence on what happens next. Wind instruments in general, and flutes in particular, do not respond well to overt frustration because this places tension in the wrong areas for successful tone production. Your ability to persist in the face of failure will lead to more success in your flute pursuits and it also trains you in a healthier approach to existence in general.

IV. Practice Guide: Approaching a New Piece

It can sometimes work to just jump right in reading and playing a brand new piece. This approach can work with most mukyoku in terms of getting a sense of the phrasing and the pitches that are being used. The sections with a pulse or rhythm notation are likely to be more challenging to sight-read than the free phrases, and a slow tempo is always recommended for reading new rhythmic phrases. Each player's ability will determine how much you should study the score and how much you should study and compare your phrases to the recording, and some amount of both is encouraged.

Once you get down to really wanting to learn a piece thoroughly and delve deeper into the possibilities it might have for you, one effective method is what might be called Phrase by Phrase study. There are two modes of this method: with the recording and without the recording. Without the recording, it is up to you to slow your whole process down and simply play one phrase at a time, about 2 to 8 times, then play the next phrase in the same way, then put the two phrases together. Repeat this process for up to 4 or 6 phrases, or any other section of the piece that seems to make melodic sense to you. With the recording, you will play the phrase from the recording, pause the recording, play the phrase yourself, repeat this process, then play the phrase 2-4 times on your own. Utilizing the recording for larger sections will take more rewinding and pausing than training without the recording, but it will save you work on pacing in the future. [If you happen to have a flute in the key of the recording you are listening to, then you can add a third step of playing along with the phrase(s).]

Long Tones

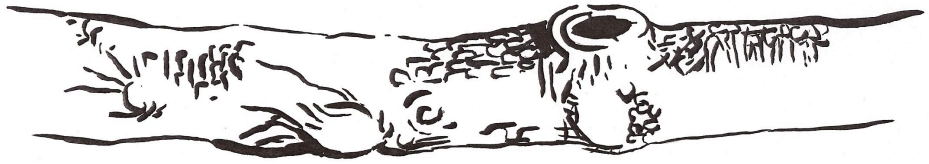
The importance of Long Tone practice cannot be over-emphasized: I am sure by now you have heard the axiom of blowing Ro for 10 minutes a day to become a master (while the master giving this instruction is likely getting in 1 or 2 hours of Ro per day). I found this instruction very inspiring in my early shakuhachi training days, mostly because it embodies the spirit of the simplicity/challenge that I enjoy about these flutes in the first place. Also, most new wind players do not understand the importance and great benefit that comes from dedicated focus on only the breath, posture and tone. Spending 20 minutes on Long Tones and 5 minutes on a piece is likely to yield better results than 45 minutes spent only on the piece, at least in the first 7-10 years of playing any shakuhachi-type flute. Do not be too structured with your practice sessions: if you start with a piece, be prepared to choose one or two pitches from a phrase that needs improvement and do Long Tones on these pitches only for 5-7 minutes, then return to the piece. For more Long Tone practice suggestions, see the Instructional Materials and the section called "And on the 1st day, God created Long Tones."

Complete Pieces and Memorization

Great benefits come from the ability to play any piece all the way through, from start to finish, as if in performance. It doesn't matter if you never intend to perform for others or not: certain aspects of your tone and musicality will remain dormant until you begin to play pieces all the way through without "going back" to "fix" blunders or mistakes. The mental intention and focus are different and the breathing and phrasing are different when you decide to play a piece from start to finish. This is just one more aspect of intentional training: do not wander around loosely within a piece, doing short "rewinds" on difficult phrases and notes and then going on until you make another mistake and then "fixing" those and then going on, etc. This is the kind of practice that is very common because it mirrors how the over-active thinking mind operates. You need to tame the monkey, reign in the horse, or whatever it takes. If you are working on one or two phrases, then you are only playing those over and over and not concerning yourself with the surrounding material; if you are playing the piece as far as you can until you "mess up," then you can choose to work the trouble-phrase in this way, but resist the automatic method of "redoing" that phrase until it is good and then going on in a breathless, manic manner. One option is to choose a phrase 2 or 3 lines back, and get back into the piece from there and see if the trouble-phrase has improved after the work on it. When you string together mistakes and half-baked phrases over and over, you are training yourself to play mistakes and half-baked phrases. It will have an inverse effect on your training.

The many aspects and benefits of memorization are discussed above in the section called "Getting your head out of the notation and back to the air-stream." Memorizing parts of a piece might be the best you can do for awhile: do not put off the training of memorization until you feel like you will be able to get an entire piece. This training should also start in a Phrase by Phrase manner and slowly build up from there. Repetition and constancy are the keys to memorization: the more often you play the piece or passage the easier it is to access it when you want to call it up. Another key to memorization is flexibility: as you add more phrases to the memorized version of the piece, your own process or mental imagery might need to adapt to include larger portions or additional sections, so keep this in mind.

V. Special Theories and Methods



Advanced work on the inner mouth shape and tone resonance

After your embouchure, breath support and posture are working consistently (or while you work on those aspects) most of your tone improvement work will center on what is happening inside your mouth. The air column that is set into vibration when we play flutes extends from inside your lungs, up through your trachea, into your throat, mouth, sinuses and nostrils, through your embouchure, into the flute and down and out the end of the flute. Keeping this imagery in mind, it becomes clear that we have access to the surfaces that mirror the flute's interior surface. In ordinary eating and speaking, we do not usually endeavor to consciously control our inner head cavities; therefore manipulating them to improve your tone might not be as easy as it sounds. In general, the goal is to expand the inner mouth as much as possible in order to provide additional resonant space for the sound/vibrating air. Some flute teachers advise flaring the nostrils, dilating the sinuses by expanding the upper nose (as when deeply inhaling a pleasant scent), and moving the tongue into different positions depending on what register of the flute you are playing in. My suggestion on Taimu is to experiment with any and all of these things, but do not have any fixed or strict goals about them. The ways in which head cavity manipulations can alter your own tone are difficult to predict, but awareness and flexibility in these areas will be of great benefit to your tone. Here are three of my own most successful methods: I encourage experimentation and development of your own methods as well.

Beer Mouth Method

This could also be called Mouthwash or Toothpaste Method, as I have had similar success with those as well, but I am much more likely to be drinking very dark, thick stout as I practice Taimu. What I have noticed is that any of these substances can stimulate the taste buds and nerve-endings inside the mouth and on the tongue creating a heightened awareness of these areas. This can lead to an increase in control over these areas and the ability to expand, contract or stretch them in ways that you might not have been able to when they seemed "dead" or unfeeling. I have often noticed an improved tone just after brushing my teeth and then immediately picking up the flute. Some mouthwash may in fact over-stimulate and numb your sensations. The dark beer method utilizes the feeling and imagery of a dense, alive liquid filling your mouth. When you pick up the flute, you signal your mouth to reenact this feeling with only air and blow through this shape.

Hourglass Mirror Image Method

This imagery tool can be very useful for woodwind instruction in general, but I can only attest to its validity for flute and single-reed instruments. The basic idea is that you imagine a mirror being held up at your mouth facing the instrument's mouthpiece. Think of how the top of an hourglass is an exact mirror image of the bottom if you were to hold a mirror in the exact middle of the hourglass. This middle point on flute/person continuum is very similar to the hourglass middle point because it is the narrowest region of the air stream; it might be so narrow that only one grain of sand can fit through at a time. It is your job to create the mirror image of the flute on the other side of the mirror. This starts at your lips, at exactly the point where the narrow middle section ends (the air stream that is connecting your lips to the flute edge) and the upper hourglass (which is you) expands back outwards in proportion to the lower section (which is the Taimu). In other words, imitate with your mouth the mirror image of the shape of the top of the flute. Basically, the flute edge is mirrored by the point where your lip membrane ends. After that, the flute is at its full diameter on the immediate interior and your mouth cavity should imitate this by expanding as wide as possible starting just behind the lips. This is for your most clear and resonant tone and must be activated in conjunction with a very small and efficient lip opening/embouchure which is why this technique is "advanced." For *mura iki* and other breath effects or tuning changes and sound manipulations, this mirror image gets distorted, but starting with this expanded interior will provide a resonant basis for many other sounds.

Singing the Note on "Ah" or "Ooo" Method

There are complicated techniques recommended for Western flute in which you activate specific vowel-sound mouth shapes for certain ranges of notes at certain volume levels, and this is an extension of the inner mouth shape work mentioned above. In the method I am recommending here, there is, once again, not a specific desired outcome but rather a development of awareness and flexibility within your tone production apparatus. This method is very simple. All you do is play the note you want to play, then sing the same pitch through an "Aaah" (as in "ma") or "Oooo" (as in "too") shape, then play the note again keeping the shape of one or both of these vowel sounds inside your mouth as you play. Remember that even though Taimu are large and lower pitched, we are not playing notes that are very low on the range of the human voice, so men will need to keep that in mind so as not to sing the same pitch in a lower octave: try to match the exact octave that the flute is in. In general, for Taimu, an "Ah" shape on the inside back of the mouth combines with an "Ooo" shape in the lips and forward part of the mouth for your basic tone, so even if you sing an "Ah" your lips will have to then form an "Ooo" in order to play the flute. I prefer actively combining these two into one, but you may want to develop one single syllable that already combines them such as "Oh" (as in "toe") and sing through that. Try and imitate an opera singer as a variation on singing these syllables and see if that increases your volume, resonance and flexibility. Remember: this is to develop mouth shape and some amount of air movement: the tightness of the vocal cords should dissipate entirely before playing a flute note.

Stretching & the physical demands of Taimu

Taimu are very big. Even if you have a 2.2 or 2.4 Taimu, the thickness makes them more significant to handle than almost any shakuhachi. However, it is this thickness that provides them with their unique sonic qualities that we desire on Taimu and that mukyoku are designed to emphasize, so we must find a way to deal with this extra girth, as it were.

My first recommendation has been noted in the detailed "Finger Placement" materials: use a pinky for your 3-hole. Most players have the right hand on the bottom, and if this is true for you then you can either select a flute with offset holes or, no matter which hand you place on the bottom, you can ask if Ken is able to move the holes around somewhat to fit your hands. If I had not started using the pinky for the 3-hole, I would not be able to play Taimu at all. I make my living as a composer and woodwind performer/teacher, and although I have physically adapted in many ways in order to play different kinds of instruments (such as Taimu) working on the kind of hand stretch that would have been required for my small/medium-sized hands to be able to play a fat flute with the ring finger on the 3-hole was simply not an option.

Fortunately, on my other wind instruments, bass clarinet for example, the pinkies on both hands have anywhere from 2 to 6 keys that they are responsible for, so my own pinky strength and abilities are slightly above normal. In general, the abilities of the pinky are equal to or greater than those of the ring finger, the larger pad size being the only advantage offered by the ring finger. Taimu, however, respond well to digging the finger into the tone hole, which is easier for the smaller pinky pad, and it still covers the largest Taimu holes without too much strain (once you reach the hole).

Other suggestions on finger placement are detailed in the notated Instructional Materials.

Next, you will want to focus on your head, neck, arms, shoulders and back. The more hours you log playing Taimu, the more you might feel the effects of working with such a heavy club. Breaks are strongly encouraged, and you should prioritize any kind of stretching exercises and upper body strengthening exercises that you have access to or experience with. In general, all shakuhachi and Taimu playing is improved with improved physical health, particularly in your core and upper body. Some methods worth looking into include qi gong, t'ai chi ch'uan, resistance bands, pilates and swimming, to name just a few.

One of my initial intentions in Taimu training was to loosen up the severe tensions that had accumulated in my 1.8 and 2.4 shakuhachi playing. This was effective, and I now have minimal tension on those smaller flutes. Of course, once I had my 2.65 Taimu, I had to go on and get a 2.8 Taimu in order to get the 2.65 playing in perspective, so be careful about getting addicted.

CONCLUSION

All of these ideas and suggestions have been from my point of view and my own experience. Due to the fact that I have been involved in woodwind performance and pedagogy for a long while, some of these thoughts might be useful to some people, but ultimately it is your own path and your own version of these discoveries that matters, especially in the realm of shakuhachi, Taimu, or hocchiku training and experience. The reasons why you pursue these flutes (or they pursue you) are personal and they are truly no one else's business in the moment you are playing. Something in these materials might provide a light in a region that can lead to another discovery and so on, but do not get too bogged down in taking too many of these ideas too seriously. Ultimately, your body and the cells within it are connecting with the flute; your thinking-mind, at its best, is only acting as a shepherd and a guide. To be too demanding or controlling in this situation is to choke some of the vitality out of the experience. Although there is a great deal of persistence and discipline required to maximize your connection with these flutes, the process should be approached with a *wu wei* perspective: action-less action.

Pick up the flute and enter the flow.